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THE ETHNO-POLITICAL IDENTITY OF ALBANIANS IN NORTH MACEDONIA: FROM HISTORY TO POLITICAL REALITY THE CASE OF THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to provide further insight into the construction of the ethno-political identity of Albanians in North Macedonia, with particular emphasis on the differentiation of this identity within the broader socio-political context. It is argued that the process of consolidating the Albanian national identity was largely completed by the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The segment of the Albanian nation that remained outside the borders of the Albanian state following 1912 became part of neighboring states but preserved a distinct identity — one that was largely denied and subjected to assimilationist policies. As Rogers Brubaker (1996) and Étienne Balibar (1991) have noted, these populations became targets of nationalizing identity policies. The Albanian identity is fundamentally centered on the Albanian language, which occupies a primary position over other sub-identities such as religion, class, or gender. Consequently, the use of the Albanian language in state institutions and educational settings constitutes the principal marker of ethno-political differentiation for Albanians in North Macedonia. Simultaneously, it represents a key point of resistance for the Macedonian ethno-political majority toward this linguistic identity. The legislative developments — from the first Constitution of independent Macedonia, through the Ohrid Framework Agreement, to the Law on the Use of Languages and its referral to the Constitutional Court — illustrate the systematic competition that underpins the clash of ethno-political identities. At its core, this clash reflects a conceptual struggle between monolingualism and multilingualism.
Keywords: *identity, mother tongue, monolingualism, multilingualism, equality.*

Teuta ARIFI is an Associate Professor in the Department of Albanian Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. Her academic research focuses on the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on nationalism, ethnic identities, interculturalism, and multilingualism. She has served as a Member of Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia, as Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs, and as Mayor of the Municipality of Tetovo.

Opening remarks: The Multiplicity of Albanian Political Identities, a Geopolitical Perspective

The construction of national and state identities is neither linear nor uniform but rather a historically contingent process shaped by geopolitical forces, cultural dynamics, and institutional frameworks. In the Albanian case, the multiplicity of political identities illustrates how different layers of belonging—ethnic, national, and eventually state-based—emerge and interact over time. Initially, identity was consolidated around ethnic markers, which provided the foundational elements of collective consciousness. As Ernest Gellner (1983) argues, nationalism often builds upon pre-existing cultural and linguistic solidarities, elevating them into frameworks of political legitimacy. This transformation reflects the progression from ethnic identity to a more defined national identity, culminating in the establishment of state identity as the institutional embodiment of collective selfhood.

Yet this trajectory has rarely unfolded in a straightforward manner. The construction of a collective national identity that fuses into state institutionalism is, as Benedict Anderson (1983) describes, an "imagined" project that requires intergenerational participation and continuous reinforcement through shared symbols, narratives, and institutions. Étienne Balibar (1991: 86) develops this argument further by defining the project and destiny of the nation as "two symmetrical figures of the illusion called national identity". It is therefore illusory for any single generation to believe that its actions constitute the culmination of national identity formation. Rather, identity unfolds through a protracted journey in which myth initially frames collective self-understanding, later deconstructed and reconstituted into institutional and political reality. Noel Malcolm (2020: 682) echoes this dynamic in his study of the Balkans, describing identity formation as both the deconstruction of myths and the construction of realities.

Following this logic of project and destiny, the Albanian National Awakening (Rilindja Kombëtare) of the nineteenth century represented an effort to properly formulate and dimension the project of constructing national identity in line with contemporary European currents. In the spirit of nineteenth-century nationalism, where the concepts of nation, state, and language were increasingly intertwined (Hobsbawm, 1990), Albanian intellectuals sought to codify language, consolidate collective memory, and translate cultural belonging into political legitimacy. The geopolitical context, however—marked by the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Empire—meant that the emergence of new states in Southeastern Europe not only redrew the political map but also transformed the region into a persistent field of ethno-identitarian contestation with underlying geo-strategic implications (Sugar, 1997).

Central to this process was the League of Prizren (1878), which functioned not merely as a cultural or symbolic awakening but as an organized political platform for

autonomy. By articulating territorial claims and delineating the boundaries within which Albanians envisioned a structured political order, the League underscored the transition of Albanian identity from a primarily cultural community to a socio-political category aspiring to statehood (Skendi, 1967). Pashko Vasa's (1989) assertion that the Albanians' "religion is Albanianism" epitomized this supra-ethnic and supra-religious orientation. As Shpuza (2013) and Clayer (2014) emphasize, the project of the Rilindja subordinated religious difference to national unity, envisioning a state capable of institutionalizing coexistence among Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox believers. This innovation distinguished Albanian nationalism from neighboring movements, which often equated nationhood with confessional identity.

In light of this history, Albanian identity came to be projected as singular and indivisible, deriving its legitimacy from antiquity and mythologized Pelasgian origins (Vasa, 1989: 271), from linguistic unity and the codification of a unique alphabet, and from territorial claims framed within the League of Prizren's vision. The act of defining potential state borders, as Hroch (1996) argues in a broader European context, marked a decisive moment in the transition from an ethnic community to a fully-fledged nation. Thus, the Albanian project not only mirrored but also innovated within the European patterns of nation-formation.

Nevertheless, the destiny of the Albanian nation did not unfold symmetrically with this project. The declaration of Albanian independence in 1912, while a monumental achievement, left large portions of the Albanian population outside the borders of the new state. For these communities—in Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Greece—the task was not only to preserve cultural and national identity but to do so under conditions where that identity was often cast as foreign, problematic, or even threatening to the dominant nationalizing states in which they resided (Brubaker, 2004; Poulton, 1995). Strategies of marginalization—ranging from assimilation to suppression—sought to redefine Albanian identity as the identity of the "other," one to be absorbed or eliminated. This outcome reflects what Ramet (2006) describes as the Balkan pattern of "nationalizing states," where minorities were tolerated at best but often excluded from the political nation.

From today's perspective, the century-long distance between the nineteenth-century Albanian national project and the contemporary realities of Albanians in North Macedonia and elsewhere may appear vast. Yet, as Immanuel Wallerstein (1991: 78) reminds us, the past functions not only as a historical phenomenon but as a moral and political phenomenon that persists as a contemporary presence. The struggles of Albanians outside Albania's borders reveal how historical legacies continue to shape identity politics: the past is not only commemorated but actively reactivated whenever identity resurfaces as a site of contestation in social and political life. In this sense, the Albanian case demonstrates how the tension between project and destiny remains unresolved, with identity still navigating the space between historical aspiration and contemporary reality.

Nationalism and Albanian Identity in the Balkans

The study of nationalism in Eastern Europe has been profoundly shaped by Rogers Brubaker's theoretical framework,

which distinguishes between three forms of nationalism that emerged in the aftermath of the disintegration of empires in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These are: nationalizing nationalism, which characterizes newly established states seeking to consolidate legitimacy through the privileging of a dominant ethnos; homeland nationalism, which refers to the policies of a state that identifies ethnically with populations residing outside its borders; and minority nationalism, which denotes the mobilization of minority groups to preserve their distinct identity within a nationalizing state (Brubaker, 1996: 20). This triadic model, while formulated with reference to nineteenth-century Europe, also applies to the post-communist successor states of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, and it offers a valuable lens for understanding the Albanian case in the Balkans.

The Yugoslav monarchy exemplified the dynamics of nationalizing nationalism, seeking to institutionalize an ethnically defined model of statehood. Rather than constructing a civic polity based on equal citizenship, Yugoslavia established Serb identity as the bearer of sovereignty and development, legitimizing its dominance through appeals to so-called historical rights and centuries of perceived injustices that were rhetorically "corrected" by the imposition of ethno-political primacy (Brubaker, 1996). These practices aligned with broader patterns in Eastern Europe, where homogenizing state-building projects often relied on coercion, assimilation, and exclusionary policies (Hroch, 2000; Smith, 1991).

The Carnegie Commission Report on the Balkan Wars (1914/1993) provides striking evidence of how military force itself was employed as a tool of nationalizing policy. The report documents the use of violence, expulsions, and ethnic cleansing to impose the sovereignty of the titular nation over others, thereby confirming the centrality of coercion in Balkan nation-state formation. Such policies were not only expressions of state fragility but also instruments of domination, producing enduring legacies of interethnic antagonism and contested sovereignties (Poulton, 1995; Verdery, 1993).

For Albanians in interwar Yugoslavia, these dynamics generated an identity forged in resistance. Confronted with violence, ethnic cleansing, and systemic repression—including the denial of education in their own language—Albanians developed what can be described as a resistance identity (Castells, 1997). Deprived of autonomous institutions, they relied on collective memory, oral traditions, and folklore to safeguard cultural distinctiveness (Clayer, 2007; Skendi, 1967). This identity was simultaneously conservative, preserving inherited traditions, and revolutionary, nurturing liberationist aspirations. Echoing Hobsbawm's (1990) notion of invented traditions, folklore and epic poetry became key instruments of national survival and resistance, embedding narratives of sacrifice and heroism that sustained visions of emancipation.

Education policies illustrate this clearly: Albanian pupils were forced into instruction in the Serbian language, under curricula explicitly designed to normalize humiliation and assimilation (Banac, 1984: 280). In the absence of supportive institutions, literature emerged as an alternative arena for cultural articulation. The poetry of Esad Mekuli in the 1930s, for example, provided an expressive outlet for collective identity, capturing the dignity, endurance, and resistance of Albanians under repression (Mekuli, 1989).

If minority nationalism in Yugoslavia cultivated defensive strategies of cultural preservation, homeland nationalism was articulated within Albania itself. Brubaker (1996) defines this form as the orientation of a state toward populations of the same ethnicity residing in other states. In the Albanian case, the notion of a "missing branch" of the national body was constructed in relation to Kosovo, which had been excluded from Albania's borders after the Balkan Wars.

Within Albania, Kosovo became a central symbol in the collective imagination, celebrated in oral traditions, folklore, and cultural memory as a site of heroic resistance. It represented both absence—an unfulfilled part of the national whole—and presence, as a symbolic extension of the nation. This homeland nationalism was not merely political but also cultural and affective, embedding Kosovo into the symbolic repertoire of Albanian identity (Clayer, 2007; Malcolm, 1998).

Nevertheless, the practical capacity of interwar Albania to act upon this symbolic homeland nationalism was extremely limited. As Brubaker (1996: 34) notes, homeland nationalism is often the first to react when co-ethnics are threatened by nationalizing policies elsewhere. Yet Albania's structural weakness, fragile institutions, and the pressing imperatives of internal consolidation meant that its expressions of solidarity with Albanians beyond its borders remained largely symbolic. Homeland nationalism, in this sense, took the form of moral discourse and cultural nostalgia, rather than effective political or diplomatic intervention.

Viewed through Brubaker's triadic framework, the Albanian experience in the interwar Balkans exemplifies the complex interplay of nationalizing, homeland, and minority nationalisms. Within Yugoslavia, Albanians developed a resistance identity in opposition to assimilationist and discriminatory state policies. Within Albania, homeland nationalism articulated a symbolic connection to Kosovo, embedding it into the cultural memory of the nation even as the state lacked the capacity to materially alter the condition of Albanians abroad.

These dual dynamic underscores the paradox of nationalism in weak states: while limited in institutional capacity, Albania nevertheless maintained a powerful symbolic repertoire of identity that transcended its borders. The Albanian case thus illustrates not only the applicability of Brubaker's framework to the Balkans but also the broader tension between symbolic nationalism and material power in the making of modern nations.

Identity Reconfiguration During and After World War II

World War II represented not only a geopolitical rupture for Europe but also a profound turning point in the reconfiguration of identities in the Balkans. For Albanians both inside and outside the Albanian state, this period marked the beginning of new territorial, cultural, and political dynamics that would continue to shape identity trajectories throughout the Cold War and into the post-Yugoslav era. As Brubaker (1996) argues, nationalizing processes often emerge in contested spaces where state power, identity, and transnational influences collide. The Albanian case exemplifies this, as World War II and its aftermath produced both temporary unifications and long-lasting fragmentations of ethnic and political identity.

The onset of the Second World War introduced a reconfiguration of the ethnic

Albanian identity among populations outside the Albanian state. This process laid the foundations for the subsequent multiplicity of Albanian political identities that emerged after 1945. The annexation of Albania by Fascist Italy in 1939, followed by wartime territorial adjustments, marked a turning point. The eastern expansion of Albania's borders incorporated into the Albanian state several settlements with majority Albanian populations previously under the jurisdiction of the Yugoslav monarchy (Clayer, 2017; Fischer, 1999; Vickers, 1999).

The formation of Mustafa Kruja's government in 1941 led to the establishment of the Ministry of the Liberated Territories, headed by Eqrem Bey Vlora (Lita, 2022). By governmental decree, 116 elementary schools were opened in Albanian-majority territories outside the 1912 borders. These institutions represented the first systematic effort to provide Albanian-language education in areas previously excluded from the state framework. Inspectorates were also founded in Prizren, Peja, Pristina, Tetovo, and Dibra e Madhe to ensure the supervision of educational activities (Clayer, 2017; Fischer, 1999).

The Minister of Education, Ernest Koliqi, emphasized the historic significance of this mission, calling on teachers to embrace a "spirit of sacrifice" (Lita, 2018). Although these schools functioned for less than four years, they played a crucial role in transforming identity from a folkloric memory into an institutionalized, collective consciousness. In terms of modern identity theory, this marked the emergence of a collective psychology—a key precondition for the transition from ethnos to nation (Brubaker, 1996; Smith, 1991).

The Unfinished Process of Balkan Identities

Scholars often describe the nineteenth century as the "century of nations," culminating in the creation of the modern nation-state system by the early twentieth century (Meadwell, 2001). Yet, in the Balkans, identity remained an unfinished process well into the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. The new states that emerged from the Ottoman and Habsburg empires rarely reflected ethnic realities, while global geopolitical shifts repeatedly reshaped local identities (Todorova, 1997; Ramet, 2018).

The Second World War and its aftermath were particularly decisive. Winston Churchill, aware of the compromises made in negotiating with Stalin, recognized that half of Europe—including most of the Balkans—would be denied democratic choice and subjected to communist regimes for nearly half a century (Kissinger, 1999). This settlement stratified Balkan identities along new ideological lines, intertwining ethnic and political dimensions in complex ways.

The establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945 produced a further fragmentation of Albanian ethno-political identity. Structured around six republics and two autonomous provinces, the federation divided Albanians among Kosovo, Macedonia (today North Macedonia), Montenegro, and the Preševo Valley (Malcolm, 1998; Ramet, 2006).

While framed as a federation of equality, the Yugoslav system in practice combined recognition with suppression. Ethnic federal units acknowledged the persistence of ethnos, but the broader goal remained the creation of a homogenized Yugoslav identity (Banac, 1990).

Albanians, as non-Slavs, were particularly vulnerable to assimilationist pressures, especially in Macedonia, where they were compelled to adopt a Titoist supra-identity (Pettifer, 2001).

From 1945 onwards, Marxist-Leninist ideology became the dominant framework across Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Its central logic was the suppression of ethnic questions in favor of class struggle, presenting class equality as the ultimate ideal that would erase other forms of difference (Djilas, 1958; Ramet, 2006). Yet, in reality, communism was imposed over unfinished nineteenth-century national histories and unresolved interethnic conflicts. Rather than resolving them, the system deferred them to a future where they would resurface with greater intensity (Todorova, 1997; Brubaker, 1996).

This produced a fundamental paradox: while communism claimed to transcend ethnicity, the federal divisions of Yugoslavia institutionalized ethnicity at the political level. Thus, ethnic identity remained irreducible, even under ideological homogenization. For Albanians, this meant living under the constant tension between recognition and assimilation, with language serving as the principal marker of resistance.

The collapse of Yugoslav communism in 1990 reopened these suppressed questions. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia dissolved at its final congress, and without the authoritarian glue of communist ideology, the federation rapidly disintegrated. The transition to democracy unfolded not as a peaceful transformation but as a violent renegotiation of suppressed nationalisms (Glenny, 1999; Ramet, 2018).

The disintegration left behind a People's Army without a party and a state army without a state (Banac, 1992). The wars of the 1990s created new states, but also reinforced the internal boundaries of the former federation, producing new ethno-political identities among Albanians. In North Macedonia, a distinct ethno-political identity emerged, with the Albanian language serving as its central cultural and political pillar.

World War II and its aftermath marked a profound reconfiguration of Albanian identity within the broader Balkan context. Temporary wartime unifications under Fascist Italy were followed by fragmentation in socialist Yugoslavia, where communist ideology both suppressed and institutionalized ethnic difference. The eventual collapse of communism revealed the durability of ethnic identities, long deferred but never erased. For Albanians, this trajectory illustrates the persistence of language and education as central to identity, even under homogenizing pressures. In Brubaker's (1996) terms, the Albanian case exemplifies how nationalizing dynamics operate across state boundaries, refracted through layers of geopolitics, ideology, and conflict.

Socialist Constitutionalism and the Question of Albanian Identity (1946–1963)

The establishment of the independent Macedonian state in 1991 was not the first moment in which the question of identity emerged in the constitutional order of this region. The earlier socialist constitutions of Yugoslavia and its federal units had already structured the terrain on which identity politics would later unfold. For Albanians in Macedonia, the period between 1946 and 1963 reveals the paradoxical nature of socialist constitutionalism: while formally guaranteeing equality and minority rights, these frameworks operated largely as mechanisms of assimilation, reinforcing the symbolic primacy of the Macedonian

nation. The 1946 Constitution of the People's Republic of Macedonia contained no Preamble situating the republic within a historical or national narrative; it consisted solely of normative provisions. Within this legal structure, the use of languages other than Macedonian was only indirectly implied through anti-discrimination clauses. No explicit articulation was made regarding the level, form, or scope of the use of the Albanian language. The text guaranteed that

> national minorities in the People's Republic of Macedonia enjoy the right to preserve and develop their cultural life and to freely use their language (Constitution of the People's Republic of Macedonia, 1946).

While symbolically significant, these rights were expressed in abstract terms, without institutional mechanisms for enforcement. As a result, Albanians remained structurally invisible within the constitutional order, their identity subsumed under the broad category of "national minorities" (Sekulić, 1991).

This framework reflected the broader ideological orientation of socialist unitarism. On the one hand, communist ideology elevated the declarative principle of non-discrimination as a cornerstone of state-building. On the other hand, the state apparatus functioned as an instrument of identity dissolution, aiming particularly at absorbing the Albanian identity into a broader Yugoslav amalgam (Banac, 1990). In this respect, Yugoslav socialism paralleled the Soviet model, which similarly sought to dissolve multiple non-Slavic identities into the larger ideological unity of the USSR (Suny, 1993). This logic of unitarism remained dominant until the reforms of 1974, when constitutional decentralization partially redefined the relationship between majority and minority communities.

The 1963 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia marked a turning point in this trajectory. Unlike the 1946 text, this Constitution introduced a Preamble which, despite its communist ideological character, explicitly situated the republic within the historical aspirations of the Macedonian nation. It declared that the Macedonian people, led by the working class and the Communist Party, had, through the National Liberation War and Socialist Revolution, created their own state—the People's Republic of Macedonia—wherein they fulfilled their historical aspirations for national freedom and state independence, while also guaranteeing equality for national minorities (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, 1963, Preamble).

This dual discourse illustrates the ambivalent nature of socialist constitutionalism: while proclaiming equality for all, it simultaneously inscribed the Macedonian people as the titular nation of the republic. Albanians and other minorities were recognized only in secondary terms, as recipients of equality rather than as co-founders of the state. Such hierarchies confirm Brubaker's (1996) concept of the nationalizing state, where the dominant nation claims primary ownership of the state, while minorities are symbolically tolerated but politically marginalized.

Article 75 of the 1963 Constitution further institutionalized this asymmetry through the localization of linguistic rights. It stipulated that in municipalities where a significant number of national minority members resided, municipal decisions and acts should be published in their language, administrative and judicial procedures could be conducted bilingually, and public inscriptions in ethnically mixed

areas should be bilingual. Yet these rights were territorially limited and procedurally constrained, ensuring that Albanian linguistic rights were tolerated only within localized boundaries (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, 1963, Art. 75). As Poulton (2000) notes, such arrangements defined Albanian rights more in terms of conditional tolerance than as recognition of co-ownership of the state.

Most revealing, however, is the absence of explicit recognition of Albanians as a distinct people. In both the 1946 and 1963 Constitutions, neither the Albanian people nor the Albanian language was directly named; instead, both were relegated to the generic designation of "national minorities." This omission underscores the assimilatory function of socialist unitarism, which treated minority identities not as political subjects but as abstract categories, nearly rendering them non-existent within the symbolic order of the republic. As Ramet (2006) has argued, such practices exemplify the paradox of socialist federalism: proclaiming equality while erasing distinctiveness.

Thus, the constitutional evolution from 1946 to 1963 reveals a consistent pattern: Albanians were granted rights in declarative form, but these rights were circumscribed in scope, localized in application, and denied the recognition of full political subjecthood. This dynamic laid the foundations for the contested debates of the post-1991 period, when Albanians would point to these earlier constitutions to argue that their rights had paradoxically been broader under socialism than in independent Macedonia.

The historical evolution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the Yugoslav federation offers a revealing case study of how language rights, ethnic identity, and constitutional change intersected within a shifting political order. The fate of the Albanian language and identity in Macedonia was profoundly tied to the broader federal dynamics of Yugoslavia. Periods of liberalization at the federal level generally produced more permissive legal frameworks for the use of minority languages, whereas phases of political centralization and nationalist retrenchment narrowed or reversed these rights. Nowhere is this relationship clearer than in the developments surrounding the 1974 Constitution and its eventual unraveling in the late 1980s.

The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution represented a major step toward decentralization, granting the republics and autonomous provinces significantly more authority over internal governance. Yugoslav unitarism, expressed through the ideological and repressive measures associated with Aleksandar Ranković, was vigorously challenged by intellectual and political forces advocating for federal decentralization. This ideological shift culminated in a transformative constitutional framework that institutionalized republican and provincial autonomy (Banac, 1984; Ramet, 2006; Woodward, 1995). In Macedonia, this federal reorientation was mirrored in the adoption of a republican constitution in 1974 that introduced new legal language concerning sovereignty and the status of nationalities.

The Preamble of the 1974 Constitution articulated sovereignty in explicitly ethnic terms. For the first time, alongside the Macedonian nation, the Albanian and Turkish nationalities were recognized not merely as minorities but as constituent nationalities within the republic:

> The Macedonian nation, together with the nationalities of Macedonia, through the joint National Liberation Struggle

> with the nations and nationalities of Yugoslavia, created the Socialist Republic of Macedonia as the national state of the Macedonian nation and the state of the Albanian and Turkish nationalities within it, in which the historical aspirations of the Macedonian nation for national freedom and state independence, of the nationalities for equality, and of the working class and all working people for a socialist society were realized... (Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, 1974, Preamble).

This constitutional language was both symbolically significant and politically strategic. It departed from earlier frameworks that had treated non-Slavic groups merely as minorities, while simultaneously reaffirming the primacy of the Macedonian nation. The formulation was a concession to decentralizing pressures, but also a mechanism for preserving the hierarchical federal order (Bieber, 2004; Poulton, 1995; Ramet, 2006).

Language, Identity, and Dissolution: The Case of Albanians in North Macedonia

Language stands as one of the most profound and distinctive attributes of human existence. It is not merely a technical instrument for communication but a complex vehicle through which emotions, collective memory, and cultural belonging are articulated. Much like human beings themselves, languages have their own trajectories of birth, evolution, and decline. Throughout history, language has captured the curiosity of philosophers and scholars alike—from classical antiquity to contemporary thought—as a fundamental key to understanding human nature, society, and identity (Anderson, 1991; Fishman, 1999).

For the Albanian community in what is today the Republic of North Macedonia, the Albanian language has functioned as more than a communicative tool; it has represented a central pillar of collective identity, cultural continuity, and political assertion. In contexts marked by shifting state structures, contested national narratives, and changing constitutional frameworks, language has served both as a marker of distinction and as a means of resistance to assimilation. As such, it occupies a critical place in examining the historical and political processes through which Albanian identity has been preserved, negotiated, and redefined across different periods (Brubaker, 1996; Balibar, 1991).

Even more inspiring—and theoretically provocative—is the multiplicity of languages itself. The differences among them, which at first glance may appear irreconcilable or unintelligible, in fact contain within them an invisible key to communication and mutual understanding, no matter how divergent these languages may be. It is precisely this plurality of languages, famously represented through the metaphor of the Tower of Babel and further examined by Jacques Derrida, that challenges not only our capacity to understand and communicate, but also the nature of the relationships that emerge between peoples (Derrida, 1985). These relationships extend far beyond mere linguistic exchange; they encompass complex institutional and political interactions that shape intercultural and interethnic dynamics within and across societies (Habermas, 1998; Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

Within these specific linguistic relationships, the Tower of Babel metaphor remains unfinished and incomplete. Derrida (1985) emphasizes that the story of Babel not only describes the undeniable plurality of languages but also

the inherent impossibility of completing or perfecting a singular universal structure. In these mythological constellations surrounding multilingualism and the deliberate confusion that emerges from encounters with linguistic and cultural "others," the search for paths toward mutual understanding and communicative exchange becomes an equally complex challenge. It mirrors the very linguistic and cultural differences between peoples, which simultaneously enable and complicate the possibilities of dialogue and coexistence.

Nevertheless, moving from mythology through the centuries, we once again reaffirm the undeniable historical fact that the formation of nation-state identities in the nineteenth century was inseparably tied to language. As previously noted, the Albanian linguistic identity extends beyond the political borders of the Albanian state established in the early twentieth century. With the subsequent geopolitical fragmentations of the 1990s, language became the primary marker of identity for Albanians living not only outside the territory of Albania, but also beyond the borders of the newly created state of Kosovo.

The dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation resulted in the formation of independent states along the administrative borders of the former socialist republics, and Macedonia was no exception to this process. However, this transition was far from smooth, marked by conceptual divergences regarding the very nature of the emerging state. The Macedonian political principle of state-building rested on a nineteenth-century model: one state, one nation, one language. This model envisioned the Macedonian nation as the sole bearer of state sovereignty. Such a principle was politically challenged by the Albanian population, who asserted their collective rights on the basis of international documents and conventions of the twentieth century.

Another dimension of significant importance in the formation of these newly independent states was the broader geopolitical context in which the disintegration of federations occurred. This disintegration was directly linked to the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe, which fundamentally transformed the political landscape of the region. Consequently, the process of state-building became inextricably tied to the introduction of multiparty democratic systems and the organization of free elections. Equally pivotal were the referendums held in these republics, which were intended to function as instruments of popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy, providing the legal and political foundation for the creation of the new nation-states.

Following this dynamic, the first political parties in the then-Republic of Macedonia began to emerge. Although these parties adopted political and ideological labels, they were primarily organized along ethnic lines. Within the Macedonian ethnic bloc, two major political parties differentiated themselves: the Social Democratic League of Macedonia (LSDM), representing the left-wing bloc, and the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), representing the right-wing bloc. Meanwhile, within the Albanian political bloc, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PPD) emerged as the largest Albanian party, followed by the smaller People's Democratic Party (PDP), both operating within the same ethnic-political spectrum.

The Albanian–Macedonian ethno-

political debate was now transferred into the parliamentary arena, where intense and often contentious discussions took place exclusively in the Macedonian language—a clear indication of the underlying identity struggle. The Macedonian political concept, by imposing the ethnic will of the majority while simultaneously disregarding the collective will of the Albanian population, sought to establish the foundations of a state defined by a single titular ethnic community. This strategy reflected a form of belated nationalization of society (Balibar, 1991), and was manifested both through the Referendum on the Independence of Macedonia and through the subsequent adoption of the Constitution of the newly independent Macedonian state. According to the Preamble of the 1991 Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, it is declared as a historical fact that:

> Macedonia is established as the national state of the Macedonian people, in which full civic equality and permanent coexistence with Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, Roma, and other nationalities living in the Republic of Macedonia is ensured (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991).

This constitutional formulation reflects a classical nation-state model, in which one ethnic group is defined as the titular nation while other communities are positioned within a framework of civic equality without collective political subjectivity (Brubaker, 1996; Balibar, 1991). Despite extensive, well-reasoned, and persistent interventions by Albanian deputies during the debates in the first parliamentary composition of the newly independent Macedonian state, the Constitution was ultimately adopted by a majority of Macedonian votes. In this way, the political will of the Albanian population in the 1990s—expressed through their democratically elected parliamentary representatives—was largely disregarded (Stojanovski, 2005; Koneska, 2014).

From a theoretical perspective, Brubaker (1996) describes the process of nationalization as one through which multiple, distinct identities are gradually merged into a single dominant ethnic identity that becomes the foundation of the nation-state. Similarly, Balibar's (1991) approach aligns with this view, emphasizing that when such a process extends well into the twentieth century, it constitutes what he terms a belated nationalization. This delayed attempt to impose a singular ethno-national framework often generates heightened tensions in multiethnic contexts, as it seeks to redefine political and cultural belonging retrospectively rather than organically through earlier historical developments. Hagège (1992: 12) asserts that

> languages are the flags of oppressed peoples. Through their language they express their ideals, and in their own language they possess a weapon in the struggle against subjugation.

This formulation offers a powerful and evocative lens through which to interpret the relationship between the Albanian population in the Republic of North Macedonia and their language. In contexts of political marginalization, language becomes both a symbolic and functional instrument of cultural survival and collective resistance (Fishman, 1999; Anderson, 1991). Following the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, the Albanian population in Macedonia was left without a central institutional, cultural, linguistic, and academic hub. This role

had previously been fulfilled by Kosovo's capital during its period as an autonomous province within socialist Yugoslavia, particularly through the University of Prishtina (Pula, 2004; Blumi, 2002).

In the absence of any independent scientific or higher educational institutions—apart from a single Department of Albanian Language and a pedagogical school—the Albanian population of Macedonia possessed only one enduring and unassailable marker of identity: the Albanian language. While the public display of the national flag could be prohibited, the number of high school classes taught in Albanian reduced, and Albanian-language inscriptions entirely excluded from public spaces, language itself could not be stripped away. It remained an inalienable element of collective existence, resistant to political restrictions and cultural marginalization. As a result, the Albanian language constituted the central axis of ethnic and political identity formation for Albanians in Macedonia. It represented a form of identity that was both self-conscious and supra-class, transcending religious, social, and regional divisions (Fishman, 1999; Hagège, 1992; Blumi, 2002; Edwards, 2009).

The trajectory followed over the past three decades of identity construction and development among Albanians in North Macedonia illustrates a profound transformation: a shift from the conception of the ethnic group as a primarily cultural category to the nation as a socio-political category (Brubaker, 1996; Calhoun, 1997). In the Albanian case, this transformation has been deeply intertwined with struggles over linguistic rights and the status of the Albanian language in public institutions. While significant progress has been made since the early 1990s, particularly after the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001, the process remains incomplete (Spaskovska, 2010; Koneska, 2014).

Given the above considerations, the identity-based rationale underlying the struggle for the recognition and institutionalization of the Albanian language becomes clear. By defining the state as the national state of the Macedonian people in the Preamble of the 1991 Constitution, the constitutional framework established a symbolic hierarchy of identities within the newly independent state. Although the Preamble is declarative in nature, its political significance lies in setting the ideological foundation of the state. The decisive marginalization of the Albanian language, however, is found in the normative sections of the Constitution, particularly those concerning language, which recognize Macedonian as the sole official language and fail to grant Albanian equivalent status (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, 1991).

These normative provisions recognize only one official language—Macedonian—thereby elevating the Macedonian ethnic identity to the status of the sole state linguistic identity. Article 7 explicitly institutionalizes this hierarchy, while Article 48 frames minority language rights in strictly cultural and educational terms (Kymlicka, 1995; Spaskovska, 2010). This framework reflects a nationalizing state logic (Brubaker, 1996), in which the titular nation's language becomes both a cultural marker and an instrument of state power.

Ten Years of (Mis)Understanding

As previously emphasized, the central argument advanced by Albanian political representatives during the debates surrounding the Constitution of the independent Macedonian state (1991) concerned the inherited national rights

relating to state sovereignty, the status of the Albanian language, and the use of national symbols. These demands were rooted in both historical claims and international legal frameworks and represented an early attempt to redefine the place of Albanians within the constitutional and political order of the newly independent state.

These claims are closely tied to the 1974 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia, which for the first time introduced legal standards acknowledging a degree of equality and participation of Albanians within the republican framework. Prior to this, constitutional arrangements offered no substantive provisions guaranteeing Albanians collective rights or participation in sovereignty. The 1974 constitutional framework, situated within the broader federal restructuring of Yugoslavia, granted limited recognition to non-Slavic communities, including Albanians, in cultural and linguistic domains, while maintaining the Macedonian nation as the titular bearer of statehood (Brunnbauer, 2002; Poulton, 2000).

The 1989 abrogation of these constitutional provisions represented a significant regression, effectively dismantling the limited legal and political space previously available to Albanians. As a response, Albanian political actors initiated a boycott of the 1991 Macedonian independence referendum and organized an alternative referendum advocating autonomy for Albanian-populated areas. These actions were interpreted by the Macedonian political elite as destabilizing and provocative, but in reality, they represented a reaction to the erosion of even the declarative rights established in the 1974 constitutional framework (Pettifer, 2001; Brubaker, 1996). This period laid the groundwork for a decade of political estrangement, as the two communities entered the post-independence era with fundamentally divergent understandings of constitutional order, sovereignty, and identity.

The parliamentary debate surrounding the adoption of the 1991 Constitution revealed fundamentally divergent logics in the understanding of the newly forming state. At its core, this was a debate between two competing political visions. The Macedonian concept sought to construct a monoethnic nation-state by nationalizing all other identities in general, and the Albanian identity in particular, aligning closely with the model of the nationalizing state described by Brubaker (1996). In contrast, the Albanian political concept interpreted political pluralism and democratization as inherently requiring the recognition of collective rights to sovereignty, language, and national symbols. For Albanian representatives, the democratization of the political system implied not merely procedural inclusion, but a substantive restructuring of the constitutional framework to reflect the multinational reality of the state (Poulton, 2000; Pettifer, 2001; Kymlicka, 1995).

During the years when civil war had already erupted in other parts of the former Yugoslavia, and while Belgrade continued to exert considerable political influence over the region, Macedonian political parties and their representatives in parliament employed the method of majoritarian overrule to adopt the 1991 Constitution. This strategy sidelined Albanian representatives, enabling the adoption of a constitutional framework that not only disregarded Albanian political demands but also closely reflected the spirit of the 1989 constitutional amendments. These amendments had already marked a departure from the more pluralistic provisions of the 1974 Constitution,

reinforcing a monoethnic vision of statehood and entrenching the dominance of the Macedonian titular nation (Pettifer, 2001; Poulton, 2000; Brunnbauer, 2002). In this way, the constitutional moment of 1991 was shaped not by consensus or negotiated inclusion, but by majoritarian imposition within a politically unstable regional context.

This monoethnic spirit is clearly reflected in the text of the Preamble to the 1991 Constitution and in Article 7, which regulates language use in the state. The Preamble emphasizes the historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage of the Macedonian people and frames the state as the national state of the Macedonian people, guaranteeing full civic equality and coexistence with other nationalities, including Albanians, Turks, Vlachs, and Roma (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, Preamble, 1991). Article 7 establishes a linguistic hierarchy by granting Macedonian and its Cyrillic alphabet exclusive status as the sole official language, relegating other languages to limited local administrative use as determined by law (Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia, Art. 7, 1991). Taken together, these constitutional provisions clearly define the Macedonian nation as the sole bearer of statehood, while other communities are acknowledged only in a subsidiary, cultural sense, without recognition of collective political subjectivity (Brubaker, 1996; Kymlicka, 1995; Spaskovska, 2010).

Throughout the first decade of the Republic of Macedonia's existence, the country underwent a complex and protracted process related to the state's name dispute, a political and diplomatic issue that persisted until 2017. This was paralleled by various political and economic crises that further shaped the fragile post-independence trajectory. Unfortunately, despite repeated demands from international institutions, numerous recommendations, and supportive international interventions, there was a persistent lack of political will to accommodate the linguistic and educational rights of the Albanian population. Demands articulated between 1991 and 2001 to elevate the official status of the Albanian language and to expand its use in public institutions were consistently rejected. These demands were portrayed by the Macedonian political establishment as threats to the unitary character of the state, which was conceived as a nation-state with Macedonian as the exclusive official language (Brubaker, 1996; Kymlicka, 1995; Poulton, 2000; Pettifer, 2001; Brunnbauer, 2002).

In fact, the unitary nature of the state, which Macedonian political elites portrayed as being threatened by the potential official use of the Albanian language, was increasingly challenged by international institutions that had Macedonia under their mandate during the 1990s. Organizations such as the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) emphasized that political discourse needed to move beyond the rigid opposition between the Macedonian conception of a unitary state and the Albanian vision of a redefined state structure. Instead, they urged the Macedonian authorities to engage in a genuine and structured dialogue addressing the specific linguistic and political demands of the Albanian community (HCNM/OSCE, 1998; Poulton, 2000; Kymlicka, 1995). This external pressure reflected a broader international shift towards minority rights protection and the accommodation of diversity within post-socialist states, particularly in contexts

where language was both a symbolic and functional marker of collective identity (Brubaker, 1996; Spaskovska, 2010). Despite these recommendations, however, meaningful institutional change remained limited throughout the 1990s.

The decision taken after 1992 to include Albanian political parties as part of the governing coalition was not without significance. It represented an initial step toward political inclusion and power-sharing within the newly independent state. However, this form of governmental accommodation failed to generate among Albanians a collective sense of belonging to state institutions. One of the central reasons for this shortcoming was the continued non-recognition of the official use of the Albanian language, which remained one of the key markers of Albanian identity (Server, 2019; Kymlicka, 1995; Brubaker, 1996; Poulton, 2000). Despite their participation in government, Albanian parties operated within a constitutional and institutional framework that did not reflect the linguistic and cultural realities of the population they represented, thereby limiting the transformative potential of their inclusion.

Throughout this decade, numerous recommendations were issued by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel. In his reports, the High Commissioner consistently emphasized three key areas of concern: education in the Albanian language, the establishment of higher education in Albanian, and access for ethnic Albanians to all levels of state and local administration (HCNM/OSCE, 1998; Brubaker, 1996; Kymlicka, 1995; Spaskovska, 2010). These recommendations reflected international expectations that the Macedonian state move beyond symbolic inclusion and implement substantive policies aimed at ensuring equality and participation for the Albanian community. Van der Stoel's interventions were particularly significant because they addressed structural issues—especially education and administrative inclusion—that were central to both the reproduction of linguistic identity and the integration of Albanians into state institutions (Poulton, 2000). Despite their clarity and persistence, however, the Macedonian government was slow to act upon these recommendations, maintaining the status quo throughout most of the 1990s.

The recommendations of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were closely aligned with those of the OSCE High Commissioner. The Assembly emphasized the need to facilitate the use of the Albanian language in public institutions in accordance with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, and urged the Macedonian government to implement the High Commissioner's recommendations regarding the use of Albanian in higher education (Council of Europe, 2000). A careful examination of international reports on Macedonia throughout this decade reveals that the use of the Albanian language was consistently analyzed and reported as inseparable from the educational process, particularly the right to use Albanian as a language of university instruction. Under the constitutional and legal framework in place before 2001, the use of Albanian in university-level education was not permitted, effectively excluding the language from higher education institutions and reinforcing its subordinate status in the public sphere (Brunnbauer, 2002; Spaskovska, 2010; Kymlicka, 1995).

Following a series of protests and counter-protests, the Law on Higher Education was amended in 1997, allowing for the functioning of the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje in the Albanian language (Rosulek, 2001). However, the authorities at the time refused to grant legal recognition to the University of Tetova, which had begun operating on 17 December 1994. This refusal culminated in violent clashes between local populations and the police, resulting in the death of a civilian. The government's persistent denial of the university's legal status and the use of repressive measures against its supporters generated heightened interethnic tensions and cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of the United Nations Preventive Deployment Mission (UNPREDEP) in Macedonia. International observers and scholars criticized the mission for its slow and cautious approach to internal ethnic issues, contrasting its relatively proactive stance on regional security with its reluctance to engage meaningfully in matters of minority rights and language policy (Pettifer, 2001; Veremis, 2014; Ackermann, 2000).

In this context, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities was internationally recognized as the most appropriate institution to intervene in the dispute. Following the events in Tetova, the High Commissioner issued a statement acknowledging the right to university education in the Albanian language, thereby affirming the legitimacy of Albanian linguistic and educational claims. However, the statement emphasized that any such arrangements had to be implemented in accordance with domestic legislation, and concluded by recommending a revision of the Law on Higher Education as a means to accommodate these linguistic and identity-related demands (HCNM/OSCE, 1995; Kymlicka, 1995; Brubaker, 1996; Spaskovska, 2010).

The High Commissioner subsequently led a multi-year process that culminated in amendments to the Law on Higher Education. These amendments did not allow for the use of the Albanian language in state university institutions, but they opened the possibility for its use within private higher education institutions (Law on Higher Education, 2000). As a direct outcome of this legal framework, the South East European University (SEEU) was founded in Tetova in 2001 with substantial academic and financial support from the United States and the European Union. The university was based on the educational vision of former High Commissioner Max van der Stoel, adopting a trilingual model of instruction in Albanian, Macedonian, and English, and operating under a public–private financing model. Following the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement and subsequent legislative reforms, further changes to the Law on Higher Education were introduced. These changes enabled the recognition and legalization of the State University of Tetova and later the establishment and registration of the Mother Teresa State University in Skopje. These developments marked a significant turning point in the institutional accommodation of the Albanian language within Macedonia's higher education system, signaling a shift from informal, contested educational spaces to legally recognized and internationally supported frameworks (Ackermann, 2000; Brunnbauer, 2002; HCNM/OSCE, 1995).

Concluding Notes: Toward the Ohrid Agreement

The decade preceding the Ohrid Framework Agreement revealed that the question of Albanian linguistic and

collective rights in North Macedonia could not be resolved merely through the rotation of Albanian political parties in power. Political pluralism alone proved insufficient in the absence of constitutional and legal frameworks capable of guaranteeing collective rights and protecting communities from majoritarian domination. For Albanians, the institutionalization of their linguistic identity required more than the establishment of a multiparty system; it depended on the creation of state mechanisms that would safeguard ethno-linguistic rights—particularly the status of the Albanian language—as integral components of the country's political order (Brubaker, 1996; Poulton, 2000; Rechel, 2009).

Following an unwritten historical pattern whereby unresolved ethnic tensions often lead to conflict and, ultimately, negotiated settlements, the 2001-armed conflict in North Macedonia culminated in the Ohrid Framework Agreement. This landmark accord addressed many of the structural and identity-based grievances that had accumulated throughout the 1990s. It initiated far-reaching constitutional amendments that reshaped the country's political and legal landscape, marking a new phase in North Macedonia's trajectory toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Among the key unresolved issues that served as a precondition for the outbreak of the conflict was the legal and symbolic status of the Albanian language, which had long remained a contentious site of negotiation between the state and the Albanian community (Andeva, Sela, & Matovski, 2022; Engström, 2002).

In line with the provisions of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, the Constitution was amended in 2001 to reflect new power-sharing arrangements and strengthen minority rights protections. The Preamble was revised, and numerous constitutional articles were amended to address language use, local governance, personal documentation, and parliamentary procedures. These changes introduced legal mechanisms designed to prevent the marginalization of Albanians and other minority communities in legislative decision-making, ensuring that collective ethnic rights could not be overridden by a simple parliamentary majority. The Agreement identified Albanians as the "20%" community, designating them as the second largest ethnic group. This formulation was subsequently embedded across constitutional articles, including Article 7, which regulates the official use of non-Macedonian languages—most notably, the Albanian language (Andeva, Sela & Matovski, 2022).

The process of translating constitutional principles into effective legal implementation, however, unfolded unevenly over time. The first Law on the Use of Languages Spoken by at Least 20% of the Population was adopted in 2008, establishing an initial legal framework for language rights. This was followed a decade later by the Law on the Use of Languages of 2018, which significantly expanded the official use of Albanian in state institutions. Despite these legal advancements, the full operationalization of linguistic rights remains an ongoing challenge. The Albanian language continues to stand as the central pillar of identity for the Albanian community in North Macedonia, yet its practical implementation within institutional, public, and private spheres often encounters bureaucratic, political, and societal obstacles (Andeva et al., 2022; Friedman, 2001; Risteska, 2013).

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Ecological risk factors for substance use among Albanian adolescents aged 13–17: A school-based cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Adolescent substance use is influenced by the social contexts in which young people are socialized. However, Albania has lacked comparable data on this issue since 2015, and no prior study has examined its social determinants across multiple domains simultaneously. Utilizing a school-based survey of 1,300 students aged 13 to 17 years (39.8 percent male) in Durres, Tirana, and Elbasan, the present study employs the Albanian adaptation of the Communities That Care Youth Survey to assess prevalence, age at onset, and risk factors across individual, family, peer, school, and neighborhood domains, with analyses stratified by sex. Lifetime alcohol use was reported by 55.2 percent of students, tobacco by 34.7 percent, and cannabis by 4.8 percent, with boys reporting higher use of all three substances. The mean age at first use ranged from 12.3 to 13.0 years, and between 75 and 80 percent of users-initiated use at or before age 14. Logistic regression models accounted for 26 to 31 percent of the variance in substance use. Peer behavior emerged as the most consistent influence across substances, although the configuration of risk factors differed by sex. Among boys, peer drinking, association with delinquent peers, and permissive community norms were predominant, whereas among girls, attitudes toward the acceptability of use and sibling modeling were more influential. These findings identify the period before age 14 as critical for prevention and support the implementation of sex-differentiated, norms-based interventions rather than undifferentiated messaging.
Key words: *adolescents; substance use; risk factors; peer influence; socialization; Albania*.

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Introduction

Adolescent substance use should be conceptualized not as an individual pathology but as a social behavior that is learned, maintained, and regulated within the primary contexts of youth socialization: the family, peer groups, schools, and neighborhoods. In Albania, these social environments have changed significantly over three decades. Since the 1990s, sustained migration from rural to urban areas has occurred, and by 2011, the urban population surpassed the rural population for the first time (INSTAT, 2012). By 2023, nearly one-third of the population resided in Tirana County, the only prefecture experiencing growth, while the national population declined by approximately 420,000 over twelve years (INSTAT, 2024). Emigration has also had a profound impact: more than 1.2 million Albanians, representing over 44 percent of the current population, have emigrated, with around 90 percent being of working age (World Bank, 2024).

These demographic shifts have eroded the social capital essential for community life, as the ongoing departure of young adults has diminished civic engagement and hindered community development (Byrne et al., 2021). These changes have also altered child supervision arrangements, including increased reliance on extended family members and older siblings, as well as periods of reduced adult oversight (Xhaho et al., 2022). Among children remaining in Albania, parental migration has been associated with delayed school enrollment and higher dropout rates (Giannelli & Mangiavacchi, 2010).

Adolescent substance use has intensified in recent years. Harm reduction organizations estimated approximately 70,000 drug users in Albania in 2023, an increase from 50,000–60,000 two to three years prior. These organizations also note that state institutions ceased publishing reports on drug use after 2014 (Boldnews.al, 2023). The withdrawal of the state from public reporting constitutes a significant social fact in its own right, leaving families, schools, and municipalities without the shared information necessary for coordinated responses. Furthermore, initiation into substance use is occurring at increasingly younger ages. Clinical observers in Tirana report initial exposure beginning at age 14, with documented cases among children as young as 10. Cannabis is identified as the most commonly used substance among the 10–15 age group (Boldnews.al, 2023; Thoma, 2024). Early initiation, particularly before mid-adolescence, coincides with a critical period in which young people renegotiate attachments to family and school. As a result, early onset is associated with consequences that extend beyond health, including school disengagement, legal conflict, and marginalization from the labor market.

The available evidence base for Albanian field researchers remains limited. Albania last participated in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs in 2015 and did not take part in either the 2019 or 2024 rounds (EUDA, 2024), resulting in a decade-long gap in comparable data on the age group

in which substance use typically begins. What national evidence exists is uneven in scope: a district-level study in Shkodra, for example, found a 13.2 percent prevalence of drug use among young people aged 13 to 22, with 42.6 percent of users falling in the 13 to 18 range (Osmani & Barbullushi, 2014), but such studies cover single localities and use age bands that do not align with international surveys. The most recent national data indicate that lifetime alcohol use was reported by 23 percent of schoolchildren aged 11–15, increasing to 45 percent among 15-year-old boys (Qosja et al., 2025). Lifetime cannabis use among 15–16-year-olds increased from 4 percent in 2011 to 7 percent in 2015 (Toçi et al., 2014). Regional data provide additional context: the 2024 ESPAD round recorded lifetime alcohol use of 75–76 percent in Montenegro and Kosovo, and cannabis use ranging from 2.1 percent in North Macedonia to 7.6 percent in Montenegro (EUDA, 2024). The normative environment is also evolving, with more potent cannabis preparations now circulating in forms accessible to youth (Zëri, 2026), and Albania's location on European trafficking routes influencing local substance availability (UNODC, 2026).

Literature Review

Research on adolescent substance use has converged on the view that risk arises across several social contexts simultaneously, and two complementary frameworks guide the present analysis. This study is based on the Social Development Model, which synthesizes social control, social learning, and differential association theories to explain the acquisition of prosocial and antisocial behaviors through socialization within five domains: the individual, the family, the peer group, the school, and the community (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Strong bonds to these socializing institutions, established through opportunities for involvement and consistent recognition, are associated with a reduced likelihood of problem behavior, whereas weak, absent, or antisocially oriented bonds are linked to increased risk. The ecological systems perspective further supports this framework by conceptualizing the five domains as nested and mutually influential contexts of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consequently, substance use is understood to result from the combined effects of multiple social influences rather than from any single factor (Jessor, 1991).

Comparative research substantiates this framework. Peer substance use represents the most significant proximal influence on initiation, functioning independently of family and individual characteristics (Henneberger et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2024). Within households, parental monitoring and the quality of the parent–child relationship serve as strong protective factors, whereas sibling substance use and family histories of substance or criminal involvement transmit deviant norms and undermine informal control (Rodríguez-Ruiz et al., 2025). Weak attachment to school and truancy are consistently linked to earlier initiation (Charrier et al., 2024; Henry & Thornberry, 2010). At the community level, perceived ease of access predicts substance use, particularly in contexts where restrictions on sales to minors are weakly enforced, as documented in Albania (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA & ISHP, 2017). Male sex and older age are the most consistent demographic correlates identified across

European studies (Charrier et al., 2024; Toçi et al., 2014). Existing Albanian research on these issues is limited and fragmented. No prior study has investigated the social determinants of adolescent substance use in Albania using a validated multi-domain instrument and multivariate analysis. The present study addresses this gap by examining the following questions: (1) What are the prevalence rates and onset ages of tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis use among students aged 13–17? (2) Which risk factors across the five social domains predict substance use? (3) Do these risk factors differ between male and female students?

Materials and Methods

Design, setting, and sample

A cross-sectional survey design with stratified proportional random sampling was employed. An anonymous self-report questionnaire was selected, as adolescents are more likely to report sensitive and norm-violating behaviors candidly in anonymous school settings compared to other contexts (Arthur et al., 2002). The target population included all students aged 13 to 17 enrolled in public lower secondary (grades 7–9) and upper secondary schools (grades 10–12) in the three most densely populated Albanian districts: Durres, Tirana, and Elbasan. Stratification was conducted across five age strata in each district, utilizing enrollment data from the Regional Education Directorates as the sampling frame. Schools were randomly selected from urban, peri-urban, and rural areas, with only public schools included. The final sample consisted of 1,300 students from 41 schools (Durres n=395; Tirana n=708; Elbasan n=197), resulting in a margin of error of ±5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Age-based weighting was applied to correct minor discrepancies between the sample and population distributions.

Instrument

Data collection utilized the Communities That Care Youth Survey, an internationally validated self-report instrument developed within the CTC prevention framework and based on the Social Development Model (Arthur et al., 2002; Glaser et al., 2005). The Albanian version included 117 items across 23 risk-factor scales, organized into four domains: family (4 scales), school (2 scales), individual and peer (10 scales), and neighborhood and community (7 scales). Most items employed four-point Likert-type response categories. Internal consistency ranged from acceptable to good (Cronbach's α = 0.46–0.86). The instrument was translated into Albanian, reviewed by bilingual experts, and pilot tested prior to full administration.

Measures

The three dependent variables were lifetime tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis use. Lifetime smoking was assessed using a five-point ordinal scale ranging from never to regularly now, while lifetime alcohol and cannabis use were measured on an occasion-based frequency scale. All three variables were recoded as binary indicators distinguishing adolescents who had ever used from those who had not. Age at first use was recorded on a reverse-coded ordinal scale, ranging from never used to age 10 or younger. Independent variables were derived from the five social domains of the Social Development Model. At the individual level, these included age and sex as demographic controls, perceived risk of regular cannabis use and daily alcohol use, and attitudes toward peer smoking. Peer-level measures assessed whether

friends smoked, drank, or used cannabis, and whether friends had been suspended from school, with the latter indicating association with delinquent peers. Family-level measures included family histories of alcohol and drug problems, criminal involvement, and sibling smoking and drinking, each reflecting the transmission of norms and models within the household. School-level measures comprised perceived interest in school subjects and school bonding, with the latter derived from a reverse-coded item on disliking school so that higher scores indicated stronger bonding. Neighborhood-level measures included perceived ease of access to alcohol, cigarettes, and cannabis, as well as community norms toward alcohol use and smoking. Given the number of available items, predictors were selected through an exploratory procedure that combined theoretical relevance within the Social Development Model with empirical association. Items were retained if they correlated significantly with at least one outcome (Spearman's rho, $p < .05$) and were meaningful within their domain.

Procedure and ethics

Formal requests were submitted to the Regional Education Directorates four weeks prior to data collection, and each school principal was contacted individually to confirm voluntary participation. Questionnaires were distributed in sealed, unmarked envelopes and completed by students in the classroom without school staff present, in accordance with the instrument's administration protocol (Arthur et al., 2002). Completed questionnaires were then collected in sealed envelopes by the researcher. The study utilized the same dataset and fieldwork described previously (Cilingiri et al., 2026). Research in Albanian schools is regulated by Law No. 69/2012 (KSH, 2012), with protections for minors specified in Law No. 18/2017 on the Rights and Protection of the Child (KSH, 2017). The study implemented an opt-out parental consent procedure in accordance with the national guide to school psycho-social practice (ASCAP, 2022) and adhered to the ethical principles of the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The Directorates reviewed the objectives, procedures, instrument, and safeguards, and issued written authorization. Parents were notified in advance and retained the right to withdraw their child, and verbal assent was obtained from every student. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; students could skip any item or withdraw without penalty, and no identifying information was recorded, ensuring that responses did not constitute personal data under the Law No. 9887/2008 on the Protection of Personal Data (KSH, 2008).

Analysis

Categorical variables were reported as frequencies and percentages, while continuous variables were summarized as means and standard deviations. Bivariate associations between predictors and outcomes were examined using Spearman's rank correlation. Three binary logistic regression models were estimated, one for each substance, with all predictors from the five domains entered simultaneously by forced entry. This approach reflects the theoretical expectation that social influences operate concurrently rather than sequentially, and it avoids the inflated Type I error rates and optimistic p-values associated with stepwise selection (Field, 2018). Model fit was assessed using

Nagelkerke R^2, and odds ratios with 95 percent confidence intervals were reported for all predictors. To address the third research question, the models were re-estimated separately for male and female students. Missing data were handled by listwise deletion, and no cases were excluded on any predictor. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$, and all analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics 21.

Results

Prevalence and Onset Age of Substance Use

The sample included 1,300 students aged 13 to 17 years (mean age 15.1, SD=1.4), with 517 boys (39.8 percent) and 783 girls (60.2 percent). Alcohol was the most commonly used substance, reported by 55.2 percent (n=718) of students, followed by tobacco (34.7 percent; n=451) and cannabis (4.8 percent; n=62). Boys demonstrated higher lifetime use of all three substances: tobacco (44.7 percent versus 28.1 percent), alcohol (69.2 percent versus 46.0 percent), and cannabis (8.7 percent versus 2.2 percent). The prevalence of tobacco and alcohol use increased with age, with tobacco use rising from 18.2 percent at age 13 to 42.4 percent at age 17, and alcohol use increasing from 42.5 percent to 59.4 percent over the same age range. Cannabis use peaked at age 15 (8.1 percent) but did not display a consistent age-related trend, likely due to the small number of cases. Table 1 summarizes these distributions by age group and sex.

Early onset was observed for all three substances (Table 2). The mean age at first use was 12.3 years (SD=2.1) for tobacco, 13.0 years (SD=2.0) for alcohol, and 12.7 years (SD=2.1) for cannabis. Among individuals who had ever used these substances, 81.9 percent of tobacco users, 75.4 percent of alcohol users, and

Table 1: *Lifetime Prevalence of Substance Use by Age Group and Sex (N = 1,300)*

Characteristic	N	Tobacco % (n)	Onset age M (SD)	Alcohol % (n)	Onset age M (SD)	Cannabis % (n)	Onset age M (SD)
Total	1300	34.7 (451)	12.3 (2.1)	55.2 (718)	13.0 (2.0)	4.8 (62)	12.7 (2.1)
Sex							
Male	517	44.7 (231)	—	69.2 (358)	—	8.7 (45)	—
Female	783	28.1 (220)	—	46.0 (360)	—	2.2 (17)	—
Age (years)							
13	247	18.2 (45)	—	42.5 (105)	—	3.2 (8)	—
14	240	30.0 (72)	—	51.7 (124)	—	2.5 (6)	—
15	259	38.6 (100)	—	59.8 (155)	—	8.1 (21)	—
16	271	42.1 (114)	—	61.3 (166)	—	6.3 (17)	—
17	283	42.4 (120)	—	59.4 (168)	—	3.5 (10)	—

Note. Onset age reported as mean (SD) in years among ever-users. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

Table 2: *Onset Age of Substance Use Among Ever-Users, by Sex*

Substance	Total M (SD)	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	% initiated ≤14 years
Tobacco	12.3 (2.1)	12.0 (2.1)	12.7 (2.0)	81.9
Alcohol	13.0 (2.0)	12.5 (2.1)	13.4 (1.9)	75.4
Cannabis	12.7 (2.1)	12.8 (2.1)	12.3 (2.2)	77.8

Note. Onset age reported among ever-users only. M = mean; SD = standard deviation.

77.8 percent of cannabis users-initiated use at or before age 14. Boys exhibited an earlier onset than girls for both tobacco (12.0 versus 12.7 years) and alcohol (12.5 versus 13.4 years).

Ecological Risk Factors Associated with Substance Use

Social risk factors were examined across five domains. The three regression models explained 30.5 percent, 26.4 percent, and 30.8 percent of the variance in lifetime tobacco, alcohol, and cannabis use, respectively (Nagelkerke R^2). Results are detailed in Table 3. Within the individual domain, male sex emerged as the only significant predictor for all three substances (tobacco OR=1.84, alcohol OR=2.33, cannabis OR=3.22, all $p<.001$). Older age independently predicted tobacco (OR=1.16, $p=.005$) and alcohol use (OR=1.10, $p=.043$). A permissive attitude toward peer smoking was associated with increased tobacco (OR=1.40, $p=.002$) and alcohol use (OR=1.36, $p=.008$). Perceived risk of cannabis use demonstrated a cross-substance pattern, predicting cannabis use positively (OR=1.43, $p=.020$) but relating negatively to tobacco (OR=0.80, $p=.021$) and alcohol use (OR=0.71, $p<.001$). Additionally, perceived risk of alcohol use predicted alcohol use (OR=1.22, $p=.012$).

The peer domain demonstrated the most consistent associations. Friends' smoking predicted tobacco use (OR=1.20, p=.001) and was negatively associated with alcohol use (OR=0.89, $p=.032$). Friends' drinking predicted both tobacco (OR=1.25, $p<.001$) and alcohol use (OR=1.35, $p<.001$). Friends' cannabis use emerged as the strongest predictor in the analysis (OR=1.89, $p<.001$). Additionally, having friends suspended from school independently predicted alcohol use (OR=1.34, $p<.001$).

Within the family domain, sibling smoking (OR=1.17, $p<.001$) and sibling drinking (OR=1.12, $p=.008$) predicted tobacco use, while a family history of alcohol and drug problems was a significant negative predictor of cannabis use (OR=0.49, $p=.015$). In the school domain, perceiving school subjects as uninteresting predicted tobacco (OR=1.35, $p<.001$) and cannabis use (OR=1.48, $p=.002$). School bonding predicted tobacco (OR=1.21, $p=.001$) and alcohol use (OR=1.32, $p<.001$) in the opposite direction to expectation, with stronger bonding associated with higher odds of use. In the neighborhood domain, perceived availability of alcohol predicted alcohol use (OR=1.16, $p=.026$), and community norms favorable to smoking predicted cannabis use (OR=1.44, $p=.032$). Overall, the peer domain included significant predictors for all three outcomes. The individual domain was the second most consistent, while school factors were relevant for tobacco and

Table 3: *Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Lifetime Substance Use: Forced Entry Method (N = 1,300)*

	Tobacco (n=451)				Alcohol (n=718)				Cannabis (n=62)			
Predictor (domain)	B	OR	p	95% CI	B	OR	p	95% CI	B	OR	p	95% CI
Individual: Male Sex	0.61	1.84	<.001***	[1.39–2.43]	0.85	2.33	<.001***	[1.79–3.05]	1.17	3.22	<.001***	[1.68–6.15]
Age	0.15	1.16	.005**	[1.05–1.28]	0.10	1.10	.043*	[1.00–1.21]	0.02	1.02	.865	[0.81–1.28]
Attitude: peer smoking	0.34	1.40	.002**	[1.13–1.73]	0.31	1.36	.008**	[1.08–1.71]	0.35	1.42	.063	[0.98–2.04]
Perceived risk cannabis	-0.23	0.80	.021*	[0.65–0.97]	-0.34	0.71	<.001***	[0.59–0.86]	0.36	1.43	.020*	[1.06–1.93]
Perceived risk alcohol	0.03	1.03	.690	[0.88–1.20]	0.20	1.22	.012*	[1.04–1.42]	-0.17	0.85	.307	[0.61–1.17]
Peers: Friends smoke	0.18	1.20	.001***	[1.08–1.33]	-0.12	0.89	.032*	[0.80–0.99]	0.02	1.02	.838	[0.82–1.28]
Friends drink	0.23	1.25	<.001***	[1.14–1.38]	0.30	1.35	<.001***	[1.23–1.50]	0.08	1.08	.453	[0.89–1.31]
Friends use cannabis	-0.09	0.91	.287	[0.77–1.08]	-0.14	0.87	.153	[0.73–1.05]	0.64	1.89	<.001***	[1.49–2.40]
Friends suspended	0.06	1.06	.410	[0.92–1.23]	0.29	1.34	<.001***	[1.14–1.57]	0.15	1.16	.232	[0.91–1.49]
Family: Family drug history	0.02	1.02	.754	[0.88–1.19]	0.03	1.03	.706	[0.89–1.19]	-0.71	0.49	.015*	[0.28–0.87]
Family crime history	-0.00	1.00	.943	[0.89–1.11]	0.10	1.11	.074	[0.99–1.24]	0.08	1.09	.412	[0.89–1.33]
Siblings smoke	0.16	1.17	<.001***	[1.07–1.28]	-0.02	0.98	.613	[0.89–1.07]	0.14	1.15	.125	[0.96–1.37]
Siblings drink	0.11	1.12	.008**	[1.03–1.21]	0.08	1.08	.059	[1.00–1.17]	0.07	1.07	.465	[0.90–1.27]
School: Courses interesting	0.30	1.35	<.001***	[1.21–1.52]	0.10	1.11	.080	[0.99–1.24]	0.39	1.48	.002**	[1.15–1.90]
School bonding	0.19	1.21	.001***	[1.08–1.36]	0.28	1.32	<.001***	[1.19–1.48]	-0.13	0.88	.313	[0.68–1.13]
Neighborhood: Alcohol easy to get	0.03	1.03	.703	[0.89–1.19]	0.15	1.16	.026*	[1.02–1.33]	0.09	1.10	.588	[0.79–1.53]
Cigarettes easy to get	0.11	1.12	.122	[0.97–1.28]	0.01	1.01	.932	[0.88–1.14]	-0.25	0.78	.129	[0.56–1.08]
Cannabis easy to get	-0.03	0.97	.694	[0.86–1.11]	-0.06	0.94	.351	[0.83–1.07]	0.07	1.07	.624	[0.81–1.41]
Community norms alcohol	0.08	1.08	.454	[0.88–1.32]	0.19	1.20	.069	[0.99–1.47]	-0.07	0.93	.715	[0.63–1.38]
Community norms smoking	0.17	1.18	.061	[0.99–1.40]	-0.00	1.00	.961	[0.84–1.18]	0.37	1.44	.032*	[1.03–2.02]
Nagelkerke R^2	.305				.264				.308			

Note. N = 1,300. B = unstandardized logistic regression coefficient; OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. All predictors entered simultaneously using forced entry. School bonding = reverse coded so higher score indicates stronger bonding. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

cannabis use. Family and neighborhood factors were substance-specific outcomes.

Gender Differences in Risk Factor Profiles

Nagelkerke R^2 values in the sex-stratified models ranged from .199 to .357, with the highest value observed in the cannabis model for males (Table 4). The profiles differed primarily in emphasis rather than in absolute terms. Among boys, peer influence was the predominant factor: friends' drinking predicted both tobacco use (OR=1.46) and alcohol use (OR=1.73), friends suspended from school predicted alcohol use (OR=1.61), and friends' cannabis use predicted cannabis

Table 4: *Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Lifetime Substance Use, Stratified by Sex*

	Males (n=517)			Females (n=783)		
Predictor	Tobacco OR (p)	Alcohol OR (p)	Cannabis OR (p)	Tobacco OR (p)	Alcohol OR (p)	Cannabis OR (p)
Lifetime prevalence	44.7%	69.2%	8.7%	28.1%	46.0%	2.2%
Nagelkerke R^2	.290	.307	.357	.331	.199	.254
Individual domain						
Age	—	—	—	1.20 (.015*)	—	—
Attitude: peer smoking	—	—	—	2.13 (<.001***)	1.49 (.008**)	—
Perceived risk cannabis	—	—	—	—	0.66 (.003**)	—
Perceived risk alcohol	—	—	—	—	1.38 (.002**)	—
Peer domain						
Friends smoke	1.22 (.016*)	—	—	1.24 (.005**)	0.84 (.013*)	—
Friends drink	1.46 (<.001***)	1.73 (<.001***)	—	—	1.17 (.019*)	—
Friends use cannabis	—	—	2.01 (<.001***)	—	—	1.83 (.015*)
Friends suspended	—	1.61 (.001**)	—	—	1.27 (.020*)	—
Family domain						
Siblings smoke	—	—	1.26 (.041*)	1.19 (.004**)	—	—
Siblings drink	—	—	—	1.23 (<.001***)	—	—
School domain						
Courses interesting	1.27 (.007**)	—	1.53 (.008**)	1.39 (<.001***)	—	—
School bonding	1.25 (.013*)	1.26 (.017*)	—	1.18 (.041*)	1.36 (<.001***)	—
Neighborhood domain						
Community norms smoking	1.30 (.043*)	1.33 (.048*)	1.88 (.004**)	—	—	—

Note. Only significant predictors ($p < .05$) shown. OR = odds ratio. School bonding = reverse coded. — = not significant ($p \geq .05$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

use (OR=2.01). Community norms favorable to smoking were significant predictors for all three substances among boys (OR=1.30 to 1.88), but not among girls. In contrast, individual attitudes were more influential among girls: a permissive attitude toward peer smoking strongly predicted tobacco use (OR=2.13, $p<.001$) and alcohol use (OR=1.49, $p=.008$), effects not observed among boys. Additionally, older age predicted tobacco use among girls (OR=1.20, $p=.015$). Perceptions of risk were significant only among girls and demonstrated divergent effects: perceived risk of alcohol was associated with higher odds of alcohol use (OR=1.38, p=.002), whereas perceived risk of cannabis was associated with lower odds of use (OR=0.66, $p=.003$). Peer influence was also present among girls, as friends' smoking predicted tobacco use (OR=1.24) and friends' cannabis use predicted cannabis use (OR=1.83). Sibling modeling was observed in both sexes but for different substances, predicting tobacco use among girls (siblings smoking OR=1.19; siblings drinking OR=1.23) and cannabis use among boys (siblings smoking OR=1.26). School-related factors operated similarly in both groups: school bonding predicted tobacco and alcohol use, while uninteresting school subjects predicted tobacco and cannabis use among boys and tobacco use among girls.

Discussion

This study examined the prevalence, age at onset, and social determinants of substance use among 1,300 Albanian school students aged 13 to 17, using an instrument designed to measure risk across five socialization domains. It offers the first multivariate account of these determinants in a large, school-based Albanian sample and the first evidence that risk profiles differ by sex in a transitional Balkan society.

Patterns of use and early onset

Alcohol was the most widely used substance, followed by tobacco and, to a much lesser extent, cannabis. Compared to the European HBSC averages for 15-year-olds, substance use rates among Albanian adolescents aged 13 to 17 were moderate, with cannabis use notably lower than the European average (Charrier et al., 2024). The more recent national HBSC survey, conducted in 2021–2022 among students aged 11, 13 and 15, reports a broadly comparable picture (Faculty of Medicine, 2024), although differences in age range and sampling preclude direct comparison with the present findings. This indicates that illicit substance use remained concentrated within specific subgroups during the period of data collection. The most salient finding is not the prevalence of use, but rather the early age of initiation. The mean age of onset ranged from 12.3 to 13.0 years for all three substances, and approximately 75% to 80% of ever-users had initiated use at or before age 14. Early initiation is a well-established predictor of persistent and escalating substance use in longitudinal studies employing this instrument (Arthur et al., 2007), a pattern also observed in the largest validation of the survey conducted outside the United States (Pérez-Gómez et al., 2020). From a sociological perspective, initiation occurs while adolescents are still embedded within family and school environments, prior to the transitions typically associated with increased risk behavior. Therefore, the critical window for prevention is between ages 11 and 13, which is earlier than the age targeted by most current Albanian intervention programs.

The primacy of the peer group

Peer substance use emerged as the most consistent predictor across all three outcomes and both sexes, aligning with the Social Development Model, which identifies bonding to substance-using peers as the most immediate social influence (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). Friends' drinking predicted both tobacco and alcohol use, while friends' cannabis use was the strongest single predictor in the analysis. These findings align with international syntheses (Henneberger et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2024) and large-scale applications of the same instrument in other societies (Glaser et al., 2005; Pérez-Gómez et al., 2020). The Albanian context is distinctive not in the magnitude of peer influence, but in the surrounding social conditions: peer networks organized around substance use have expanded during a period of reduced adult supervision and diminished public monitoring. One peer-related finding diverged from expectations. Friends' smoking was negatively associated with alcohol use, which may suggest a form of substitution. Adolescents whose immediate peer group is organized around smoking may spend less time in mixed social settings where drinking occurs, or this association may reflect a measurement artifact. Replication is necessary before drawing substantive conclusions.

Sex as a social position

Male sex emerged as the only significant predictor for all three substances, with the strongest association observed for cannabis, aligning with previous Albanian research (EMCDDA & ISHP, 2017; Toçi et al., 2014). However, stratified models indicate that sex functions less as a static attribute and more as a social position that shapes the relevance of specific social influences. Among boys, risk was primarily associated with peer group dynamics and community norms, including friends' drinking, association with peers suspended from school, and permissive community norms toward smoking. Notably, permissive community norms were significant for all three substances among boys but not among girls. In contrast, attitudinal factors were more influential among girls, particularly the perceived acceptability of peer smoking, which more than doubled the odds of tobacco use. This distinction reflects the difference between descriptive norms, defined as perceptions of peers' actual behaviors, and injunctive norms, defined as perceptions of what is socially approved. Boys were more responsive to descriptive norms, whereas girls were more influenced by injunctive norms (Arthur et al., 2002). It is important to note that the peer group should not be considered exclusively a male domain; among girls, friends' smoking predicted tobacco use and friends' cannabis use predicted cannabis use. The key difference lies not in the importance of peers, but in which peer signals are most influential. Sibling modeling was also evident in both sexes, predicting tobacco use among girls and cannabis use among boys, suggesting that household-level social learning is present across the sample but is associated with different substances.

Risk perception demonstrates notable ambiguities

Perceptions of risk varied inconsistently across different substances, highlighting a pattern that merits further examination. In the full statistical models, higher perceived risk of cannabis was associated with lower odds of tobacco and alcohol use, but with higher odds of cannabis use. Among girls, higher perceived risk of alcohol correlated with increased odds of drinking, while higher perceived risk of cannabis correlated with decreased odds of use. The most

plausible explanation involves reverse causation in conjunction with cultural distance. Adolescents who have already used a substance tend to assess its risks based on personal experience and subsequently rate them higher. In contrast, for substances with which they lack experience, risk perception operates as a normative judgment. In Albania, alcohol is culturally normalized and socially visible, so its risks are typically learned through direct use. Cannabis, by contrast, remains stigmatized and less accessible, so perceived risk continues to function as a deterrent. This interpretation aligns with the varying effectiveness of risk messaging across substances and supports the need for substance-specific, rather than generic, risk communication strategies in educational settings.

School bonding as exposure

Viewing school subjects as uninteresting predicted tobacco and cannabis use, consistent with the model's expectations for individuals with low commitment to school as a socializing institution. However, the school bonding measure demonstrated an unexpected pattern: stronger bonding was associated with higher odds of tobacco and alcohol use. This result should not be dismissed as error. Attachment to school also entails attachment to the peer networks present within the school environment. Longitudinal research indicates that school connectedness can have complex and sometimes adverse effects on later substance use, depending on the quality of peer relationships formed (Bond et al., 2007). These findings suggest that institutional attachment and peer exposure are empirically intertwined in this sample, and that a school bonding measure based on a single reverse-coded item cannot adequately distinguish between them.

Family and community

A family history of alcohol and drug problems was associated with lower odds of cannabis use, which contrasts with typical findings in Western contexts (Rodríguez-Ruiz et al., 2025). In societies where family reputation holds significant social importance and illicit drug use is highly stigmatized, exposure to substance-related harm within the household may serve as a deterrent rather than a behavioral model, particularly for substances that carry the greatest stigma. Parental attitudes did not predict cannabis use, whereas sibling behavior was a significant predictor. These findings suggest that adolescents are more influenced by observed behaviors within the household than by parental guidance, indicating that prevention strategies focused solely on parental education may not effectively address the primary mechanisms influencing adolescent substance use. Neighborhood factors emerged as the most selective among the five domains examined. Only perceived alcohol availability and community norms supportive of smoking were significant predictors, with the latter associated with increased cannabis use. This finding suggests that the social acceptability of one smoked substance may extend to others within the same normative environment. Most other community-level variables, including cannabis and cigarette availability, were not significant after controlling for peer and individual factors. This pattern aligns with the sequential logic of the Social Development Model, which posits that community conditions influence behavior primarily by shaping peer associations and group behaviors. Similar attenuation of community effects has been observed when peer factors are included in models elsewhere (Pérez-Gómez et al., 2020). Thus, neighborhood influences are reflected indirectly through their impact on peer groups.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. Data collection occurred in a single wave, and the substance use landscape among Albanian adolescents has since evolved, with more potent substances and new behaviors such as vaping that were not captured by the instrument. Consequently, these results should be interpreted as a baseline for future comparison rather than as a current estimate. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference, and several reported associations, particularly those involving risk perception, may be subject to reverse causation. Reliance on self-report introduces social desirability bias, although anonymous classroom administration likely reduced this effect. The school-based sampling frame excludes out-of-school youth, who are likely at higher risk, suggesting that prevalence is underestimated. The school bonding measure, based on a single reverse-coded item, performed anomalously and does not distinguish between institutional attachment and peer exposure within the school context. Finally, the cannabis models are based on 62 cases, which limits the stability of these estimates.

Conclusion

This study presents the first multivariate analysis of the social determinants of adolescent substance use in Albania. Two principal findings emerge. First, substance use initiation occurs early, with the mean onset between 12.3 and 13.0 years, and most users beginning at or before age 14. This timing precedes the typical age range targeted by prevention programs. Second, the relevant social influences vary by sex. For boys, peer groups and permissive community norms are associated with increased risk, whereas for girls, attitudes regarding the acceptability of use and sibling behaviors at home are more influential. While peers are important for both groups, the mechanisms of influence differ.

These findings suggest that undifferentiated prevention strategies are unlikely to be effective. Prevention programs should target children between ages 11 and 13, address descriptive peer norms for boys and injunctive norms for girls, and consider the household, rather than solely the parent, as the primary unit of intervention, given that sibling behavior predicted substance use while parental attitudes did not. Risk communication should be tailored to specific substances, as a generalized message about "drugs" is ineffective when alcohol is culturally accepted and cannabis is stigmatized; these substances elicited opposite patterns of risk perception in this sample. Considering the decade-long gap in national surveillance, these results provide a reference point for future assessments of Albanian adolescents.

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INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND STUDENTS' NEEDS: THE ROLE AND PERSPECTIVE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education requires more than placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; it depends on meaningful participation, accessible learning, social acceptance, and coordinated professional support. This study examines inclusive education in Albania through the perspectives of teachers, parents, and students, with particular attention to the role of school social work. A descriptive mixed-source design combines documentary analysis of the historical and legal framework with questionnaires administered to 170 participants—20 teachers, 30 parents, and 120 students—and semi-structured teacher interviews. The findings reveal a marked contrast between broad teacher support for inclusion and limited professional preparedness. Teachers reported difficulties related to curriculum flexibility, adapted materials, large classes, infrastructure, and specialist support. Parent responses showed substantially greater resistance to inclusive classrooms and socialisation with children with disabilities, whereas student attitudes were generally more positive. Interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective, the results indicate that interactions among the student, family, school, peer group, professional

services, and institutional environment shape inclusion. The study argues that social workers are strategically positioned to connect these systems through needs assessment, family–school communication, multidisciplinary coordination, discrimination prevention, and psychosocial support. Effective inclusion therefore depends on coordinated educational and social intervention rather than formal access alone.

Keywords: *inclusive education; students with disabilities; school social work; psychosocial support; educational participation; Albania.*

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Introduction

Inclusive education is a rights-based educational and social principle grounded in equal participation, dignity, and meaningful development opportunities for every learner (United Nations, 1989; United Nations, 2006). Its purpose is not to require students to conform to a rigid school structure, but to adapt educational environments to diverse capacities and needs. In this sense, diversity is a normal characteristic of the school community rather than a problem to be managed.

Formal enrolment in a mainstream school does not by itself constitute inclusion. Meaningful inclusion requires participation in learning, peer relationships, school activities, and decision-making, together with access to appropriate curricula, teaching strategies, support services, and physical environments. Barriers may arise from large classes, limited professional preparation, inflexible curricula, inaccessible infrastructure, stigma, low expectations, weak family–school communication, and fragmented institutional support.

These barriers have a social dimension that makes the school social worker particularly relevant. Social workers can identify psychosocial and environmental difficulties, facilitate communication between families and schools, contribute to multidisciplinary planning, prevent exclusion and discrimination, and connect students with community services. Their contribution is therefore relational and systemic rather than limited to intervention after a problem has already emerged.

In Albania, inclusive education has developed alongside changes in legislation, institutional policy, professional practice, and understandings of disability. This study examines this process through the perceptions of teachers, parents, and students and asks how professional preparation, curriculum, resources, infrastructure, family attitudes, peer relations, and psychosocial support interact in implementing inclusion.

Literature review

Inclusive Education and Professional Preparation

Contemporary inclusive education emphasises participation, accessibility, learning, belonging, and removing institutional and social barriers. Teachers are central to translating policy into classroom practice because their knowledge, attitudes, confidence, and ability to differentiate instruction shape students' daily experience. A systematic review of students with autism spectrum disorders found generally positive educator attitudes but substantial variation associated with training, experience, perceived student needs, and professional factors.

Curriculum flexibility is equally important. A curriculum becomes exclusionary when it assumes uniform pace, method, materials, and assessment. Inclusive practice therefore requires differentiated instruction, individualised planning where necessary, adapted learning resources, and specialist support. Family participation and peer relationships also influence belonging: physical presence in a classroom may coexist with social isolation when students lack acceptance, friendship, cooperation, or meaningful participation.

Social Work and the Ecological Perspective

Educational barriers frequently extend beyond pedagogy into family circumstances, poverty, discrimination, social isolation, access to services, and institutional coordination. School social work addresses these intersections by linking individual needs with family, school, peer, community, and service environments. Relevant functions include psychosocial assessment, early identification, family–school mediation, multidisciplinary collaboration, preventive intervention, and referral to support services.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective provides the theoretical framework for this study because it conceptualises development as occurring across interacting environments. Inclusion is consequently understood as a systemic process: classroom practice, family attitudes, peer relations, school organisation, professional services, community resources, and policy conditions can reinforce or undermine one another. The social worker occupies a particularly important position at these intersections and can strengthen continuity between educational and social support.

Research Gap

Research commonly addresses teacher attitudes, curriculum adaptation, accessibility, or family participation as separate dimensions. The present study treats them as interconnected components of one inclusive system and gives particular attention to the social worker as a coordinating professional. This approach permits the empirical findings to be interpreted not as isolated obstacles but as interacting educational, interpersonal, and institutional conditions.

Albanian historical and legal context

The development of services for children with disabilities in Albania reflects a gradual movement from institutional and medical approaches toward specialised education and, later, greater participation in mainstream schooling. From 1944–1990, organised special education expanded, but educating children with disabilities alongside their peers was not yet the

dominant model (World Vision Albania, 2013). After the political transition, broader communication methods, changing professional practices, and new rights-based approaches gradually shifted toward integration and inclusion.

The legal framework reinforces equality, non-discrimination, and adaptation to individual educational needs. Law No. 69/2012 on the Pre-University Education System (KSH, 2012) devotes a chapter to the education of children with disabilities. Under Article 65, students with disabilities learn according to the ordinary curriculum and subject programmes adapted for them or according to specialised programmes; ordinary institutions must provide a commission that includes teachers, psychologists, and assistant teachers, and must provide rehabilitation services. Order No. 31 of 28 January 2020 (MASR, 2020a) regulates the functioning of pre-university institutions, including the role of assistant teachers, participation in Individual Education Plans, and the psychosocial service in schools; Order No. 313 of 20 October 2020 (MASR, 2020b) addresses the organisation and functioning of that service. Law No. 10 221 of 4 February 2010 on Protection from Discrimination explicitly includes disability as a protected ground (KSH, 2010), and Law No. 93/2014 on the Inclusion and Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities (KSH, 2014) sets out rights to inclusion and accessibility. At the international level, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2006). Several of these texts have been amended since adoption, for example, Law No. 69/2012 (KSH, 2012) by Laws No. 56/2015 (KSH, 2015) and No. 48/2018 (KSH, 2018), and Law No. 10 221 by Law No. 124/2020 (KSH, 2020). Legal recognition, however, does not automatically produce effective inclusion. Implementation depends on whether schools, teachers, assistant teachers, psychosocial professionals, families, and educational authorities can translate formal rights into accessible environments, adapted learning, coordinated assessment, and sustained support. This implementation gap is central to the empirical analysis that follows.

Research questions

- RQ1. How prepared are teachers to implement inclusive education in mainstream classrooms?
- RQ2. Which curricular, material, infrastructural, and professional-support barriers are most visible in the reported data?
- RQ3. How do parents and students perceive the inclusion and social participation of children with disabilities?
- RQ4. How can the findings be interpreted through an ecological model of inclusion and the coordinating role of school social work?

Method

Research Design

The study uses a descriptive design combining documentary analysis with empirical data from questionnaires and semi-structured teacher interviews. The documentary phase examined the historical development and legal framework of inclusive education in Albania. The empirical phase examined perceptions, preparedness, attitudes, and barriers within the school environment.

Participants and Instruments

A total of 170 participants took part: 20 teachers, 30 parents, and 120 students. The parent group included participants from urban and rural areas and varied educational backgrounds. We used separate questionnaires for teachers, parents, and students. Teacher items addressed knowledge, preparation, experience, cooperation, curriculum, and classroom barriers; parent items addressed awareness and attitudes toward shared classrooms and social environments; student items addressed perceptions and behaviour toward peers with disabilities. Semi-structured teacher interviews added qualitative detail, including participants' definitions and understandings of inclusive education. The teacher questionnaire findings are reported as descriptive response patterns from the available dataset. Because the surviving records do not permit reliable reconstruction of all original administration details, the results are interpreted cautiously and are not presented as nationally representative estimates.

Analytical Procedure

The empirical material was organised around six connected categories: teacher preparedness; cooperation and specialist support; curriculum and adapted programmes; learning resources and infrastructure; parental attitudes; and student attitudes. Descriptive percentages are reported where item-level data permit; otherwise, patterns are reported qualitatively. Interpretation then connects these categories to the ecological framework, distinguishing reported responses from broader theoretical implications.

Scope and Interpretive Caution

The data describe the participating sample and should not be treated as nationally representative. Questionnaire responses capture perceptions rather than direct measures of classroom effectiveness. The study therefore uses the findings to identify patterns and relationships requiring further investigation rather than to generalise to all Albanian schools.

Results

Teacher Support and Professional Preparedness

Teachers expressed strong general support for inclusion: 98% responded positively to including all children in mainstream schools, while 2% responded negatively. This support was not matched by equivalent confidence in professional preparation. Interviewed teachers frequently reported limited knowledge of inclusive teaching practices. Reported sources of knowledge were education (36%), media (32%), discussions with colleagues (20%), and training activities (12%), indicating that specialised professional training was not the dominant source of preparation.

Table 1: *Study participants*

Participant group	Number
Teachers	20
Parents	30
Students	120
Total	170

Cooperation and Classroom Support

Family–school cooperation was uneven: 68% of teachers reported extensive cooperation with parents, 20% some cooperation, and 12% limited cooperation. By contrast, all teachers considered cooperation with assistant teachers and other specialists highly necessary. When asked whether inclusive classrooms created difficulties in teaching other students, responses were 21% "very much," 54% "to some extent," 19% "a little," and 6% "not at all." The accompanying responses linked many difficulties to insufficient support rather than to the presence of students with disabilities itself.

Curriculum, Resources, and Infrastructure

Curriculum flexibility emerged as a major concern. Teachers rated the current curriculum as appropriate "very much" in 0% of responses, "to some extent" in 23%, "a little" in 41%, and "not at all" in 36%. Only 8% reported having a specific programme for working with students with disabilities, while 92% did not. Participants also identified shortages of adapted textbooks, simplified or large-print materials, Braille resources, supplementary materials, and assistive technology.

Physical access was another recurring concern. Reported difficulties included transportation and distance from home to school, the physical condition of buildings, class size, and insufficient equipment. Large classes were especially prominent: 84% of teachers considered them an obstacle to satisfactory educational outcomes. These results show that inclusive practice depends on organisational and material conditions as well as teacher attitudes.

Parents and Students

Parent responses revealed substantially greater resistance. Seventy-seven per cent (23/30; 95% CI 59–88%) reported that they did not agree with their child studying in a classroom that included children with disabilities, while 23% agreed. Approximately 80% did not want their children to socialise with children with disabilities. Some concerns reflected fears that disability-related behaviour could negatively influence their own child's learning or behaviour.

Students presented a comparatively more positive pattern. Most reported that they did not discriminate between themselves and peers with disabilities and expressed willingness to assist. Nevertheless, some opposed sharing classrooms with peers with disabilities, and some linked these views to messages received from parents. The findings therefore connect peer attitudes with the wider family and social environment.

The available student responses indicate an overall tendency toward acceptance and willingness to assist peers with disabilities, although a smaller group expressed reservations about shared classroom participation. Because item-level counts are not available for every student response, these patterns are reported qualitatively rather than converted into unsupported percentages.

Synthesis of findings

The integrated pattern is consistent with an ecological reading: professional preparation appears to shape classroom practice; classroom conditions appear to affect participation; family attitudes appear linked to peer relations; and institutional resources constrain what teachers and families can realistically sustain. Because the data are descriptive and perceptual, these links are interpretive rather than causal. The social worker's relevance lies in

Table 2: *Integrated mapping of reported barriers and social-work implications*

Dimension	Reported pattern	Inclusive implication	Social-work relevance
Teacher attitudes	98% support inclusion	Positive attitudes exceed practical preparedness	Training coordination and case support
Professional support	Specialists viewed as highly necessary	Inclusion depends on multidisciplinary capacity	Link teachers, families, specialists
Curriculum/ resources	Limited flexibility and adapted materials	Access requires instructional adaptation	Advocate and coordinate supports
Infrastructure	Class size/access barriers reported	Physical presence does not ensure participation	Identify environmental barriers
Parents	77% opposed shared classroom; ~80% opposed socialisation	Family attitudes may reinforce exclusion	Family education and mediation
Students	Generally, more positive, with some resistance	Peer attitudes appear shaped by family messages	Prevention and school-community work

connecting these levels rather than treating each barrier in isolation.

Discussion

The clearest finding is the gap between normative support for inclusion and practical capacity to implement it. Teachers overwhelmingly endorsed inclusion while simultaneously reporting limited preparation, inflexible curricula, scarce adapted programmes and resources, and dependence on specialist support. This pattern is consistent with meta-analytic evidence that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are generally positive (Guillemot, Lacroix & Nocus, 2022), while their beliefs, self-efficacy, and concerns about practice vary with training and experience (Dignath et al., 2022). Professional development should therefore emphasise applied strategies—differentiated instruction, individualised planning, classroom management, collaboration, and use of adapted resources—rather than awareness alone.

The curriculum and infrastructure findings show that inclusion cannot rest solely within teacher competence. When programmes, materials, assistive technologies, accessible spaces, and manageable class conditions are inadequate, individual teachers are asked to compensate for structural limitations. The ecological framework is useful precisely because it prevents these constraints from being interpreted as isolated professional shortcomings.

Parent responses expose an equally important social barrier. Resistance to shared classrooms and socialisation suggests that it is shaped by attitudes formed beyond the classroom. UNICEF Albania continues to identify stigma, discrimination, and inadequate access to genuinely inclusive education and community support as challenges affecting children with disabilities and their families (UNICEF Albania, 2013). The more positive student responses are encouraging, but the reported influence of parental messages also indicates that peer attitudes develop within wider social relationships.

These patterns clarify the role of school social work. Many reported barriers—family resistance, stigma, communication difficulties, access to services, and fragmented support—

are not purely instructional. Social workers can contribute by assessing psychosocial barriers, strengthening family–school communication, coordinating multidisciplinary responses, supporting anti-discrimination work, and helping students and families navigate services. Their role complements rather than replaces the responsibilities of teachers, psychologists, assistant teachers, administrators, and families.

Conclusion and practice implications

This study shows that inclusive education is best understood as coordinated participation rather than physical placement. The participating teachers were broadly supportive of inclusion but reported substantial limitations in preparation, curriculum, resources, infrastructure, and specialist support. Parent attitudes were markedly more resistant, while students were generally more accepting. Taken together, the findings indicate that educational inclusion is produced through the interaction of classroom, family, peer, professional, and institutional environments.

For practice, the data point to four priorities: ongoing applied training for teachers and assistant teachers; greater curriculum flexibility and access to adapted materials and assistive resources; sustained family–school engagement to reduce stigma and misunderstanding; and systematic integration of psychosocial services into inclusive planning. School social workers can contribute across all four areas by linking individual needs to family, school, community, and institutional resources.

Inclusion should therefore be evaluated not only by whether a student enters a mainstream classroom, but by whether that student can participate, learn, belong, build relationships, and receive coordinated support. The central institutional challenge is to transform formal access into meaningful educational and social participation.

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations. The empirical sample—20 teachers, 30 parents, and 120 students—is relatively limited and does not support national generalisation. The analysis relies substantially on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by participants' experience, knowledge, and willingness to express their views. In addition, the study did not examine professionals such as social workers, psychologists, assistant teachers, school leaders, and local educational representatives as distinct participant groups, despite their relevance to institutional coordination.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across Albanian municipalities, urban and rural contexts, educational levels, and school types. Particular attention should be given to school social workers' direct professional experiences and to the voices of students with disabilities themselves. Longitudinal and comparative research could also examine whether training, family-engagement programmes, adapted resources, and strengthened psychosocial services produce measurable changes in participation, belonging, achievement, peer relations, and continuity of support.

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AADF PROJECTS: EDUCATION, ACADEMIC DIASPORA & ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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ABSTRACT[1]

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 163 million USD and is growing every year, with 97 M USD in Education & Leadership and 66 M USD 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: ElementIT, AI for Youth, and TUMO Tirana. For students: Clean Score, JuniorUP, 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.*

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Dr. **Jonida LAMAJ** has served as Program Manager at the Albanian American Development Foundation (AADF) since 2018. She manages AADF's Education portfolio, comprising more than 20 projects with a total value of approximately $60 million. Prior to joining AADF, she worked for eight years (2010–2018) as a full-time lecturer at Marin Barleti University, served as Executive Director of the Youth Act Center, and led the Education USA Advising Center in Albania. From 2018 to 2022, she also taught on a part-time basis at the Faculty of Law of the University of Tirana for one year and at Marin Barleti University for four years. She holds an MSc in Law, an MA in Public Administration, and a PhD in Competition Law from the University of Tirana. Jonida is also a licensed attorney with the National Chamber of Advocacy of Albania and holds a Project Management Professional certification from the Project Management Institute.

Introduction

The Albanian American Development Foundation (AADF) is dedicated to supporting Albania's path towards sustainable development. AADF was founded as a non-profit entity in 2009, with support from USAID and the U.S. government, as a legacy organization of the Albanian American Enterprise Fund (AAEF). AAEF was set up in 1995 with a $30 million grant from USAID under the SEED Act of 1989, with the aim of promoting the private sector in Albania (AADF, 2026a). AADF mission is realized through impactful investments, innovative models, and strategic partnerships across four core areas: Education for Sustainable Development, Leadership Development, Entrepreneurship, and Cultural and Eco-tourism. AADF is better described as a strategic development foundation that designs, pilots, executes, and scales mid & long-term initiatives working closely with local communities, experts, government bodies, universities and international organizations to build a shared vision and co-create long-lasting solutions. AADF is best understood as a high-engagement, country-focused, operating and catalytic foundation. It does not provide grants; it identifies problems, designs interventions, brings international models to Albania, develops partnerships, supports implementation, and often works toward institutional or regulatory change. That makes AADF more operationally involved than many traditional foundations.

AADF till September 2026 reports approximately $163 million committed across 87 projects, generating an estimated $500 million in overall economic impact.

Although, its peers by origin and endowment are America for Bulgaria, Polish American Freedom, HAESF, etc., its peers by operating model are Mastercard Foundation, Aga Khan Foundation, Lemann Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York, Skoll Foundation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Rockefeller Foundation etc. These organizations share several characteristics with AADF: They make mid & long-term investments (5+ years) rather than short-term grants; they co-design programs with governments, universities, and the private sector; they emphasize institution building instead of only funding projects; they focus on measurable, sustainable impact; they often create new institutions or national models that governments later adopt.

Key characteristics of AADF

AADF operates projects, not grants

A conventional grantmaking foundation normally selects an independent organization, transfers funding, and monitors performance. AADF is frequently much more involved. It develops, executes and monitors its own projects.

It combines several intervention levels
Many foundations concentrate on one principal level of intervention, for example, individual scholarships, research grants, civil-society organizations, public policy, or social services. AADF often works simultaneously at several levels: individual, organization, sector, policy, infrastructure, market, national system.

It has national concentration and institutional access
AADF operates entirely in Albania and concentrates its investments in education and leadership, entrepreneurship, cultural heritage, and eco-tourism.

It develops proven global models
AADF's guiding philosophy is simple: development does not have to mean reinventing the wheel. At AADF, we adapt and implement models that have already proven successful in other contexts, tailoring them to Albania's needs. Some of the internationally proven models and initiatives supported by AADF, particularly in the fields of education, technology and innovation, include Jounior Achievement of Albania, Center for School Leadership, TUMO Tirana, the Center for Educational Services (CES), ElementIT, AI for Youth, Plug and Play, 42 Tirana, and the Coding Academy, among others.

AADF stands as a catalyst for Albania's sustainable development, leveraging international expertise and local partnerships to create lasting change across education, leadership, entrepreneurship, and cultural heritage.

Education is the cornerstone of AADF's work

The Foundation has implemented a wide range of initiatives serving different age groups and stakeholders. For early learners and kindergarten children, these include Junior Achievement Albania and the Center for School Leadership. For K–9 and secondary school students, AADF supports ElementIT, AI for Youth, and TUMO Tirana. For university students, initiatives include Clean Score, JuniorUP, and Debating Economics. For young professionals, AADF offers fellowship programs such as LEAD Albania, Masters and Internship Programs, and the AADF Scholarship Program. For university researchers and academics, the Foundation implements programs such as Research Expertise from the Academic Diaspora (READ) and Boosting Research and Integrating Diaspora for Education Growth, BRIDGE (AADF, 2026b).

Given the fact that is difficult to cover all AADF projects within education portfolio, this paper will focus primarily on the impact of: two projects that address mainly pre-university education in Albania: Junior Achievement Albania and the Center for School Leadership; one project related to our scientific Diaspora and one project related to Artificial Intelligence.

Junior Achievement of Albania (JAA, 2026) was established in 2012 as a strategic investment of the AADF and operates in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education. JA modules are currently integrated into the core curriculum of pre-university education, from preschool through upper secondary education, as well as into the elective curriculum at the upper secondary level. JAA is a member of Junior Achievement Worldwide and Junior Achievement Europe. JA curriculum is part of the entire pre-university school system, from pre-school to K12 classes, reaching 100% of Albania's students across the country. JAA continues to promote

financial literacy among Albanian youth, prepare them with hands-on experience to succeed in a global economy, consolidate, and diversify the JA programs, and ensure their long-term sustainability.

Junior Achievement Worldwide (JAW, 2026) is the world's largest organization dedicated to equipping young people with financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and work-readiness skills through experiential learning programs that enable them to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. The JA philosophy originated in the United States and dates to 1919. Today, JA programs are implemented in 122 countries worldwide, benefiting more than 15 million students and young people each year.

JA Albania is the only organization within the JA Worldwide network to have successfully integrated JA entrepreneurship competencies and financial education into both the core and elective curricula of pre-university education. JAA has received the "JA Europe Model Organization" award four times, in 2019, 2022, 2024, and 2025.

With a consolidated almost 14-year experience and remarkable achievements, JA of Albania is a unique case in Europe, of integration of its financial and entrepreneurial education in the national curricula of preuniversity education system.

The OECD report *SME Policy Index: Western Balkans and Turkey 2022 – Assessing the Implementation of the Small Business Act for Europe* (OECD, 2026) identifies Junior Achievement as the leading provider of entrepreneurship education in Albania.

In accordance with the Cooperation Agreements signed between JAA and the Ministry of Education, since September 2018 JA programs have been present in all pre-university schools across the country and are recognized and assessed under the competency area "Competence for Life, Entrepreneurship and the Environment." JAA modules provide students with practical skills and contribute to the development of relevant competencies through curricular channels, extracurricular activities, and other areas of competence, including digital, personal, and civic skills.

JAA modules provide young people with practical opportunities to develop decision-making skills, business ethics, workplace ethics, teamwork, and other competencies necessary for successful entry into the labor market. Students learn about marketing strategies, the planning required to establish their own business ventures, and the financial and managerial operations necessary to successfully manage a mini enterprise.

Since 2020, JAA has also implemented university-level programs, including the StartUp incubation program based on the JA Europe model and the "Debating Economics" program, as a member of the International Debate Education Association (IDEA).

Following its expansion throughout the entire pre-university education system, since 2020 Junior Achievement has also been present in Albania's higher education system through the implementation of the "Debating Economics" program and the Junior Up – StartUp program. This has positioned JA as a nationwide platform operating across the full spectrum of the Albanian education system.

JAA has also been an agency accredited by the Ministry of Education for the professional development of teachers in the pre-university education system since 2017. To date (September 2026), JAA has trained and accredited approximately 10,000 teachers from preschool and basic education, including all active teachers of the "Economics 12" subject nationwide.

JAA's extracurricular activities reach more than 6,000 students and teachers in

the pre-university education system across the country each year.

Since its establishment, the activities of Junior Achievement of Albania have been governed by a series of agreements with the Ministry of Education, as outlined below:

- Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, April 2012
- Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, April 2013
- Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, September 2018
- Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, April 2021
- Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, April 2026

The objectives of the above agreements are to strengthen economic education and entrepreneurship skills through the introduction of Junior Achievement modules within the pre-university education system. The agreements also emphasize the supporting of JAA with textbooks, teacher training, the involvement of the business community in teaching activities, practical materials enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge, and extracurricular activities at local, national, and international levels.

Since September 2023, based on the agreement signed between the Ministry of Finance and Economy and the AADF for the implementation of Junior Achievement of Albania programs, the modules "Student Companies" and "Leader for a Day" have also been incorporated into the curriculum of vocational education institutions throughout Albania.

JAA — Impact Summary

Between 2011 and 2026, AADF invested roughly $9.1 million in JAA — about 13% of the program's total $68 million cost, the remainder covered mainly by the Ministry of Education's in-kind contribution (teacher salaries and infrastructure, ~$59 million).

In terms of people, JAA grew from its founding in 2012 to reach full national coverage of Albania's pre-university system by 2018 — becoming, by its own account, the first Junior Achievement affiliate worldwide to reach 100% of pre-university students — before expanding into university-level debate and start-up incubation programs from 2019–2021.

Each year, JAA reaches about 340,000 students (the numbers used to be much higher but due to demographic changes numbers are declining each year), 1489 pre-university schools, 11570 teachers trained till today.

Center for School Leadership

The Center for School Leadership (CSL) is inspired by the successful models of the Wallace Foundation in NY, and Avney Rosha Institute in Israel and the end goal of this center is to provide schools with well-equipped leaders, positively affect the school environment and directly increase the quality of education. Till September 2026, about 3000 in-service school principals and aspiring ones attended the Compulsory Training Program of School Leaders, and about 7,500 teachers and school principals attended the Continuous Professional Development courses.

The CSL was developed in 2018 within the framework of a strategic partnership between the Ministry of Education and the AADF, with the

objective of strengthening the leadership of pre-university education institutions and establishing a sustainable pool of qualified candidates for leadership positions across the education system.

To formalize their cooperation for the development of CSL, AADF and the Ministry of Education signed initially a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in October 2017, establishing a ten-year partnership, and a second MoU in June 2026 to extend their partnership for an additional seven years, till June 2033.

The activities of the CSL are supported by a clearly defined legal and regulatory framework, including:

- Law No. 48/2018, dated July 23, 2018, "On some additions and amendments to Law No. 69/2012, 'On the Pre-University Education System in the Republic of Albania,' as amended" (KSH, 2018).
- Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 540/2018, dated September 19, 2018, "On the organization and functioning of the School of Directors of Pre-University Education Institutions and the modalities for their training and certification" (KM, 2018).
- Internal Regulations of CSL.

The mission of CSL is to develop the professional capacities of school principals, deputy principals, and aspiring principals of public and private pre-university education institutions through preparatory training and certification programs. The vision of this Center is to contribute toward a high-quality education system in which every institution is led by professional and certified leaders, selected on the basis of merit and equipped to drive continuous improvement in teaching and learning, student and staff well-being, school culture, and partnerships with relevant stakeholders.

The CSL offers four main Compulsory Training programs – CTP (CSL, 2026a):

- Compulsory Training Program – a nine-month program designed for school leaders.
- Compulsory Training Program for school principals with more than five years of experience in the position – a six-month program tailored to the needs of experienced school leaders.
- Compulsory Training Program for Vocational Education and Training (VET) – a nine-month program designed specifically for leaders of VET institutions.
- Compulsory Training Program for Pre-School Education – a seven-month program focused on leadership and management in early childhood education institutions.

In addition to the Compulsory Training programs above, CSL offers 33 modules of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Program with one credit easch, as well as a range of specialized training opportunities delivered as part of the School's internationalization efforts, featuring distinguished professors and experts from the Albanian academic diaspora. These initiatives provide education professionals with opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and competencies while benefiting from international expertise and fostering stronger connections with the Albanian academic community abroad.

2017–2026: First Phase of Development and Consolidation

The period 2017–2026 marked the establishment and consolidation of the CSL as a national mechanism for the

preparation, certification, and continuous professional development of educational leaders. During this phase, the CSL achieved significant results, including:

- 5,060 applications to the Compulsory Preparatory Training programs;
- 2,495 participants trained and 2,110 certified, representing an overall certification rate of approximately 85%;
- Approximately 7,500 education leaders and teachers certified through continuing professional development programs;
- 6 national conferences on educational leadership and management, featuring around 240 academic and professional papers;
- Establishment of a national network of trainers, experts, education leaders, and partner institutions.

Beyond these results, the CSL contributed to strengthening a professional culture of educational leadership, with emphasis on instructional leadership, strategic planning, human resource management, data-informed decision-making, ethics, inclusion, community engagement, and organizational change.

Through its training programs, conferences, and institutional partnerships, the CSL has also created a national platform for professional exchange, research, and dialogue, helping establish educational leadership as a distinct field of professional development in Albania.

2027–2033: Second Phase of Development

The 2027–2033 period represents the second phase of the CSL's institutional development, supported jointly by the Ministry of Education and AADF. It will focus on consolidating achievements to date, expanding training capacity, and strengthening the link between certification and the recruitment of education leaders. An additional 2,450 participants are expected to be trained through CSL programs, helping build a larger pool of qualified and certified candidates, increase competition for leadership positions, and reduce reliance on interim appointments. Building on the priorities of the National Education Strategy 2021–2026, the CSL will continue to support the professionalization of educational leadership through training, certification, improved appointment standards, and stronger performance development mechanisms (MA, 2026).

During this phase, the CSL is expected to evolve beyond its initial focus on preparation and certification toward a broader institutional role that links leadership development with education reform priorities. This includes continuous professional development, performance improvement, and the long-term strengthening of leadership capacity across the education system (CSL, 2026b).

CSL — Impact Summary

CSL trains and certifies Albania's school principals, vice principals and teachers in leadership skills, on the theory that better school leadership improves student math/reading outcomes and raises pay for teachers promoted into leadership roles. AADF has invested about $6.5 million of a $9.5 million total (69% AADF share, alongside Ministry of Education co-investment) over roughly 15 years (2017–2033).

As of September 2026, 2,986 school leaders have completed the mandatory certification training, 2,600 leaders have completed continuing development

(CPD) training, and 4,800 teachers have completed CPD leadership training. Internal notes put certified-principal coverage at roughly 51% of Albania's ~1,300 pre-university schools, against a national base of ~30,000 teachers and ~500,000 students — with kindergartens (582 more institutions) targeted for future expansion (CSL, 2026c).

Research Expertise from the Academic Diaspora Program (READ)

One of the AADF's key programs that has a direct impact on higher education is the READ program. READ is an initiative designed to strengthen Albania's higher education and research ecosystem by connecting Albanian universities and researchers with the Albanian academic diaspora worldwide. The program was approved in June 2021, inspired by the international fellowship model of the Institute of International Education (IIE).

READ supports sustainable academic collaboration through collaborative research, co-supervision of PhD students, curriculum development, co-teaching, and other forms of knowledge and expertise exchange. The program aims to mobilize the expertise of the Albanian academic diaspora, strengthen research and teaching capacities in Albanian higher education institutions, and increasingly support applied research and innovation addressing Albania's development needs.

The program serves as a dual purpose, by enhancing the research output of local higher education institutions and helping foster professional networks. On the other hand, it will also provide another avenue through which the Albanian diaspora can hopefully contribute to Albania's growth and development through mentorship program and offering short term intensive courses, PhD grants and executive trainings to highly qualified scholars from the diaspora, giving them an opportunity to participate in collaborative research projects. Till September 2026, the program issued 151 research grants, and 22 PhD grants have been supported by engaging more than 152 Diaspora Scholars from 29 OECD countries.

According to the 2023 Census, approximately 4.6 million people hold Albanian citizenship, while around 2.4 million people were residing in Albania at the time of the Census. This suggests that approximately 2.2 million Albanian citizens live abroad.

A conservative estimate suggests that more than 4,000 Albanians currently hold or are pursuing PhDs abroad, with an additional estimated 1,000 researchers from other Albanian-speaking territories. This number is expected to increase in the coming years, partly due to the growing participation of the children of Albanian emigrants in higher education and research. Over the next decade, migration from Albania is expected to gradually decline, largely due to demographic changes, including the shrinking size of younger age cohorts and declining fertility rates. However, the number of highly educated Albanians living and pursuing advanced degrees abroad is likely to continue increasing, driven primarily by two factors: the increasingly skilled profile of Albanian migration and the growing number of second-generation Albanian emigrants pursuing higher education abroad.

These trends highlight the significant potential of the Albanian academic diaspora as a source of knowledge, expertise, research capacity, and international connections for Albania's higher education and research ecosystem.

READ — Impact Summary

AADF has supported the READ Program through two phases: an initial investment of $1.75 million for 2021–2025, followed by a larger, ongoing second phase of $4.25 million for 2026–2032.

By September 2026, READ had generated significant results, including 133 co-authored publications in high-impact journals, 52 jointly supervised PhD candidates, 87 new or revised curricula, and approximately 1,436 hours of co-teaching directly benefiting students. The program's partnerships have expanded to 28 Albanian higher education and research institutions.

Building on these results, as well as the strong expertise of the Albanian scientific diaspora in project development and implementation, AADF developed a larger complementary initiative: BRIDGE by READ – Boosting Research and Integrating Diaspora for Education Growth. The $3.6 million program was approved in October 2024.

BRIDGE by READ is a strategic capacity-building initiative designed to strengthen the institutional capacity of Albanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through active engagement with the Albanian scientific diaspora. The program focuses particularly on strengthening the skills of academic staff in developing and managing EU-funded research projects, while also promoting research collaboration, institutional sustainability, and stronger links between Albanian HEIs and diaspora researchers.

AI & Technology in education

Since 2010, the EU's digital agenda has focused on using digital transformation to empower citizens, support businesses, and modernize public services. The first phase (2010–2020) improved connectivity, reduced communication costs, strengthened consumer and data protection, and advanced digital skills, AI, and industry digitalization. The current 2020–2030 agenda builds on these achievements by prioritizing digital skills, secure and sustainable infrastructure, business digitalization, and further modernization of public services (AADF, 2025).

Albania is currently implementing the Digital Agenda 2022-2026 (KM, 2022), a strategic framework centered on Digital Governance; Digital Businesses; Digital Citizens; and Digital Education and Skills. The strategy promotes investments in critical areas such as advanced computing, data processing, AI, cybersecurity, and advanced digital skills. In addition to the Digital Agenda, several other important strategic documents are under implementation such as "National Plan for Sustainable Development of Digital Infrastructure, Broadband 2020-2025" (MIE, 2020); the "Strategic Plan on the Fifth Generation (5G) Technology for Albania" (AKEP, 2022); the "National Strategy for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation 2023-2030" (KM, 2023); "National Cyber Security Strategy 2020-2025" (AKCESK, 2023); the "Business and Investment Development Strategy 2021-2027" (KM, 2021) and "Smart Specialization Strategy 2030" (KM, 2024).

An intelligent society is one that uses and processes data, automates processes, leverages digital technologies, systems, artificial intelligence, and innovation to improve quality of life and address complex challenges more effectively. An intelligent society is not simply a society with advanced technology; it is a society that uses technology wisely, ethically, and inclusively.

The path toward an intelligent society is not solely technological; it is deeply human. We cannot stop the development of technology, nor should we seek to limit it. Instead, we must embrace it wisely and use it to develop one of the most important strengths of any society: its human capital. Speaking of human capital development, AADF has been a pioneer organization in Albania, consistently investing in people, building capacity, and creating opportunities for professional and academic growth. To achieve this mission, AADF supports the Tech Ecosystem in Albania though several initiatives:

- ***Pyramid & TUMO*** is an internationally renowned model providing digital education for children aged 12-18. The center's curriculum consists of 10 courses such as programming, robotics, 3D-modeling, animation, etc. Since the start of TUMO operations in Tirana, over 6,000 children have registered and attended the different courses at TUMO. With the financial support of AADF and the Municipality of Tirana all TUMO courses are offered tuition free to all the students from January of 2024.
- ***Protik Academy*** is tailored for young professionals looking to update their skills while keeping up with the latest innovations in coding and programming. Over 2,750 students have enrolled in coding, AI, data science and other courses since the launch. From the start AADF has provided student scholarships to facilitate the nationwide expansion of the academy, while the Albanian Government has started financing up to 50% of the course fees from April of 2023.
- ***ElementIT*** project aims to extend the ICT curriculum of the Albanian elementary education, specifically adding it to grades1 to 3. AADF as part of the project has coo-financed together with the Albanian Government in 2022 the setup of 100 Smart Labs in 100 elementary schools in Albania. The setup of 216 more Smart Labs based on the same model was finalized in 2024 and was funded by the World Bank loan to the GoA. The AADF has already delivered training for over 800 ICT teachers from more than 370 elementary schools through a train-the-trainer program.
- ***42-Tirana*** aims at opening a 42-school campus in Tirana, a unique, peer-to-peer, tuition-free computer science education with headquarters in Paris. It is located at Pyramid Center aiming to incorporate 42 Tirana in a growing ICT community, including TUMO, Protik, AADF Innovation HUB, etc. The 42-school model internationally has an 85% program completion rate and a 100% employment rate post-graduation rate.

In addition to the above interventions there is also a project dedicated to Artificial Intelligence for high school students called AI for Youth.

AI for Youth (AADF, 2021) is a $1.7 million partnership between AADF and Intel, launched in 2021 to equip Albanian high school students with practical AI and digital skills. The program builds long-term capacity through intensive teacher training, AI laboratories, student learning, and hands-on projects.

By September 2026, AI for Youth had reached 19 cities and 38 schools, established 27 AI labs, trained 88 teachers, and provided AI education to around 2,200 students.

The next phase, covering 2027–2031, aims to scale and institutionalize the program by expanding nationally, developing a Train-the-Trainer model, exploring integration of AI into pre-university education, increasing practical innovation projects, and strengthening partnerships with universities, businesses, and international organizations. The long-term goal is to make AI education accessible across Albania's high school system and better prepare young people for the digital economy.

Overall, AI for Youth represents AADF's effort to prepare the next generation for the digital economy by combining international expertise, local capacity building, technology infrastructure, and practical learning opportunities.

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AI EVALUATION IN EFL TEACHING: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT[1]

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 11th grades 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

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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, EFL assessment, formative assessment, automated feedback, language learning, high school education*

Dr. **Josilda DOÇI** is an experienced English language teacher and lecturer from Elbasan, Albania. With over 17 years of teaching experience, she specializes in EFL methodology, digital learning, teacher training, and quality assurance. Her academic interests include AI-supported assessment, bilingual vocabulary learning, and innovative approaches in foreign language education.

Introduction

All over the world, including Europe, the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has revolutionized teaching, learning, and evaluation methods in education. For example, in response to the call from European educational bodies, such as the European Commission, for the integration of AI technologies to facilitate personalization of experience and the modernization of assessment systems aligned with digital education strategies (European Commission, 2020). On the other hand, in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) education, AI applications are enabling linguistic learning by providing personalized feedback, automated assessment, and customizable learning tools, in line with recommendations from the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators (DigCompEdu), which stresses the importance of educators' digital literacy for effective technology use (Redecker, 2017). Conventional EFL assessment approaches in Europe typically revolve around standardized testing which focuses on discrete language elements such as grammar and vocabulary. But European pedagogical trends highlight that communicative competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and adaptability are core objectives of foreign language education (Council of Europe, 2001).

It may be this that Europe's educators are developing AI-assisted formative assessment techniques that stress autonomy and personalized progress monitoring toward the learner. The potential of AI in providing quick and responsive feedback and minimizing teacher burden has also been reported in the European community, benefiting formative assessment methods in secondary education (Luckin et al., 2016; European Schoolnet, 2021). But as academic researchers note, ethical and pedagogical concerns are not over, such as equity, student privacy, and the threat of artificial intelligence replacing human judgment (Floridi et al., 2018). Responding to these debates, the study is located in the Albanian high school context within the European educational landscape where AI integration is a nascent issue but lessons from European policy and research provide some perspectives. By exploring what impact AI-enhanced assessment has on student engagement, language competence and teachers' professional perspectives, this research is adding to broader European attempts to responsibly use AI in education to enable inclusive, effective language teaching within changing digital contexts.

Literature Review

Artificial Intelligence in Education

Definition of artificial intelligence (AI): Computer systems that can imitate human cognition including reasoning, learning, language and decision-making processes. Throughout Europe AI is being regarded as a promising technology for education transformation with the European Commission highlighting that the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 can personalize training methods and improve teaching practices (European Commission, 2020). Data that shows that the need for teachers to be digitally literate if they are to realize the benefits of AI, is further emphasized in the European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators, DigCompEdu (Redecker 2017).

AI technologies such as adaptive learning systems, automated grade systems, chatbots, virtual tutors, and intelligent assessment tools have been implemented, embedded in many European classrooms to improve engagement and performance (Luckin et. al, 2016; European Schoolnet 2021). However, ethical issues of transparency, fairness and privacy highlight the importance of careful implementation (Floridi et al., 2018; Council of Europe, 2019).

Here in Albania as a whole, applications of AI in education are in their infancy. Hoxha (2023) highlights the recent evolution in digital transformation yet states the lack of infrastructure and education capacity to facilitate further adoption of AI. Kola (2022) highlights problems in the effective implementation of digital pedagogy in a secondary education classroom in relation to the calls for a responsible and appropriate use of AI worldwide (González-Calatayud, Prendes-Espinosa, & Roig-Vila, 2021). Albanian teachers are supported in how to better integrate AI tools with academic objectives and ethics (Doçi, 2025). AI and Formative Assessment in EFL

AI and Formative Assessment in EFL

In language learning, formative assessment is vital for learning through the provision of continuous meaningful feedback, that not only enhances learner performance, but is also useful in facilitating self-regulation. Europe's policies highlight digital tools that facilitate real-time, adaptive feedback as an essential element of student-centered pedagogy (European Commission, 2020). Empirical research indicates the beneficial contributions of AI-supported formative assessment towards EFL-based skills (reading, writing and speaking) with an increasing motivation and independence in study (Alazemi, 2024; Cahyanto & Sutrisno, 2024).

Similarly, in Albania, the research demonstrates advantages as well as drawbacks of AI in EFL formative assessment. Doçi (2025) reports that AI based tools in Albanian high school EFL classrooms increase responsiveness and participation by learners in feedback. However, Meta and Dervishi (2023) present differences within infrastructure and inequalities of digital accessibility within Albania, which stifle the complete implementation of AI. The use of AI-powered grammar correction and speech-recognition tools fosters autonomy, but access difficulties must be addressed (Meta & Dervishi, 2023; Floridi et al., 2018). An additional impact on EFL teaching practices, generative AI including ChatGPT, will cause arguments about academic integrity (Floridi et al., 2018; Prompiengchai, Narreddy, & Joordens, 2025).

Teacher Perceptions and AI Literacy

Teachers are optimistic and cautious about AI. All over Europe, teachers admire AI for its efficiency and rapid feedback, and are also concerned about context and academic integrity (Sahmaniasl, 2025). As well, Albanian teachers enjoy advantages of AI while underlining that professional growth in AI literacy is required with regard to critically reading AI-generated feedback (Hoxha & Berisha, 2024; Kola, 2022; Doçi, 2025).

Digital competencies in ethical awareness for AI integration are emphasized with a framework called DigCompEdu (Redecker, 2017). Roe, Perkins, and Furze (2025) suggest frameworks for AI literacy that balance technology use with academic integrity principles that apply equally to European and Albanian educational contexts.

Ethical and pedagogical issues

Ethical issues remain a central concern in the use of AI in education. Key challenges include algorithmic bias, data privacy, transparency, unequal access to technology, and algorithmic fairness, among other ethical considerations (Floridi et al., 2018; Council of Europe, 2019). Such concerns are especially relevant in developing locations as Albania both lacks infrastructure and digital divide (Meta & Dervishi, 2023).

Researchers stress that AI must be used to augment, not take the place of, human-centered, formative assessment. For instance, Prompiengchai, Narreddy, and Joordens (2025) claimed that AI cannot fully capture emotional sensitivity and context, which are crucial to the acquisition of a language (Doçi, 2025). Indeed, Maleki (2026) notes that inadequate AI-specific teacher education together with infrastructure issues are important obstacles hindering implementation of AI in the Albanian sector (Hoxha, 2023).

In general, the literature from 2020 to 2025 argues that AI-enabled assessment leads to learner participation, personalization, and formative feedback but needs to be interspersed with teacher professional experience, ethical considerations, and equitable access strategies (European Commission, 2020; Floridi et al., 2018; Doçi, 2025).

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The mixed-method approach allowed the researcher to investigate both measurable learning outcomes and participants' perceptions regarding AI-supported assessment.

The participants included 110 high school students from 10th and 11th grades and nine English teachers from public high schools in Elbasan, Albania.

Table 1: *Participant Distribution*

Participants	Number	Percentage
10th Grade Students	58	48.7%
11th Grade Students	52	43.7%
English Teachers	9	7.6%
Total	119	100%

Three research instruments were used:

- Student questionnaires
- Classroom observations
- Semi-structured teacher interviews

The questionnaires examined students' attitudes toward AI feedback, engagement levels, motivation, and language improvement. Classroom observations focused on student participation and interaction during AI-supported activities. Teacher interviews explored perspectives regarding effectiveness, reliability, and ethical considerations.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics including percentages and mean scores. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations were analyzed thematically.

Findings and Discussion

Student Perceptions of AI Assessment

Most of the students responded pro to AI-supported assessment activities. Students said AI tools assisted with grammatical errors, vocabulary enhancement, and helped them to revise writing assignments more efficiently,

Students liked getting feedback instantly according to the AI feedback. Instant corrections guided a lot of participants to revise assignments more often and on their own, they said.

Impact on Language Skills

In this study, there was a significant increase in writing accuracy and vocabulary learning. Students who used AI-assisted grammar and vocabulary software were more confident writers.

Classroom observations showed a rise in participation in speaking activities using speech recognition technologies. Students were less anxious practicing pronunciation alongside AI applications compared to standard speaking exercises in classrooms.

These results are aligned with the latest literature on pedagogical motivations and benefits that AI-supported formative assessment offers in EFL contexts.

Table 2: *Student Perceptions of AI Assessment*

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
AI feedback improves writing skills	82%	11%	7%
AI tools increase motivation	79%	13%	8%
AI feedback is easy to understand	85%	9%	6%
AI supports independent learning	81%	10%	9%

Table 3: *Descriptive Statistics of Student Perceptions*

Statement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
AI feedback improves writing skills	2.75	0.57	High positive perception
AI tools increase motivation	2.71	0.60	High positive perception
AI feedback is easy to understand	2.79	0.53	Very high positive perception
AI supports independent learning	2.72	0.62	High positive perception
Overall Mean	2.74	—	Positive perception

Table 4: *Pre-Test and Post-Test Results for AI-Supported EFL Assessment*

Language Skill	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Mean Difference	Improvement %
Writing accuracy	6.4	7.8	+1.4	21.9%
Vocabulary use	6.7	8.0	+1.3	19.4%
Speaking confidence	6.1	7.5	+1.4	23.0%
Grammar accuracy	6.5	7.9	+1.4	21.5%
Learner autonomy	6.2	7.7	+1.5	24.2%

Teacher Perspectives

The most part of the teachers agreed with AI assisted assessment, although they said that the nature of automated feedback needs to be tempered through professional judgment. The interviews revealed 3 main themes:

- Increased assessment efficiency
- Need for professional development
- Ethical and pedagogical concerns

Teachers noted that AI cut grading time and improved formative feedback processes. But they also insisted that AI systems couldn't fully measure creativity, communicative intent, emotional expression, or contextual language use. Some participants emphasized the necessity of teacher training programs focused on AI literacy and digital pedagogy.

Table 5: *Teacher Interview Themes*

Main Theme	Description	Suggested Frequency
Increased assessment efficiency	Teachers reported that AI reduced grading time and supported faster feedback.	7/9
Need for professional development	Teachers emphasized the need for AI literacy and training in digital assessment.	8/9
Ethical and pedagogical concerns	Teachers raised concerns about privacy, fairness, overreliance, and creativity.	6/9

Table 6: *Ethical Challenges Identified in AI-Supported EFL Assessment*

Ethical Challenge	Description	Impact on EFL Assessment
Overreliance on AI	Students may depend too much on automated suggestions.	Reduces independent writing and critical thinking
Academic integrity	AI-generated texts may blur authorship.	Makes assessment of original work more difficult
Data privacy	Student data may be processed by digital platforms.	Requires clear school policies and consent
Unequal access	Not all students have the same digital resources.	Creates inequality in participation
Limited creativity assessment	AI may not fully understand context, emotion, or originality.	Teacher judgment remains necessary

Ethical Challenges

While the findings are pro AI, the participants emphasized some challenges:

- Dependence on AI tools
- Academic integrity issues
- Data privacy concerns
- Not proper technological infrastructure
- Unequal access to digital resources among students

Teachers admitted that their students rely on AI-generated writing suggestions before writing an essay, thus limiting their ability to reflect critically and write independently. These results also align with the findings from the literature that promotes ethics and responsible AI use in the education settings.

Implications for EFL Teaching

The results of the present study can be helpful in EFL teaching and assessment practices. First, AI technologies will support richer and more personalized (and/or learner-centered) forms of assessment. For example, teachers can use AI tools to provide quick and immediate feedback and follow students' progress more quickly.

Second, embedding AI requires substantial teacher education and cultivation. Teachers need to be given opportunities to learn digital literacy skills and challenge AI-generated ideas.

Third, schools must establish professional ethics that will govern the application of AI technology to classroom assessment. There should be policies created in respect to academic integrity, data privacy, and equal learning opportunities.

Finally, the focus should be on AI with a focus on the principles that AI should act as a supplement to the development of instruction and support to instructional design, never to replace, or supplant, educators. The role of human touch, emotional intelligence, and teaching skills are at the heart of teaching; language learning is as relevant and impactful as ever.

Conclusion

This study investigated the opportunities, challenges, and pedagogical implications of integrating AI-enhanced formative assessment in Albanian high school EFL classrooms. The findings reveal that AI-supported assessment significantly benefits student outcomes by increasing engagement, fostering learner autonomy, improving writing skills, and encouraging active participation during class activities (Doçi, 2025; Alazemi, 2024). The immediacy and personalization of AI-generated feedback appear particularly effective in motivating students to revise their work independently and gain confidence in language use.

However, alongside these promising developments, significant ethical and pedagogical challenges emerged. Issues such as overreliance on AI technologies risk diminishing students' critical thinking and creativity, while concerns about academic integrity—especially with the rise of generative AI tools, call for careful monitoring and clear guidelines (Floridi et al., 2018; Prompiengchai, Narreddy, & Joordens, 2025). Additionally, unequal access to digital resources across different school contexts in Albania exacerbates educational inequities, limiting AI's potential benefits for some learners (Meta & Dervishi, 2023; Hoxha, 2023).

The study underscores that effective and responsible integration of AI in EFL assessment requires a balanced approach where AI tools augment, rather than replace, teacher expertise. Educators' professional judgment remains

crucial for interpreting AI-generated feedback, addressing contextual language nuances, and supporting the emotional and motivational needs of learners (Prompiengchai et al., 2025; Hoxha & Berisha, 2024). Furthermore, teacher preparation programs must prioritize digital literacy and ethical awareness to equip educators with the skills necessary for critically engaging with AI technologies (Redecker, 2017; Kola, 2022).

Looking forward, educational institutions should develop clear policies that regulate AI use in classrooms, focusing on data privacy, fairness, and equitable digital access (European Commission, 2020; Floridi et al., 2018). Collaborative efforts between policymakers, educators, and technology developers will be essential to create AI-supported assessment systems that are pedagogically sound, ethically responsible, and inclusive.

Future research is needed to explore the long-term effects of AI-enhanced formative assessment on language acquisition, learner autonomy, and teacher identity. Investigations across diverse educational contexts will help determine how AI reshapes teaching roles and learning experiences over time and identify best practices for integrating advanced AI tools such as generative AI in language education (Maleki, 2026; Roe, Perkins, & Furze, 2025). Such research will contribute to constructing a nuanced understanding of AI's evolving place within foreign language teaching and assessment.

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EDUCATION AND SCIENCE AS DRIVERS OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC INTEGRATION IN ALBANIA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW IN THE WESTERN BALKAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of education and science in shaping socio-economic integration processes, with Albania as its primary analytical focus and with selected regional perspectives from Kosovo and Albanian-speaking communities in North Macedonia and Montenegro. Education and scientific development are widely recognized as fundamental drivers of human capital formation, institutional modernization, innovation, and sustainable economic growth in contemporary knowledge-based societies. In Albania, the historical trajectory of educational and scientific development has been characterized by important structural constraints, including political instability, economic underdevelopment, limited institutional capacity, and uneven research investment. The main objective of this article is to analyze the influence of education and science on socio-economic transformation, with particular emphasis on their relationship with economic modernization, technological advancement, human capital formation, and European integration. The study adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on historical analysis, documentary research, critical interpretation of Albanian and international scholarly literature, and contextual comparison with selected developments elsewhere in the Western Balkans. The analysis indicates that education and science have played

a major role in cultural emancipation, institutional development, and the gradual integration of Albanian society into European and global socio-economic systems. At the same time, persistent challenges remain, including underinvestment in research and development, limited alignment between education and labor market needs, and the continued loss of skilled human capital through migration. The study concludes that sustainable socio-economic development depends on strategic investment in education, scientific research, innovation systems, and human capital, supported by stronger international academic and institutional cooperation.
Keywords: *education, science, human capital, economic development, social integration, Western Balkans, Albania*

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Introduction

Education and science constitute two of the most decisive pillars in the development of modern societies. Across historical periods, economic, cultural, and institutional development has been closely associated with the advancement of educational and scientific systems. Education should therefore be understood not merely as a mechanism for transmitting knowledge, but as a process of intellectual, civic, and professional formation that shapes human capital and productive capacity. Science, in turn, provides a foundation for innovation, technological progress, and the creation of new knowledge (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1993; OECD, 2015).

Within the Albanian context, the relationship between education, science, and socio-economic development is particularly complex because of the historical, political, and economic conditions that shaped Albanian society. For long periods, access to institutionalized education in the Albanian language was restricted and economic structures remained predominantly traditional. These conditions constrained cultural development, limited access to knowledge, and slowed the formation of an educated social elite capable of contributing to modernization (Skendi, 1967).

Despite these structural limitations, education played a fundamental role in the preservation of Albanian national identity and cultural continuity. During the Albanian National Renaissance (Rilindja Kombëtare), education in the Albanian language became a strategic instrument of cultural emancipation and national consolidation. The establishment of Albanian-language schools, the development of a common alphabet, and the publication of educational materials contributed significantly to the formation of a shared cultural and linguistic identity (Skendi, 1967).

In this period, education served not only a pedagogical function but also a political and nation-building role. It became a mechanism of intellectual emancipation and a unifying force for Albanians dispersed across different administrative and political territories. Moreover, it facilitated the emergence of an Albanian intellectual elite that played a crucial role in the processes of state

formation and institutional development following independence.

After the declaration of independence in 1912, the development of education and science became a strategic priority for the Albanian state. The early decades of state-building were nevertheless marked by high illiteracy, limited school infrastructure, and severe economic constraints. Gradual reforms sought to expand primary and vocational education and to strengthen administrative and institutional capacities (Sota, 2023a; Sota, 2023b).

Following the Second World War, the Albanian education system underwent mass expansion. Educational institutions at all levels grew substantially, literacy campaigns were implemented, and the foundations of organized scientific research were established. These developments contributed to major social transformation and to the formation of a more skilled workforce for public administration and the industrial economy (Sota, 2023b).

However, during the socialist period, the development of education and science was strongly influenced by ideological constraints. Academic autonomy and institutional independence were limited, and scientific research was largely directed toward state-defined political and economic objectives. Despite these limitations, the expansion of education significantly increased the overall educational attainment of the population and contributed to the creation of a more structured professional class.

After the 1990s, Albania entered a new phase of political, economic, and social transformation, while education systems across the Western Balkans also underwent substantial reforms. In Albania, the transition to democracy and a market-oriented economy led to major changes in educational governance, the expansion of higher education, the emergence of private institutions, and intensified international cooperation. The Bologna Process further supported alignment with European higher education structures and academic mobility (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; European Commission, 2020).

At the same time, the global shift toward knowledge-based economies further increased the strategic importance of education and science in socio-economic development. Modern economies increasingly depend on human capital, innovation capacity, scientific research, and the effective diffusion of knowledge rather than on natural resources or low-skilled labor alone (Romer, 1990; OECD, 2015).

Despite these developments, education and science in Albania continue to face structural challenges, including insufficient research investment, persistent brain drain, weak alignment between educational outcomes and labor market needs, and limited research infrastructure. Similar challenges are also visible, to differing degrees, across the Western Balkans (World Bank, 2019).

European integration has further raised expectations regarding the quality and performance of education, research, and innovation systems. For Albania, harmonization with European standards has become an important component of public policy and institutional reform, particularly in higher education, research governance, quality assurance, and international academic cooperation (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; European Commission, 2020).

In this framework, the study of the interrelationship between education, science, and socio-economic integration processes is of both theoretical and practical significance. It enables a deeper understanding of the historical

determinants of Albanian development while also identifying contemporary challenges that must be addressed to ensure future progress.

Accordingly, this study analyzes the impact of education and science on the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional transformation of Albania. Regional developments in Kosovo and among Albanian-speaking communities in North Macedonia and Montenegro are used selectively as contextual points of reference rather than as equivalent territorial units of analysis. Through a historical, interdisciplinary, and contextual-comparative approach, the research highlights the role of education and science in modernization, human capital formation, and integration into European and global systems.

Research aim and specific objectives

The interrelationship between education, science, and socio-economic development is a major field of inquiry within the social sciences, educational sciences, and economics. In the context of rapid technological change and European integration, education and science are increasingly recognized as drivers of institutional progress, economic growth, and cultural development. This study therefore focuses primarily on Albania while using selected regional evidence to situate Albanian developments within the broader Western Balkan context.

The main aim of this study is to analyze the impact of education and science on socio-economic integration processes in Albania, with particular emphasis on economic transformation, institutional modernization, cultural emancipation, human capital formation, and European integration. Kosovo and Albanian-speaking communities in North Macedonia and Montenegro are considered selectively where they provide relevant regional context.

The study further seeks to demonstrate that the development of education and science should not be interpreted merely as a process of knowledge transmission or professional training, but as a complex structural mechanism that influences economic systems, institutional frameworks, technological development, and the integration of Albanian society into broader European and global processes.

A central dimension of this research is the examination of the relationship between educational development and economic modernization processes. In contemporary knowledge-based economies, human capital is widely regarded as one of the most important determinants of economic growth and international competitiveness. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how education and science contribute to professional skill formation, productivity growth, technological advancement, and the integration of the Albanian economy into regional and international markets.

At the same time, the study incorporates a historical dimension, recognizing that the development of education among Albanians is closely linked to efforts to preserve national identity, promote cultural emancipation, and build state institutions. For a significant historical period, the absence of education in the Albanian language and restrictive political conditions severely limited cultural and economic development. Nevertheless, education played a decisive role in the formation of the Albanian intellectual elite and in the strengthening of national consciousness.

One of the key objectives of this study is to highlight the role of higher education

institutions and scientific research organizations in the modernization of Albanian society. Universities and research institutes have significantly contributed to the preparation of professionals in economics, public administration, education, technology, and other strategic sectors. In this context, the study examines the influence of higher education and scientific research on human capital formation and institutional development.

Beyond the historical and economic dimensions, the study also addresses the cultural and pedagogical role of education. Education has been fundamental in transmitting national values, shaping civic identity, and fostering cultural development. In the context of globalization and increasing cultural interconnections, the education system faces the challenge of preserving national identity while simultaneously aligning with European educational standards.

Another important objective of the study is the analysis of contemporary challenges facing the Albanian education and science systems. These challenges include limited funding for education and research, brain drain, insufficient levels of scientific research output, mismatch between education systems and labor market demands, and the growing need for digitalization and institutional modernization. Within the framework of European integration processes, the study also examines the impact of educational reforms on the harmonization of the Albanian higher education system with international standards. The Bologna Process, academic mobility programs, and inter-university cooperation have created new opportunities for the internationalization of Albanian higher education. However, these processes are also accompanied by challenges related to educational quality, institutional autonomy, and academic competitiveness.

To achieve its main aim, the study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To analyze the historical development of Albanian education, with Albania as the primary focus and selected regional references to Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro.
- To examine the role of education in preserving national identity and promoting cultural emancipation among Albanians.
- To investigate the impact of education and science on economic and institutional development.
- To analyze the relationship between human capital and economic competitiveness.
- To assess the contribution of scientific research to technological and institutional modernization.
- To examine contemporary challenges of the Albanian education system in the context of globalization.
- To analyze the impact of higher education reforms and the Bologna Process on Albanian higher education.
- To investigate the relationship between education systems and labor market requirements in Albania and the region.
- To highlight the role of inter-university cooperation and academic mobility in integration processes.
- To evaluate the importance of investment in education and scientific research for sustainable development.
- To analyze the need for new education and science policies oriented toward innovation and technology.
- To emphasize the importance of digitalization and institutional modernization in addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

Through the realization of these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the enrichment of the scientific literature on the relationship between education, science, and socio-economic development, while also providing an analytical framework for understanding the challenges and perspectives of the Albanian education system in the context of European integration and global development trends.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is based on an integrated and interdisciplinary research design that combines elements from the history of education, sociology of education, development economics, and contemporary pedagogy. Given the complexity of the interaction between education, science, and socio-economic processes, the study adopts a qualitative methodological approach characterized by analytical–interpretative and historical–comparative dimensions.

The methodological framework is designed primarily for the analysis of historical and contemporary developments in Albania. Selected developments in Kosovo and among Albanian-speaking communities in North Macedonia and Montenegro are used for contextual comparison where relevant. The study therefore combines historical reconstruction, interpretative analysis, and regional contextualization rather than treating these different state systems as a single or homogeneous territorial unit.

One of the primary methods employed is the historical method, which allows for the systematic analysis of the evolution of Albanian education across different historical stages, including the period of the National Renaissance, the period of the independent Albanian state, the socialist period, and the post-1990 transition era. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of the political, economic, and cultural factors that have shaped the development of education and scientific institutions over time.

A contextual-comparative perspective represents another component of the research design. Rather than undertaking a fully symmetrical comparison of national education systems, the study uses selected examples from Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro to illuminate similarities and differences in policy trajectories, institutional settings, and European integration processes. Comparison with European higher education standards is particularly relevant within the framework of the Bologna Process (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

Documentary analysis also plays a significant role in this study. The sources examined include official institutional documents, reports from international organizations such as the OECD and the World Bank, and relevant Albanian and international academic literature. This approach provides the documentary and theoretical basis for the interpretation developed in the article.

In addition, the study relies on qualitative content analysis of scholarly literature, including academic studies on the history of Albanian education, human capital theory, knowledge economy frameworks, and globalization processes. This allows for the integration of contemporary theoretical approaches with the specific socio-historical context of Albanian society.

Another important methodological component is critical interpretation, which is used to examine in depth the influence of political, institutional, and economic factors on the development of education

and science. This interpretative approach contributes to identifying structural constraints, institutional challenges, and opportunities for sustainable development.

The study is explicitly interdisciplinary in nature, integrating concepts from the sociology of education, development economics, educational history, and political science. Such an approach is essential for understanding the complexity of the relationship between education systems and socio-economic development in the Albanian context.

From a theoretical perspective, the study is grounded in human capital theory, which conceptualizes education as a strategic investment in economic growth and social development. Additionally, elements of sustainable development theory and the knowledge economy paradigm are incorporated, both of which emphasize the central role of science, innovation, and knowledge creation in contemporary economic systems.

Through this combined methodological framework, the study seeks to provide an analytically grounded account of the role of education and science in Albania's socio-economic integration, while situating key developments within their wider regional and European context. The approach emphasizes historical patterns, institutional mechanisms, and policy relationships rather than claiming direct causal effects that would require a different empirical research design.

Historical development of Albanian education

Albanian education until the early 20th century

The development of Albanian education is closely linked to the broader political, cultural, and historical trajectory of Albanians in the Western Balkans. During the Ottoman period, education in the Albanian language was significantly restricted. Educational institutions existed primarily within religious frameworks, including Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox institutions, which largely limited the development of a unified national education system.

Despite these limitations, the Albanian National Renaissance (Rilindja Kombëtare) marked a decisive turning point in the emergence of national education. The establishment of the first Albanian-language school in Korçë in 1887 represented a symbolic and practical milestone in the cultural emancipation of Albanians (Skendi, 1967). Intellectuals of the Renaissance viewed education as a central instrument for preserving national identity and fostering collective consciousness.

During this period, significant efforts were made toward the development of a standardized alphabet, the production of textbooks in the Albanian language, and the establishment of early educational programs. Education became a key mechanism for cultural integration and national consolidation among Albanian-speaking communities living under different administrative and political arrangements.

Education in the period 1912-1945

Following the declaration of independence in 1912, the Albanian state faced major challenges in establishing a functioning national education system. The high level of illiteracy, lack of infrastructure, and limited economic capacity significantly hindered educational development.

Nevertheless, between 1920 and 1939, important reforms were implemented aimed at expanding primary and vocational

education. Teacher training institutions, vocational schools, and administrative educational structures were gradually established. These reforms reflected attempts to modernize education and align it with Western European models (Sota, 2023b).

This period was characterized by efforts to strengthen state institutions and to use education as a tool for modernization and administrative development.

Education during the socialist period (1945-1990)

After 1945, the Albanian education system underwent massive expansion. A nationwide campaign against illiteracy was implemented, resulting in a dramatic increase in literacy rates. The school network expanded rapidly, and institutions of higher education were established for the first time.

During this period, education became universal, centralized, and strongly oriented toward technical and professional training. Universities and research institutes played a crucial role in producing qualified personnel for the state administration and planned economy (Sota, 2023b).

However, the education system was heavily influenced by ideological control. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy were limited, and scientific research was largely subordinated to political objectives.

Education after 1990

The post-1990 transition represents one of the most transformative phases in the history of Albanian education. The collapse of the socialist system and the transition to a market economy and political pluralism led to profound structural changes in educational governance, institutional organization, and policy orientation.

A key feature of this period was the liberalization of the education system. Previously centralized and state-controlled higher education began to open to private initiatives. Private universities and higher education institutions were established, and academic programs became more diversified. This expansion significantly increased access to higher education, although it also raised concerns regarding quality assurance, accreditation, and academic standards.

Internationalization became another defining feature of this period. Albania intensified cooperation with European and global academic institutions, while universities elsewhere in the Western Balkans also expanded exchange programs, joint research projects, and participation in international academic networks. These processes contributed to the gradual modernization of higher education systems (European Commission, 2020).

A major structural reform was the implementation of the Bologna Process. This reform introduced the Bachelor-Master-Doctorate structure, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and stronger mechanisms for academic mobility. These changes supported Albania's alignment with European higher education standards and the international recognition of qualifications (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018).

However, the implementation of these reforms has faced significant challenges. In many cases, structural changes were not accompanied by sufficient improvements in teaching quality or research capacity. Limited infrastructure, high teaching loads, and inadequate funding for research have constrained the effectiveness of reforms.

Another important development has been the rapid expansion of higher

education institutions. While this has improved access to education, it has also led to disparities in quality between institutions, highlighting the need for stronger regulatory frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms.

From a socio-economic perspective, education after 1990 has been closely linked to labor market transformations. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system created new demands for skills, competencies, and professional qualifications. However, a persistent mismatch between educational outputs and labor market needs remains a key challenge in Albania and the wider region. A particularly critical issue is the phenomenon of brain drain. The emigration of highly educated individuals, including academics and professionals, contributes to the loss of human capital in key sectors of development and remains a wider challenge for the Western Balkans (World Bank, 2019; Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

Regional developments must be interpreted within the constitutional and institutional frameworks of the respective states. Kosovo has followed its own post-war and post-independence trajectory of educational institution-building. In Kosovo, especially after independence, education has played an important role in state-building and institutional consolidation, while the University of Prishtina and other higher education institutions have contributed to the formation of the country's intellectual and professional capacities. Albanian-speaking communities in North Macedonia and Montenegro, meanwhile, participate in education systems governed by those states. These cases are therefore used only as contextual regional references and are not treated as a single territorial or institutional unit.

In recent decades, digitalization has emerged as an important dimension of educational reform. Information and communication technologies have been increasingly integrated into teaching and learning processes, although disparities in infrastructure and digital competencies remain significant.

Finally, education has become a central component of European integration strategies. The European Union considers education, research, and innovation as key pillars of sustainable development, democratic governance, and economic competitiveness. As a result, Albania and other Western Balkan countries have undertaken reforms aimed at improving quality, transparency, and alignment with European standards.

The role of science in socio-economic development

Science represents one of the fundamental pillars of modern societal development and a decisive factor in the economic, institutional, and cultural transformation of contemporary societies. Within the framework of the global knowledge-based economy, the role of science has significantly expanded, shifting from a primarily academic and theoretical function to a strategic component of economic growth and international competitiveness. In this sense, science can no longer be considered an isolated sector; rather, it constitutes a complex and dynamic system that directly influences production, innovation, technological advancement, and public administration (OECD, 2015).

In the case of Albanian society, the role of science in socio-economic development has been shaped by historical, political, and institutional factors. Across different

historical periods, scientific development has followed uneven trajectories, reflecting changes in political regimes, economic systems, and the overall level of societal development. Despite these constraints, science has played an important role in the modernization of state structures and in the enhancement of professional capacities within society.

During the post-World War II period, particularly under the socialist system, the foundations of institutionalized scientific research were established in Albania. Research institutes developed in fields including agriculture, history, linguistics, medicine, and technical sciences. Although highly centralized and ideologically constrained, this institutionalization contributed to the formation of research infrastructure and specialized human resources (Sota, 2023b).

Following the post-1990 transition toward a market economy and political pluralism, Albania's scientific and higher education system underwent profound institutional change. Research structures were reorganized, universities assumed a larger role in knowledge production, and financial and institutional constraints affected the continuity and capacity of research. These transformations formed part of the wider social and economic restructuring of the post-communist period (De Waal, 2005; European Commission, 2020).

In the context of the contemporary global economy, science and scientific research are closely linked to technological innovation and economic growth. Modern economic theories emphasize that investment in Research and Development (R&D) is a key determinant of productivity and national competitiveness. Countries that allocate higher levels of investment to science and innovation tend to achieve higher levels of sustainable economic and social development (Romer, 1990; World Bank, 2019).

In Albania, investment in scientific research has historically remained limited relative to the ambitions of a knowledge-based economy, contributing to weak innovation capacity and continued dependence on imported technologies. In recent decades, higher education reforms, national research structures, and participation in European research programs have created opportunities for stronger integration into international knowledge networks (European Commission, 2020).

Universities in Albania, Kosovo, and the broader region have gradually evolved into important centers of knowledge production and professional training. They are no longer exclusively teaching institutions but increasingly aim to integrate research activities into their academic missions, aligning with the modern model of the research university (Clark, 1998).

An important dimension of the role of science in socio-economic development is its impact on technological modernization. Through the application of scientific research outcomes, production processes in industry, agriculture, healthcare, and public administration have been significantly improved. Information and communication technologies have transformed work organization, governance systems, and public services, enhancing efficiency, transparency, and institutional performance.

Science also plays a crucial role in human capital development. Through higher education and research programs, highly qualified specialists are trained, contributing directly to economic and institutional development. Human capital

is widely recognized as one of the key drivers of long-term economic growth, particularly in knowledge-based economies (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961).

However, scientific development in Albania faces several structural and institutional challenges. One of the main issues is insufficient funding for scientific research and limited research capacity, which restrict the implementation of large-scale projects and the modernization of research infrastructure (European Commission, 2020).

Another critical challenge is brain drain. A considerable number of researchers and academic staff migrate to Western European countries in search of better working conditions, higher salaries, and greater professional opportunities. This phenomenon has created a substantial gap in national research capacity and negatively affected the continuity of scientific development (Sota, 2018).

Furthermore, inadequate research infrastructure remains a significant barrier. Limited laboratory facilities, equipment constraints, and uneven digitalization hinder the competitiveness of Albanian research in the international environment (European Commission, 2020).

From an institutional perspective, collaboration between universities, research institutions, and the private sector remains an area requiring further development. Stronger university–industry cooperation can support innovation, knowledge transfer, and technological modernization (European Commission, 2020).

Despite these challenges, international research cooperation, partnerships with European universities, and participation in European research initiatives have created opportunities to strengthen research capacity and deepen Albania's integration into the European research environment.

In conclusion, science is a fundamental factor in the socio-economic development of Albania and an important component of regional integration. It supports economic modernization, institutional strengthening, human capital development, and international cooperation. Sustainable scientific development requires continuous investment, coherent policy frameworks, and stronger cooperation between academic institutions, the state, and the private sector.

Education, human capital and economic development

In contemporary literature on development economics and the sociology of education, the concept of human capital occupies a central position in explaining economic growth and social transformation. Human capital is commonly understood as the stock of knowledge, skills, competencies, and capacities that individuals acquire through education, training, and experience and that contribute to productivity and broader development outcomes (Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). In this sense, education is not only a public good but also a strategic long-term investment that can generate both economic and social returns.

Within the framework of the modern knowledge-based economy, the relationship between education and economic development becomes increasingly evident. Higher-quality education can strengthen workforce skills, adaptability, productivity, and long-term economic performance, making education an important component of sustainable development (Becker, 1993; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

In Albania, the development of human capital has been closely linked to the historical evolution of the education

system and broader socio-economic transformations. Limited access to high-quality education and uneven educational attainment have historically constrained productivity and occupational mobility, while the post-socialist transition increased demand for more diversified, technology-oriented, and service-based skills (World Bank, 2019; European Commission, 2020).

During the post-1990 transition period, the role of human capital became even more critical as Albania shifted from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented system. This transformation required a fundamental restructuring of the labor force and a significant increase in professional and managerial competencies. Higher education expanded rapidly in response to new labor market demands; however, this expansion has not always been aligned with the structural needs of the economy, resulting in a persistent mismatch between educational outputs and labor market requirements (World Bank, 2019).

A key determinant of human capital is the quality of education. Not only the number of years of schooling but also the quality of learning outcomes significantly affects individual productivity and overall economic performance. Education systems that emphasize critical thinking, analytical skills, and practical competencies have a stronger impact on economic development than those relying primarily on memorization-based learning. In this regard, curriculum reform and modernization of teaching methodologies in Albania and the Western Balkans remain essential for improving human capital formation.

Another crucial dimension is the relationship between education and labor productivity. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of education tend to earn higher incomes, contribute more significantly to economic output, and adapt more effectively to technological change. Thus, investment in education generates not only private returns but also substantial social benefits through increased aggregate productivity and economic growth (Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2018).

In Albania, Kosovo, and other selected Western Balkan contexts, human capital development has also been significantly influenced by migration patterns. The emigration of skilled labor toward EU countries and beyond has resulted in a substantial loss of human capital, commonly referred to as brain drain. At the same time, however, migration has also generated opportunities for knowledge transfer, international experience, and diaspora engagement, which can contribute positively to economic development if effectively managed (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

From an institutional perspective, human capital development requires strong coordination between the education system and the labor market. Higher education institutions must align their curricula with the needs of strategic economic sectors such as information technology, engineering, healthcare, education, and business administration. Without such alignment, education systems risk producing graduates whose skills are not fully compatible with labor market demands, leading to structural unemployment and underutilization of human resources.

Research and innovation also play a fundamental role in human capital development. In knowledge-based economies, the ability to generate, disseminate, and apply new knowledge is a key driver of economic growth.

Investment in research and development (R&D), collaboration between universities and industry, and the establishment of innovation ecosystems are essential for strengthening the link between education and economic performance (Romer, 1990).

However, several structural challenges persist in Albania. Low levels of research investment, infrastructure limitations, fragmented policy implementation, and weak coordination between educational institutions, research centers, and the private sector continue to limit the full development of human capital (European Commission, 2020; World Bank, 2019).

In conclusion, education and human capital constitute a central axis of socio-economic development. In Albania, strengthening the education system, improving teaching quality, increasing investment in scientific research, and enhancing labor market alignment are essential conditions for sustainable economic growth and successful integration into the European and global economy.

Conclusions

This study has provided an interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between education, science, and socio-economic development in Albania, situating the country's experience within the broader framework of the knowledge economy, globalization, European integration, and selected regional developments in the Western Balkans. The analysis indicates that education and science have exerted a substantial influence on economic modernization, institutional development, cultural transformation, and human capital formation.

A central conclusion of this research is that education cannot be understood merely as a process of knowledge transmission, but rather as a strategic development mechanism that shapes long-term socio-economic trajectories. In contemporary knowledge-based economies, national development increasingly depends on the quality of educational systems, the capacity to generate new knowledge, and the ability to translate scientific and technological innovation into productive economic activity. Consequently, education emerges as a core determinant of competitiveness at both national and regional levels (Sota, 2018).

The historical analysis demonstrates that the evolution of education and scientific activity among Albanians has been shaped by changing political, institutional, and economic conditions. In Albania, the lack of institutional infrastructure, restricted access to Albanian-language education in earlier historical periods, and later political constraints slowed socio-economic modernization. Nevertheless, education played a crucial role in preserving cultural identity, strengthening social cohesion, and forming the intellectual and professional groups that contributed to state-building and development.

The post-1990 transition period represents a structural turning point in the development of the Albanian educational and scientific system. The liberalization and decentralization of education, the expansion of private higher education institutions, and the intensification of international cooperation have contributed to a profound transformation of the academic landscape. In particular, the implementation of the Bologna Process has facilitated harmonization with European higher education standards, increased academic mobility, and supported institutional modernization. However, these reforms remain incomplete, as persistent challenges related to quality

assurance, unequal institutional capacity, and insufficient research funding continue to limit systemic effectiveness.

Another key finding of the study concerns the important role of science in socio-economic development. The literature reviewed associates scientific research and innovation with productivity growth, technological advancement, and institutional efficiency. In Albania, however, structural constraints persist, including limited investment in research and development (R&D), inadequate research infrastructure, and the emigration of highly qualified researchers and academics. These factors constrain national innovation capacity and long-term development potential.

The study further highlights the central importance of human capital in the relationship between education and economic development. Human capital, understood in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies, is closely associated with productivity, innovation capacity, and economic competitiveness. The literature examined indicates a close relationship between educational quality, human capital formation, and the conditions that support sustainable economic growth.

A persistent structural challenge identified in the Albanian context is the mismatch between educational outputs and labor market demands. This gap contributes to inefficiencies in employment, underutilization of skills, and reduced returns on educational investment. Addressing this issue requires stronger coordination between educational institutions, policymakers, and the private sector, as well as continuous curriculum adaptation aligned with economic transformation and technological change.

In conclusion, sustainable socio-economic development in Albania depends on sustained and strategic investment in education, science, innovation, and human capital. Regional cooperation with Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and the wider Western Balkans can reinforce these efforts through academic mobility, research partnerships, and knowledge exchange. Strengthening educational institutions, increasing research capacity, and deepening integration into international knowledge networks are essential prerequisites for long-term competitiveness and European integration.

Ultimately, education and science should be understood not as isolated policy sectors, but as interconnected systems that shape the trajectory of national development. Their effective alignment with economic and social priorities represents a fundamental condition for building a resilient, innovative, and knowledge-based society in the 21st century.

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Childhood vulnerability and social support in Charles Dickens's David Copperfield: family, poverty, education, and relational resilience

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Abstract

Charles Dickens's David Copperfield presents childhood as a formative condition shaped not only by individual temperament but by family authority, economic insecurity, schooling, labour, social recognition, and access to dependable adults. This article examines the novel through an interdisciplinary literary and social framework centred on childhood vulnerability, risk and protective factors, social support, agency, resilience, and narrative identity. Rather than treating resilience as an isolated personal quality, the study asks how David's capacity to act changes as the social environments around him change. A qualitative design combines close reading with thematic and risk–protection mapping of key episodes: David's early home with Clara Copperfield and Peggotty; the arrival of Edward and Jane Murdstone; Salem House; maternal loss; employment at Murdstone and Grinby's; the Micawbers;

the journey to Betsey Trotwood; renewed education; and the adult narrator's retrospective reconstruction of childhood. The analysis shows that vulnerability accumulates when dependency joins coercive authority, disrupted education, economic insecurity, humiliation, and isolation. Protective relationships operate differently: Peggotty provides emotional continuity, while Betsey Trotwood combines recognition with material protection, advocacy, and educational opportunity. The article argues that Dickens represents resilience as relational and developmental. David's initiative matters, but initiative becomes sustainable only when social resources make action consequential. The Bildungsroman's retrospective form further transforms vulnerability into narrative identity by allowing the adult David to interpret experiences that the child could not control. Social-science concepts therefore illuminate the novel most effectively when they remain subordinate to literary form and historical specificity.
Keywords: *Charles Dickens; David Copperfield; childhood vulnerability; social support; relational resilience; narrative identity.*

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Introduction

David Copperfield (1850) is among Dickens's most sustained literary investigations of childhood, development, memory, social inequality, and self-formation. Its first-person retrospective structure follows David from dependency and limited power through changing family, educational, economic, and professional environments. Because the adult narrator reconstructs the child's experience from a later position, the novel continually joins two forms of knowledge: the immediacy of childhood fear, attachment, shame, and hope, and the interpretive authority of an adult who can name the social conditions that once constrained him. This double perspective makes the novel especially productive for an interdisciplinary analysis of childhood vulnerability.

The social environments through which David moves are not neutral backgrounds. Home, school, workplace, extended family, friendship, and professional life distribute security, recognition, discipline, education, and opportunity unevenly. The arrival of Edward Murdstone converts the domestic sphere from a site of relative affection into one organised around coercive "firmness." Salem House demonstrates that institutional education can reproduce humiliation rather than protection. The warehouse episode makes economic vulnerability inseparable from interrupted schooling and social displacement. By

contrast, Peggotty and Betsey Trotwood illustrate distinct forms of protective relationship: one sustains emotional continuity, while the other converts care into material security, advocacy, and renewed education.

Recent Dickens scholarship has renewed attention to David Copperfield as a novel of memory, feeling, family, and life-writing. Ford (2023) reconsiders the novel's autobiographical divisions and its unstable distribution of heroic significance; Bodenheimer and Davis (2024) emphasise retrospective feeling and the older David's relation to his younger self; Stînga (2024) examines memory as an instrument in the shaping of identity; and Deane (2025, Chapter 29, pp. 379–390) foregrounds family and domestic sociality. These approaches strengthen the case for reading development in the novel as both literary and relational rather than as a simple narrative of individual ascent.

The present study therefore asks how Dickens transforms social conditions into narrated experience. Its central claim is that David's resilience is relational: personal initiative is necessary but insufficient, because the consequences of action depend on whether responsive people and institutions provide protection, recognition, education, and material resources. The argument does not turn a fictional character into an empirical case. Instead, social-science concepts serve as interpretive instruments for clarifying patterns that Dickens constructs through narrative voice, characterisation, setting, contrast, irony, and memory.

Literature review

Childhood, Autobiography, and the Bildungsroman

David Copperfield has long been read as an autobiography and the Bildungsroman. Dickens's own experience of childhood labour makes the warehouse episode especially resonant, but biographical resemblance does not reduce the novel to documentary testimony. The literary problem is how experience is selected, rearranged, narrated, and given developmental meaning. Ford's (2023) account of Dickensian divisions is useful here because it highlights tensions between protagonist, heroism, and life-writing rather than assuming a transparent equivalence between author and character.

The Bildungsroman structure also requires attention to the social conditions of development. Brown (2013) situates the English Bildungsroman within a moral and social field rather than treating maturation as purely private. In David Copperfield, development occurs through movement between environments. The same child behaves and imagines differently when exposed to affection, coercion, humiliation, work, education, or recognition. Development is therefore chronological, but it is also ecological and relational.

Memory, Feeling, and Narrative Identity

The adult David's recollection of childhood is central to the novel's form. Bodenheimer and Davis (2024) show how retrospective narration preserves difficult feeling without collapsing into simple self-pity. Stînga (2024) similarly identifies memory as a mechanism for reconstructing identity, stressing subjectivity, nostalgia, and the instability of recollection. LaFarge (2009) further examines the emotional and psychological significance of forgiveness in David Copperfield, contributing to an understanding of how the narrative is

retrospectively processed. These readings matter for a study of vulnerability because childhood adversity in the novel is never available as an unmediated record. The survivor remembers, orders, and interprets it.

Narrative identity consequently becomes both a social and a formal category. David learns who he is through the ways others name, discipline, reject, educate, employ, shelter, or support him. Later narration gives him a power that the child lacked: the power to define relationships and to connect episodes into a life story. The retrospective voice does not erase earlier powerlessness; it makes that powerlessness intelligible.

Family, Education, Poverty, and Social Support

Family relations in the novel distribute both risk and protection. Deane (2025) emphasises the importance of family and domestic relationships to healthy sociality in David Copperfield. Dickens repeatedly distinguishes affection from effective protection. Clara loves David but is progressively deprived of authority; Peggotty possesses limited formal power yet preserves continuity and belonging; Betsey Trotwood combines emotional recognition with the practical ability to intervene.

Education is similarly ambivalent. Salem House shows that school attendance alone is not protective, because institutional authority can reproduce fear and degradation. Later schooling, by contrast, becomes a resource when joined to stability, recognition, and future possibility. The distinction is important: Dickens does not idealise institutions in the abstract; he evaluates them through the relationships and opportunities they create.

Poverty and child labour intensify this relational reading. The warehouse episode changes David's daily environment, social position, self-perception, and imagined future at once. The social-support tradition distinguishes emotional from instrumental support (Cohen & Wills, 1985), while resilience research increasingly treats positive adaptation as a process that emerges across interacting systems rather than as a fixed trait (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 2021). Used cautiously, these concepts clarify why different adults have different developmental effects in the novel.

Research Gap

Scholarship has examined autobiography, memory, childhood, education, class, family, and narrative form in David Copperfield, but often treats these concerns separately. The present article integrates them through a risk–protection model while retaining the specificity of literary analysis. It proposes the following interpretive sequence: accumulated adversity narrows security and opportunity; protective relationships and education can reopen opportunity; expanded opportunity increases the practical effectiveness of agency; and retrospective narration integrates vulnerability and support into adult identity. This sequence is non-deterministic: protective experiences do not cancel earlier harm, and risk does not mechanically determine later outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Ecological Development and Childhood Vulnerability

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective provides a useful conceptual starting point because it locates development in continuing interaction between individuals and environments. David moves among household, school,

workplace, extended family, friendship networks, and professional contexts. These settings alter the resources and constraints available to him. Vulnerability is therefore understood here not as an inherent weakness but as a condition intensified by dependency, unequal power, unstable relationships, restricted resources, and inadequate protection.

Risk, Protection, and Social Support

Risk factors in the novel include parental loss, coercive authority, emotional insecurity, educational disruption, child labour, economic dependency, humiliation, and social isolation. Rutter's (1987) account of protective mechanisms is particularly useful because it focuses on processes that modify the impact of adversity rather than on simple lists of positive traits. Cohen and Wills (1985) likewise distinguish forms of social support that may buffer stress. In literary terms, these concepts help differentiate Peggotty's emotional continuity from Betsey's broader capacity to provide shelter, advocacy, education, and material stability.

Resilience, Agency, and Narrative Identity

Resilience is treated as a developmental process. Masten (2001) describes resilience as arising from ordinary adaptive systems, and later multisystem work emphasises interaction among individual capacities, relationships, and social resources (Masten et al., 2021). David's journey to Betsey illustrates this interaction precisely: his initiative creates a possibility, but only Betsey's response converts possibility into durable change. Agency is therefore neither absent nor sovereign. Narrative identity adds a further level: the adult narrator retrospectively organises experiences of vulnerability, recognition, and support into a coherent account of selfhood.

Research questions

- RQ1. How does Dickens represent childhood vulnerability through family instability, coercive authority, poverty, disrupted education, and child labour?
- RQ2. How do family and substitute-family relationships function as risk-producing or protective forces in David's development?
- RQ3. How do education, class position, and economic insecurity shape David's opportunities and self-perception?
- RQ4. How does the novel represent the relationship between personal agency and social support in the development of resilience?
- RQ5. How does retrospective narration transform childhood vulnerability into narrative identity?

Method

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative interdisciplinary design combining close reading, thematic analysis, and risk–protection mapping. The primary corpus is Charles Dickens's David Copperfield, using the Global Grey 2025 ebook edition (original work published 1850). The procedure is interpretive rather than empirical: fictional characters are not treated as research participants, and the novel is not presented as direct sociological evidence about all Victorian children. Social-science concepts sharpen literary interpretation and help identify patterned relations among authority, vulnerability, support, opportunity, agency, and memory.

Units of Analysis and Selection Criteria

The units of analysis are scenes, relationships, dialogues, settings, narrative reflections, and developmental transitions that directly bear on the research questions. The principal episodes are David's early home with Clara Copperfield and Peggotty; the arrival of Edward and Jane Murdstone; punishment and domestic control; Salem House; the death of David's mother; employment at Murdstone and Grinby's; the Micawber household; David's journey to Betsey Trotwood; Betsey's intervention; renewed education; later supportive relationships; and the adult narrator's reconstruction of childhood. Episodes were selected because they represent changes in risk, protection, social position, educational access, or narrative self-understanding.

For textual verification in the edition used, the principal childhood episodes are located as follows: Murdstone domestic control and punishment, Chapter 4, pp. 34–40; Salem House, Chapters 5–7, especially pp. 53–62; Murdstone and Grinby's and the Micawber household, Chapters 11–12, pp. 105–115; David's flight and journey to Betsey Trotwood, Chapters 12–13, pp. 115–134; Betsey's protective intervention, Chapter 14, pp. 135–145; and renewed education, Chapter 15, from p. 146 onward (Dickens, 2025).

Analytical Categories

Seven categories guided the reading: childhood vulnerability; family relations and adult authority; poverty, labour, and social inequality; education and developmental opportunity; social support and protective relationships; agency and resilience; and memory and narrative identity. Categories were allowed to overlap because the novel repeatedly makes one episode perform several developmental functions at once.

Coding and Interpretive Procedure

I read each selected episode at two linked levels. At the literary level, I focused on narrative voice, focalisation, characterisation, setting, irony, contrast, emotional vocabulary, temporal distance, and retrospective commentary. At the social level, the analysis identified forms of authority, dependency, risk, protection, support, opportunity, and agency. A risk–protection matrix was then used to compare environments rather than to assign numerical scores. Interpretive claims were retained only when they could be connected to recurrent patterns in the novel and to the conceptual framework.

Trustworthiness and Scope

Analytical trustworthiness was strengthened through explicit category definitions, repeated comparison of contrasting episodes, and separation of literary evidence from social-science interpretation. The framework does not diagnose David or other characters, quantify trauma, or claim causal relationships. Its purpose is to make the interpretive procedure transparent and reproducible at the level appropriate to qualitative literary research.

Analysis and results

Family Authority and Accumulated Vulnerability

David's early domestic life shows that vulnerability is produced through an interaction between dependency and authority. Clara's affection initially gives the child emotional security, but her capacity to protect him diminishes after her marriage to Murdstone. The household is

reorganised around a rhetoric of firmness that gives coercion a moral vocabulary. Adults can therefore interpret the child's resistance as evidence of his defect rather than as a response to fear. The child is disadvantaged twice: he has little control over events and little authority to define what those events mean.

Jane Murdstone reinforces this asymmetry by extending surveillance and control into ordinary domestic life. Dickens's representation of the household therefore moves beyond a single cruel adult. Vulnerability becomes systemic within the small ecology of the home: authority, interpretation, discipline, and access to maternal protection are concentrated on one side, while David's dependence remains unchanged. The adult narrator later reverses only the interpretive dimension of this imbalance by giving language to experiences that the child could not authoritatively name.

Peggotty: Emotional Continuity Without Full Structural Power

Peggotty provides a sharply contrasting relationship. Her protective significance does not arise from legal or economic authority but from continuity, recognition, affection, and dependable presence. She cannot prevent every harmful event, yet she gives David a relational point of stability across changes in household structure. This distinction matters because it prevents social support from being treated as a single undifferentiated resource. Emotional support can protect belonging and self-worth even when it cannot immediately alter material circumstances.

Salem House: Education as a Risk-Producing Environment

Salem House complicates the assumption that schooling is automatically developmental. Mr Creakle's authority, public humiliation, and the school's disciplinary culture reproduce unequal power outside the home. Education here provides neither reliable protection nor meaningful recognition. The episode demonstrates that institutions must be evaluated by the quality of their relationships and opportunities, not simply by their formal purpose. Later educational experiences gain protective value precisely because Dickens first shows education stripped of those qualities.

Child Labour, Poverty, and Developmental Displacement

David's employment at Murdstone and Grinby's concentrates economic, educational, and identity-related vulnerability in a single episode. The injury is not reducible to unpleasant labour. His removal from school changes the trajectory he expected to follow and alters the social meanings attached to his daily life. Work, housing, association, and interrupted education become signs through which he measures the distance between his circumstances and his developing sense of self. This is best described as developmental displacement. David's capacities have not suddenly diminished, yet the social environment available for exercising them has narrowed. The episode therefore challenges individualistic accounts of success and failure: opportunity can contract independently of ability. Dickens's social criticism is especially forceful because the narrative presents this contraction through the consciousness of a child acutely aware of what has been lost.

The Micawbers: Economic Insecurity and Adult Vulnerability

The Micawber family broadens the social field by showing that vulnerability is

not confined to children. Debt affects housing, mobility, relationships, and dignity, while Dickens mediates insecurity through comedy and pathos. David's proximity to the Micawbers complicates a simple opposition between vulnerable children and secure adults. At the same time, his position remains distinctive because he lacks the legal, economic, and familial power normally associated with adulthood. The episode links poverty to social instability without reducing it to a uniform moral category.

Seeking Betsey: Agency Under Constraint

David's decision to leave the warehouse and seek Betsey Trotwood is the clearest instance of agency in the childhood narrative. Yet the episode does not support a self-rescue model. David can initiate movement, endure hardship, and ask for help, but he cannot independently create shelter, guardianship, education, or social legitimacy. Agency opens a pathway; it does not provide the resources to stabilise that pathway. The scene therefore offers a literary model of agency under constraint rather than autonomous individualism.

Betsey Trotwood: Protective Intervention and Opportunity

Betsey's importance lies in how she makes use of authority. Dickens does not portray her as conventionally gentle; she is forceful, eccentric, and decisive. The contrast with Murdstone is therefore not authority versus freedom but restrictive authority versus protective authority. Betsey listens, investigates, refuses Murdstone's claim, provides material security, and restores educational possibility. Her intervention changes David's developmental ecology because several protective resources become available at once.

The sequence also distinguishes escape from protection. Leaving the warehouse removes David from one harmful environment, but removal alone is unstable. Betsey converts escape into a new trajectory by providing the social resources David cannot generate by willpower. This is where the novel most clearly supports a relational understanding of resilience.

Education, Recognition, and Social Mobility

Renewed education expands David's opportunities because it is embedded in a more stable network of care and expectation. The novel's earlier representation of Salem House prevents this development from becoming a simple celebration of schooling. Education becomes protective when it is accompanied by recognition, guidance, safety, and a credible future. It then contributes not only to knowledge but to self-direction, professional mobility, and a revised sense of social possibility.

Relational Resilience

Across the selected episodes, David's persistence remains relatively continuous while the consequences of that persistence change dramatically. Under coercive or neglectful conditions, initiative has limited effect. Under protective conditions, the same capacity for effort and learning becomes consequential. Resilience therefore emerges from interaction between personal capacities and social resources. This interpretation is consistent with process-oriented and multisystem accounts of resilience (Masten, 2001; Masten et al., 2021), while remaining grounded in the novel's own pattern of contrasts. Dickens thus resists both determinism and the mythology of the completely self-made individual. Circumstances do not simply produce David, because he

interprets, chooses, seeks, and acts. Nor is he independent of circumstances, because the range and durability of his choices depend on housing, education, advocacy, affection, and recognition supplied by others.

Memory and Narrative Identity

The retrospective narrator gives these social processes their distinctively literary form. David's adult identity is constructed by returning to childhood and assigning relationships to a developmental pattern. Fear, shame, affection, loss, and support are not discarded once circumstances improve. They remain active components of self-understanding. Stînga's (2024) emphasis on memory and Bodenheimer and Davis's (2024) attention to retrospective feeling help clarify why the novel's resilience is not equivalent to forgetting.

Narration also redistributes authority. The child David often lacks the power to define events in the moment; the adult David can frame, connect, and interpret them. The Bildungsroman is therefore social and narrative. Development occurs through changing environments, but it also occurs through the later capacity to make meaning from those changes.

Synthesis of findings

The mapping demonstrates three recurrent findings. First, risk is cumulative and cross-domain: family instability, institutional humiliation, economic insecurity, and educational disruption reinforce one another. Second, protection is multidimensional: emotional continuity, material security, advocacy, education, and recognition are not interchangeable, and their effects depend on combination and timing. Third, agency is relationally amplified. David's initiative matters most when a responsive social environment makes it possible for action to alter his trajectory.

Discussion

The findings support an interpretation of David Copperfield in which childhood development is neither a private psychological

Table 1: *Risk–protection mapping of major developmental environments in David Copperfield.*

Episode / Environment	Principal Risk	Protective Resource	Developmental / Narrative Effect
Murdstone household	Coercive authority; reduced maternal protection	Peggotty's continuity	Fear, dependency, restricted voice
Salem House	Humiliation; harmful institutional authority	Peer relations and later contrast	Education shown as potentially risk-producing
Murdstone and Grinby's	Child labour; interrupted schooling; isolation	David's persistence and later help-seeking	Developmental displacement and class shame
Micawber household	Debt and instability	Human attachment; social observation	Broader understanding of adult economic vulnerability
Journey to Betsey	Material insecurity; isolation	David's initiative	Agency creates a possible pathway
Betsey Trotwood's care	Residual effects of earlier adversity	Protection, advocacy, housing, education	Opportunity expands; agency becomes sustainable
Adult narration	Persistence of painful memory	Retrospective interpretation	Vulnerability incorporated into narrative identity

story nor a simple sociological illustration. Dickens's literary method repeatedly converts social structures into felt experience. Authority becomes fear or security; poverty becomes interrupted possibility and shame; education becomes either humiliation or mobility; support becomes continuity, recognition, and practical opportunity. The novel's social criticism is therefore inseparable from narrative form.

The analysis also clarifies the distinction between vulnerability and weakness. David is vulnerable because he is dependent on adults and institutions that control housing, education, discipline, and work. His vulnerability increases when those systems fail or become harmful. This formulation avoids treating resilience as evidence that adversity was minor. Later success does not retroactively make childhood harm beneficial or insignificant.

The contrast between Murdstone and Betsey is particularly instructive. Both exercise authority, but their authority has opposite developmental functions. Murdstone narrows voice, security, and opportunity; Betsey expands them. Dickens therefore locates the ethical problem not in authority itself but in the purposes and relationships through which authority is exercised. The novel's treatment of education follows the same logic. Salem House and David's later schooling occupy the same institutional category but not the same developmental function. This difference cautions against abstract claims that education is inherently protective. In Dickens's representation, education becomes protective only when it is embedded in relationships and conditions that allow learning to enlarge rather than diminish the child's agency.

Finally, the retrospective form prevents resilience from being reduced to social mobility. David's adult narration preserves vulnerability as memory. His identity contains the child who was frightened, humiliated, loved, displaced, and helped. This gives the novel's developmental pattern a specifically literary complexity: recovery involves not the deletion of adversity but its reinterpretation within a larger life narrative.

Conclusion

This study has examined David Copperfield through an interdisciplinary framework of childhood vulnerability, social support, education, poverty, agency, resilience, and narrative identity. The analysis indicates that vulnerability in the novel is socially conditioned and cumulative. Parental loss, coercive domestic authority, harmful schooling, economic insecurity, premature labour, humiliation, and isolation interact to narrow David's opportunities and his capacity to influence circumstances.

Protective relationships operate through different resources. Clara offers affection but limited protective power; Peggotty provides emotional continuity; Betsey combines recognition with practical intervention, material stability, advocacy, and education. These differences demonstrate that support must be analysed by function rather than by sentiment alone.

The central conclusion is that resilience in David Copperfield is relational. David's persistence and initiative are indispensable, but they become developmentally effective when social resources allow action to produce durable change. Education likewise functions as a protective resource only when embedded in a stable and recognitive environment. The adult narrator finally converts these changing social conditions into narrative identity by interpreting experiences that the child could not control. Social-science concepts

are therefore most useful here when they clarify, rather than replace, literary analysis. Dickens's novel does not provide empirical data about Victorian childhood; it creates a complex representation of how social structures become personal experience through memory, voice, characterisation, setting, irony, and contrast. Its continuing relevance lies precisely in that conjunction of social condition and narrated selfhood.

Limitations and future research

The study is limited to one novel and uses an interpretive rather than empirical design. Its conceptual categories cannot establish psychological diagnosis or historical prevalence, and the selected episodes do not exhaust the novel's social relationships. Future research could compare vulnerable childhoods across Dickens's fiction; examine gendered forms of dependency and protection; place child labour and schooling in fuller Victorian historical context; compare David Copperfield with later Bildungsromane; or test the usefulness of relational resilience as a comparative literary concept. Further work could also examine how translation, adaptation, and classroom reception reshape the novel's representations of vulnerability and social support.

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CYBERSECURITY GOVERNANCE IN ALBANIA: INSTITUTIONAL TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY AFTER 2022

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ABSTRACT

The cyberattacks targeting Albania's public institutions in 2022 exposed challenges extending beyond the technical protection of digital systems. They also raised important questions about institutional preparedness, public communication, transparency, and accountability. As government services become increasingly dependent on digital infrastructure, cybersecurity has emerged as a critical dimension of public governance and institutional resilience. This article examines the development of cybersecurity governance in Albania between 2022 and 2026, focusing on the institutional arrangements and policy responses introduced following the attacks. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, it employs documentary analysis of national legislation, cybersecurity strategies, institutional reports, official communications, and relevant international assessments. The analysis considers how responsibilities are distributed among public institutions, how cybersecurity measures are communicated, and what mechanisms exist to support transparency and accountability. Particular attention is given to the relationship between policy commitments and their documented implementation. Rather than treating the adoption of legislation and strategic frameworks as evidence of institutional effectiveness, the study distinguishes between stated objectives, reported actions, and verifiable outcomes. This approach provides a basis for examining the extent to which developments in cybersecurity governance are supported by publicly available evidence. By situating Albania's experience within broader discussions of digital governance and institutional resilience in small states, the article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of

the governance challenges associated with major cyber incidents and the institutional conditions necessary for more transparent and accountable cybersecurity practices.
Keywords: *cybersecurity governance; institutional transparency; accountability; digital governance; cyber resilience; Albania.*

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Introduction

The digital transformation of public administration has changed how governments operate and how citizens interact with public institutions. Digital platforms have made public services more accessible and, in many cases, more efficient. Yet this transformation has also created new vulnerabilities. As government institutions become increasingly dependent on interconnected information systems, cybersecurity is no longer simply a technical concern. It has become an important aspect of public governance, affecting the continuity of essential services, institutional responsibilities, and the ability of governments to respond to crises and communicate with citizens.

Albania offers a relevant case for examining these challenges. In July and September 2022, its public institutions were targeted by major cyberattacks involving unauthorised access to government networks, data theft, encryption, and destructive malware. A joint advisory issued by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) indicated that the attackers had gained access to government systems months before the attacks became publicly known (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI] & Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [CISA], 2022). These incidents exposed the potential consequences of cyber threats for the functioning of public institutions and brought greater attention to the need for effective cybersecurity governance.

Beyond their technical impact, the attacks raised broader questions about how cybersecurity responsibilities are distributed across government institutions, how information about cyber incidents is communicated to the public, and what mechanisms exist to ensure institutional accountability. These questions are particularly relevant to smaller states, where limited administrative resources, specialised expertise, and institutional coordination may shape the ability to implement cybersecurity policies effectively. However, such constraints should be assessed through evidence rather than assumed solely on the basis of a country's size.

Following the 2022 attacks, Albania introduced important changes to its cybersecurity framework. Law No. 25/2024 on Cybersecurity provided an updated legal foundation for national cybersecurity governance. The adoption of the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030, together with its Action Plan 2025–2027, further established priorities related to critical infrastructure protection,

institutional cooperation, public awareness, international partnerships, and resilience to emerging cyber and hybrid threats (Council of Ministers of the Republic of Albania, 2025).

Nevertheless, the introduction of new legislation and strategic commitments does not necessarily demonstrate that these measures have been effectively implemented. A distinction must therefore be made between policies formally adopted by institutions, actions reported as implemented, and outcomes supported by verifiable evidence. This distinction is especially important when examining transparency and accountability, since publishing official strategies or reports does not, by itself, establish that oversight mechanisms are effective or that institutions are adequately accountable for their cybersecurity responsibilities.

Against this background, this study examines the development of cybersecurity governance in Albania from 2022 to October 2026, with particular attention to institutional transparency and accountability. It addresses the following research question: How have the 2022 cyberattacks been reflected in Albania's cybersecurity governance framework, particularly in the allocation of institutional responsibilities and the development of transparency and accountability mechanisms?

To answer this question, the article employs a qualitative case study approach based on documentary analysis. The research draws on national legislation, cybersecurity strategies, institutional reports, official communications, and relevant international assessments. By comparing formal policy commitments with publicly documented implementation, the study seeks to identify institutional developments and potential gaps without assuming that reforms introduced after the attacks were necessarily caused by them.

The article contributes to discussions on cybersecurity governance and institutional resilience by examining how Albania has developed its policy and institutional arrangements following a major cybersecurity crisis. More specifically, it aims to provide an evidence-based assessment of the relationship between institutional responsibilities, transparency practices, and accountability mechanisms, while recognizing the limitations of publicly available documentation.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Cybersecurity Governance and Institutional Responsibility

As public administration becomes increasingly digitalised, cybersecurity has evolved from a predominantly technical concern into a broader governance challenge. Protecting government information systems requires not only technological safeguards but also clear institutional responsibilities, coordinated decision-making, and effective oversight. The NIST Cybersecurity Framework 2.0 reflects this understanding by placing governance alongside risk identification, protection, detection, response, and recovery as essential elements of cybersecurity risk management (National Institute of Standards and Technology [NIST], 2024).

In public administration, cybersecurity governance determines how responsibilities are assigned, how institutions coordinate their activities, and how security policies are implemented and evaluated. The adoption of legislation or strategic objectives, however, does not necessarily demonstrate that these arrangements

function effectively in practice. Assessing governance therefore requires attention to both formal institutional structures and evidence of their implementation.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are closely related principles of public governance, although they serve different purposes. Transparency concerns the accessibility and clarity of information about institutional decisions and activities. Meijer (2013) argues that transparency is shaped by institutional and organizational dynamics, suggesting that publishing information alone does not guarantee meaningful public scrutiny.

In cybersecurity, transparency also involves balancing public information needs against the protection of sensitive systems. Authorities may have legitimate reasons to restrict operational details, but this does not eliminate their responsibility to communicate relevant information about incidents, institutional measures, and policy implementation.

Accountability goes beyond information disclosure. Bovens (2007) describes it as a relationship in which public actors are expected to explain and justify their conduct before a forum capable of questioning and evaluating their actions. Applied to cybersecurity governance, this perspective draws attention to reporting obligations, oversight arrangements, and the mechanisms through which institutions are held responsible for cybersecurity decisions.

Cyber Resilience and Small-State Governance

Cyber resilience concerns the ability of institutions to prepare for, respond to, and recover from cyber incidents while maintaining essential functions. Although technological capabilities remain important, resilience also depends on institutional coordination, organizational preparedness, and effective governance.

For smaller states, these challenges may be influenced by administrative capacity, access to specialized expertise, and international cooperation. Nevertheless, institutional weaknesses should not be assumed simply because a country is small. They must be established through evidence concerning specific governance arrangements and implementation practices.

In Albania, examining cyber resilience therefore requires attention to the relationship between formal policy commitments, institutional responsibilities, and publicly documented measures taken following the 2022 cyberattacks.

Analytical Framework

This study examines cybersecurity governance through three interconnected dimensions: institutional responsibility, transparency, and accountability. Institutional responsibility concerns the allocation of authority and coordination mechanisms. Transparency refers to the availability and quality of public information about cybersecurity policies and institutional responses. Accountability concerns reporting, oversight, and the justification of institutional decisions.

These dimensions are assessed by distinguishing between formally adopted policies, reported implementation activities, and outcomes supported by verifiable evidence. This framework provides a basis for analyzing Albania's cybersecurity governance after 2022 without assuming that legislative reforms automatically result in stronger institutional performance.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative single-case study approach to examine cybersecurity governance in Albania from January 2022 to October 2026. Documentary analysis provides the basis for exploring institutional responsibilities, transparency practices, and accountability mechanisms in the period following the 2022 cyberattacks. The approach allows legal and policy developments to be considered alongside available evidence of their implementation, without assuming that reforms introduced after the attacks were necessarily caused by them.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study draws on national legislation, government strategies, institutional reports, official statements, and relevant international assessments. Key documents examined include Law No. 25/2024 on Cybersecurity, the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030, its Action Plan 2025–2027, and the 2025 monitoring report issued by Albania's National Cyber Security Authority (AKSK). Documents are selected according to their relevance, institutional origin, publication date, and contribution to the research question. Priority is given to sources that clarify cybersecurity responsibilities, transparency arrangements, accountability mechanisms, or the implementation of policy commitments. Documents without identifiable authorship or verifiable provenance were excluded. The selected materials were organised by issuing institution, date, document type, and analytical relevance.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis follows a thematic approach informed by Bowen (2009) and Braun and Clarke (2006). Five categories guide the examination of the documents: institutional responsibilities, transparency, accountability, policy implementation, and cyber resilience.

Relevant information was classified under these categories and compared across documents and reporting periods. Particular attention is paid to the distinction between formally adopted measures, actions reported by institutions, and outcomes supported by additional evidence. Where sufficient documentation is available, institutional claims are compared with other official publications and independent assessments.

Reliability and Limitations

The study seeks to strengthen analytical consistency through transparent selection criteria, a structured coding framework, and careful documentation of the evidence used to support its interpretations. The reliability of individual sources is considered in relation to their institutional origin, purpose, and potential limitations.

The analysis is limited to publicly accessible documents, which may not fully reflect internal decision-making, operational cybersecurity measures, or implementation challenges that remain undisclosed. As a result, the study focuses on documented governance arrangements rather than attempting to measure cybersecurity performance or changes in public trust directly.

Results and Analysis

Developments in Albania's Cybersecurity Governance Framework

Albania's cybersecurity governance framework has undergone important legal and institutional developments since the cyberattacks of 2022. Although

these incidents brought greater attention to vulnerabilities in public digital infrastructure, the available evidence does not establish that all subsequent reforms resulted directly from the attacks.

One of the main developments was the adoption of Law No. 25/2024 on Cybersecurity, which established an updated legal framework for cybersecurity responsibilities, security requirements, and incident reporting. The law clarified obligations for relevant public and private entities and provided a stronger regulatory basis for national cybersecurity governance.

Further developments followed with the adoption of the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030, approved by Council of Ministers Decision No. 606 of 23 October 2025. The strategy identifies priorities concerning the protection of digital infrastructure, institutional coordination, cybersecurity awareness, international cooperation, and resilience to cyber and hybrid threats.

Together, these measures indicate an expansion of the formal governance framework. However, their adoption does not, in itself, demonstrate improvements in operational capacity or institutional performance. Such conclusions require evidence of implementation and measurable outcomes.

Institutional Transparency and Public Reporting

The national cybersecurity framework also places emphasis on institutional reporting and the monitoring of policy implementation. The National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030 and its Action Plan 2025–2027 establish arrangements for tracking progress, with the National Cyber Security Authority (AKSK) playing a coordinating role.

AKSK's 2025 monitoring report provides measurable evidence of public reporting. Under Policy 1 (digital infrastructure protection), 53 measures were scheduled: 55% were reported completed, 9% ongoing, 2% not completed and 34% without available information (AKSK, 2026, p. 8). Importantly, the report's footnote links the information gap to certification-scheme measures scheduled for subsequent years. The 34% figure therefore cannot be treated as proof of non-compliance or institutional concealment.

The same report differentiates implementation statuses and names responsible institutions, allowing readers to identify where progress is claimed and where evidence remains limited. AKSK also maintains a public transparency programme and a register of information requests and responses. These are observable disclosure practices, although neither the presence of a register nor published percentages independently establishes the completeness or accuracy of the underlying reporting (AKSK, n.d.-a; AKSK, n.d.-b).

Transparency is thus observable in the publication of policy-specific indicators and public responses, but its substantive quality depends on how clearly reporting gaps, delays and follow-up actions are explained. The available sources permit assessment of what is disclosed, not a definitive judgment about information withheld or public trust.

Accountability and Policy Implementation

The Action Plan 2025–2027 translates national cybersecurity priorities into measures with assigned responsibilities, implementation periods, and planned resources. These provisions create a formal basis for monitoring institutional commitments and evaluating progress.

A concrete institutional practice is the identification of 215 critical and important information infrastructure operators in 2025, including 133 critical and 82 important operators, as publicly reported by AKSK. This indicates a defined supervisory population under the updated regulatory framework, not evidence that every operator complies with security requirements (AKSK, 2025).

However, institutional accountability extends beyond the allocation of responsibilities. It also requires mechanisms for reviewing performance, explaining delays or shortcomings, and assessing whether planned measures have achieved their intended objectives.

AKSK's 2025 monitoring report records 65 on-site and online inspections of critical and important information infrastructures and technical follow-up meetings with 16 public institutions (AKSK, 2026: 10–12). These figures demonstrate reported supervisory activity. However, the publicly cited aggregate figures do not establish how many deficiencies were remedied, whether sanctions followed, or whether cyber incidents declined as a result. Accountability therefore remains only partially observable from the examined material.

Synthesis of Findings

Three findings emerge from the selected official documents: legal responsibilities have been formalised; AKSK publishes policy-level implementation indicators and responses to information requests; and reported inspections demonstrate supervisory activity. At the same time, incomplete or future-dated reporting categories and limited publicly presented follow-up outcomes constrain conclusions about accountability. These observations suggest that the central question is no longer limited to whether cybersecurity responsibilities have been formally defined. It also concerns how institutions demonstrate progress, communicate results, and account for their performance.

The evidence comes primarily from the responsible authority's own publications and is not an independent audit. Accordingly, the study identifies observable governance practices and reporting limitations rather than demonstrating improvements in cybersecurity effectiveness.

Discussion

The evidence moves the discussion beyond policy adoption. AKSK's 2025 monitoring report records implementation percentages and 65 inspections, while its public information register documents responses to requests. These are concrete transparency and oversight practices, but the figures are institutionally reported and do not by themselves establish the quality of corrective action or resilience outcomes (AKSK, 2026; AKSK, n.d.-b).

Meijer (2013) helps explain why publication alone is insufficient: transparency also depends on whether information permits meaningful scrutiny. The 34% 'no information' category under Policy 1 illustrates this distinction, although AKSK's explanation that relevant measures are scheduled for later years cautions against interpreting it as straightforward non-performance.

Bovens (2007) similarly distinguishes reporting from answerability and evaluation. The designation of 215 supervised operators and the reporting of 65 inspections make oversight activity visible, yet the sources examined do not consistently establish inspection outcomes, remediation rates or consequences for non-compliance. This limits any claim that

accountability mechanisms are effective in practice. These issues are also relevant to discussions of cyber resilience in smaller states. Technical capabilities remain essential, but institutional coordination, clearly defined responsibilities, and reliable reporting practices are equally important governance considerations. Albania's experience illustrates these challenges without providing sufficient grounds for generalising about other small states.

The central implication is that cybersecurity governance should be assessed not only through the policies governments adopt but also through evidence of their implementation. A more complete evaluation requires comparing reported implementation indicators with independent assessments and evidence of operational outcomes.

Conclusions

This study examined developments in Albania's cybersecurity governance following the 2022 cyberattacks, with particular attention to institutional responsibilities, transparency, and accountability. The analysis highlights changes in the country's legal and strategic framework, notably the adoption of Law No. 25/2024 on Cybersecurity and the National Cybersecurity Strategy 2025–2030. These developments have strengthened the formal foundations of cybersecurity governance by clarifying institutional responsibilities and establishing mechanisms for monitoring policy commitments. Nevertheless, adopting legislation and introducing reporting procedures do not necessarily translate into effective implementation or greater cyber resilience.

The study identifies specific disclosure and supervisory practices, including implementation reporting, a public information-request register, a defined population of supervised operators and reported inspections. Greater accountability would require public evidence of follow-up actions and measurable implementation outcomes, subject to legitimate security restrictions.

The research is limited to publicly available documents and institutionally reported monitoring data, which may not fully capture internal decision-making or operational challenges. Future studies drawing on institutional interviews, independent assessments, and implementation data could offer a more comprehensive understanding of Albania's progress. Ultimately, Albania's experience demonstrates why cybersecurity should be approached not only as a technical challenge but also as a matter of public governance, where transparency and accountability are essential to institutional resilience.

The empirical document set used here consists of Law No. 25/2024, Decision No. 606/2025 and its strategy/action plan, AKSK's 2025 monitoring report, the authority's transparency programme and information-request register, and its public notice on the classification of supervised operators. Findings are limited to what these documents disclose.

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DETERMINANTS OF WELL-BEING AMONG YOUTH IN KOSOVO: A PATH ANALYTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Youth well-being is increasingly understood as the product of interacting material and psychological determinants, yet no study in Kosovo has modelled these determinants together. In this quantitative cross-sectional study, 372 young people aged 18–25 years (M_{age} = 20.55, SD = 1.48; 91.7% female) completed an online survey measuring well-being (WHO-5), psychological distress (GHQ-12), resilience (BRS), mental health literacy (MHLS), household income (objective and subjective indicators), physical activity, and use of mental health applications. We estimated a path model within a structural equation modelling framework, using maximum likelihood with robust standard errors, and tested indirect effects with percentile bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). The revised model fitted the data very well, $\chi^2(6) = 6.07$, p = .415; CFI = 1.000; RMSEA = .006; SRMR = .026, and explained 32.2% of the variance in well-being. All five significant indirect

pathways ran through psychological distress: no determinant was linked to well-being except by way of lower distress. Perceived financial sufficiency was the strongest predictor of distress (β = −.335). Added to objective income, it explained a further 12.9 percentage points of the variance in distress, whereas objective income added only 1.9 points beyond perceived sufficiency. Resilience was related to well-being only through lower distress. Contrary to theoretical expectations, application use was associated with lower distress, and mental health literacy had a small negative effect on well-being that was confined to the knowledge subscale. In Kosovo, where economic insecurity is widespread and mental health services are limited, the main route to youth well-being appears to run through the reduction of distress. This has direct implications for the institutions that support young people.
Keywords: *well-being; psychological distress; household income; resilience; path analysis; Kosovo*

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Introduction

Youth well-being is now conceptualized as more than the absence of psychopathology. It is a multidimensional state of flourishing with emotional, psychological, and social components (Keyes, 2002). Its determinants seldom act directly: some operate as distal material resources, others as proximal psychological mechanisms. So, structural equation modelling suits this structure well, because it estimates direct and indirect effects simultaneously within a single system of equations (Kline, 2016).

Household income is the most distal of these determinants, and the literature suggests that it acts mainly through indirect pathways. In a meta-analysis, Thomson et al. (2022) found that the largest gains in well-being occur when rising income lifts people out of poverty, and that income losses produce larger psychological declines than equivalent gains. Alloush (2024) showed that the relationship runs in both directions. In structural models, subjective appraisals

of wealth tend to explain more variance than absolute income. Among 18,910 adolescents in eight countries, subjective family wealth predicted internalizing symptoms more consistently than objective income (Steare et al., 2024). Similarly, the effects of financial difficulty among university students operated mainly through a perceived sense of poverty rather than through objective resource deficits (Reyes & Yujuico, 2014).

In structural models of youth well-being, resilience usually serves as the main mechanism through which distal determinants, physical activity among them, affect psychological outcomes (Cui et al., 2025). Mental health literacy shows smaller effects. Zhang et al. (2023) found that it reduced distress indirectly through resilience, with subjective socioeconomic status moderating this pathway. Evidence on mental health mobile applications is still sparse. Engagement with an app predicted symptom improvement only among users who had clinical symptoms at baseline (Bakker & Rickard, 2018), while problematic smartphone uses and pre-existing mental health vulnerabilities were the main drivers of app adoption (Vera Cruz et al., 2023). Finally, Boyes and Hermens (2026) found that psychological distress and well-being behave as partially independent dimensions rather than as opposite ends of a single continuum.

Kosovo is a post-conflict, collectivist society with the youngest population in Europe, high exposure to adversity, marked economic insecurity, and limited mental health infrastructure (Fanaj et al, 2025c). Research on young people in this setting remains fragmented. Psychological distress is well documented: a national survey placed 25–40% of adolescents in the clinically elevated range (Shahini et al., 2015). Studies of resilience show that hope, meaning-making, and multiple psychological strengths predict subjective well-being (Kelmendi & Hamby, 2024), and two recent Kosovo studies reported mean WHO-5 scores of 62.44 and 61.64 (Fanaj et al, 2025b; Fanaj et al., 2026b). Evidence on income is thin. It consists of a non-significant correlation in a small sample (Duraku et al, 2018) and broad socioeconomic classifications (Fanaj et al., 2025b), even though 58% of young Kosovars in a national survey named financial stress as their main psychological burden (Democracy for Development, 2025). Mental health literacy has not yet been measured empirically in Kosovo.

To now, no published study has modelled these six constructs together among Kosovar youth. Local mediation research has relied on single-mediator models of isolated outcomes (Fanaj et al, 2026a) rather than on simultaneous structural systems. The present study treats household income (objective and subjective indicators), physical activity, and application use as exogenous variables; mental health literacy and resilience as intervening variables; psychological distress as a proximal mediator and a partially independent dimension; and well-being as the outcome. We hypothesized that household income would affect well-being indirectly (H1); that perceived financial sufficiency would outperform objective household income and show a steeper slope near the poverty threshold (H2); that resilience would partially mediate the effects of physical activity and literacy (H3); that literacy would operate through resilience, moderated by subjective economic status (H4); that application use would act as a marker of elevated distress (H5); and that distress and well-being would prove empirically distinct (H6).

Method

Design, participants, and procedure

The study used a quantitative cross-sectional design based on self-report survey data. The main analysis was a path analysis with observed composite variables, a form of structural equation modelling in which constructs are represented by total scale scores rather than by latent measurement models. The measurement battery dictated this choice, since three constructs were measured with single items. As a result, measurement error is not controlled, structural coefficients are attenuated, and paths are interpreted as structural associations rather than as causal effects.

The sample consisted of 372 young people aged 18–25 years (M_{age} = 20.55, SD = 1.48), of whom 341 identified as women (91.7%). Participants were recruited through non-probability convenience sampling on online social networks and university channels, so the sample is not nationally representative. Data were collected with Kobo Toolbox. Responses were fully anonymous, and no identifying information was recorded.

Measures

Psychological distress was measured with the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988), scored on a 0–1–2–3 Likert scale (total range 0–36). The established cut-off of ≥ 15 was used for descriptive purposes only; continuous scores entered the path model. Resilience was assessed with the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008), scored as the item mean. Well-being was measured with the five-item World Health Organization Well-Being Index (WHO-5; World Health Organization, 1998). Raw scores were multiplied by 4 to give a 0–100 scale, with scores ≤ 50 indicating reduced well-being (Topp et al., 2015). Mental health literacy was assessed with the 35-item Mental Health Literacy Scale (MHLS; O'Connor & Casey, 2015), scored according to the original key (range 35–160). Because the structure of the scale is still debated, we also computed knowledge (items 1–19) and attitudes/stigma (items 20–35) subscale scores.

Household income was measured with two items developed for this study. The first recorded absolute monthly household income in euros; it was log-transformed for regression analyses and grouped into three ordinal categories for the path model. The second recorded perceived financial sufficiency ("quite difficult", "just about managing", "living comfortably"). Physical activity was assessed with a single item on the number of active days per week (0–6), which captures frequency but not duration or intensity. Use of mental health applications was measured with a single frequency item with six response options, ranging from "never" (0) to "very often" (5).

Statistical analysis and ethics

Data were processed and analysed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27.0) and Jamovi (Version 2.7; The Jamovi project, 2024). Mardia's coefficients indicated significant departures from multivariate normality, so the path model was estimated by maximum likelihood with robust standard errors, and indirect effects were tested with percentile bootstrapping (5,000 resamples). Model fit was judged against conventional criteria: CFI and TLI ≥ .95, RMSEA ≤ .06, and SRMR ≤ .08 (Kline, 2016). Internal consistency was indexed by Cronbach's alpha (α) and McDonald's omega (ω). Objective income was the only variable with missing data. The complete-case analysis (n = 285) was therefore

compared with multiple imputation (m = 20) and with an alternative model that omitted objective income. The initial model fitted poorly and was re-specified by adding three theoretically justified paths identified from standardized residuals. Because this re-specification was partly data-driven, the final model should be regarded as exploratory.

The study followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants gave electronic informed consent before data collection and could withdraw at any point; no minors were enrolled. The Ethics Committee of AAB College in Pristina approved the study (Approval No. A6-437/23).

Results

Monthly household income was reported by 285 participants (76.6%), and this was the only variable with missing data. Little's MCAR test indicated that these data were missing completely at random, $\chi^2(7) = 6.90$, $p = .440$. Participants who did not report income did not differ from those who did on any primary outcome (all $|d| \leq 0.11$), gender, or employment status. We therefore report results for the complete-case sample ($n = 285$).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients. Reliability was high for the WHO-5, GHQ-12, and MHLS but low for the BRS ($\alpha = .577$; $\omega = .610$); the BRS was retained, and this is acknowledged as a limitation. According to the screening cut-offs, 132 participants (35.5%) showed probable psychological distress, 128 (34.4%) scored ≤ 50 on the WHO-5, and 43.3% had low resilience. The strongest bivariate correlation was between distress and well-being ($r = -.551$), followed by that between perceived financial sufficiency and distress ($r = -.414$). Perceived sufficiency was far more strongly related to distress than objective income was ($r = -.238$), and the two income measures were only moderately correlated with each other ($r = .312$). Mental health literacy showed negligible correlations with well-being (r

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics and reliability (N = 372)*

Variable	k	M (SD)	α	ω
Well-being (WHO-5, 0–100)	5	59.31 (25.49)	.882	.883
Distress (GHQ-12, 0–36)	12	13.17 (7.70)	.889	.891
Resilience (BRS, 1–5)	6	3.00 (0.64)	.577	.610
Literacy (MHLS, 35–160)	35	104.44 (14.65)	.848	.816
Knowledge (items 1–19)	19	58.16 (9.38)	.881	.883
Attitudes/stigma (items 20–35)	16	46.28 (9.41)	.786	.681
Financial sufficiency (1–3)	1	2.33 (0.71)	—	—
Household income (€)	1	1,310.44 (1,244.57)	—	—
Physical activity (days/week)	1	1.63 (1.30)	—	—
App use (0–5)	1	1.43 (1.41)	—	—

Note. k = number of items. Household income statistics exclude six implausible values (n = 279). Internal consistency cannot be estimated for single-item indicators.

Table 2: *Direct effects in the revised path model (n = 285)*

Path	B	SE	z	p
Distress → Well-being	−.534	.058	−9.18	< .001
Literacy → Well-being	−.079	.049	−1.61	.108
Sufficiency → Well-being	−.049	.055	−0.89	.375
Resilience → Well-being	.046	.051	0.89	.371
Physical activity → Well-being	.044	.052	0.86	.388
Sufficiency → Distress	−.335	.052	−6.34	< .001
Resilience → Distress	−.211	.051	−4.10	< .001
App use → Distress	−.190	.050	−3.75	< .001
Physical activity → Distress	−.105	.053	−2.02	.043
Income (obj.) → Distress	−.075	.053	−1.40	.162
Physical activity → Resilience	.168	.061	2.85	.004
Income (obj.) → Literacy	.115	.062	1.86	.064

Note. β = fully standardized path coefficient; Sufficiency = perceived financial sufficiency. R^2 values: well-being = .322, distress = .293, resilience = .061, literacy = .016. Non-significant paths are omitted; the only significant covariance among exogenous variables was between the two income indicators (β = .312, p < .001).

= −.082) and distress (r = −.007).

The initial model fitted poorly: $\chi^2(9) = 41.08$, $p < .001$; CFI = .828; RMSEA = .112; SRMR = .082. We then added three theoretically grounded paths (physical activity → distress, application use → distress, and application use → resilience) and modeled perceived financial sufficiency as a separate exogenous predictor. The revised model fitted the data very well, $\chi^2(6) = 6.07$, $p = .415$; $\chi^2/df = 1.01$; CFI = 1.000; TLI = .998; RMSEA = .006; SRMR = .026, and needed no further modification.

Table 2 reports the direct effects. Distress was the only direct predictor of well-being (β = −.534), and the model explained 32.2% of the variance in well-being. Distress was predicted by perceived financial sufficiency (β = −.335), resilience (β = −.211), application use (β = −.190), and physical activity (β = −.105). Objective income was no longer significant once perceived sufficiency was controlled. Physical activity was the only predictor of resilience (β = .168).

Of the ten indirect pathways tested with percentile bootstrapping, five were significant, and all five passed through psychological distress: perceived financial sufficiency (β = .179, 95% CI [.108, .253]), resilience (β = .113, 95% CI [.048, .178]), application use (β = .101, 95% CI [.046, .165]), physical activity (β = .056, 95% CI [.004, .111]), and the serial path from physical activity through resilience and distress (β = .019, 95% CI [.005, .036]). Since the direct effect of perceived sufficiency on well-being was not significant, its effect was fully mediated by distress. The 95% confidence intervals of the remaining five indirect pathways, including those involving objective income and those running through resilience or literacy without distress, included zero.

H2 was tested directly with hierarchical regression (n = 279). Adding perceived financial sufficiency to objective income

raised the explained variance in distress by 12.9 percentage points (R^2 from .067 to .197), whereas adding objective income to perceived sufficiency raised it by only 1.9 points. Quadratic income terms were not significant for either outcome, so there was no support for a steeper slope near the poverty threshold. When the model was re-estimated with the two MHLS subscales entered separately (r = .212), fit remained good, χ^2 (8) = 10.68, p = .220; CFI = .990, and the literacy effect was located in the knowledge subscale. Knowledge negatively predicted well-being (β = −.143, p = .005), whereas attitudes/stigma did not (β = .042, p = .396). Sensitivity analyses under three specifications (women only, n = 264; multiple imputation; and exclusion of objective income) confirmed that the model was stable: no coefficient changed by more than 0.04 standardized units.

Discussion

The revised model explained 32.2% of the variance in well-being and 29.3% of the variance in distress. The first figure exceeds the 22.1% reported in comparable Kosovar samples; the second is close to the 29.9% reported there. Those samples also had slightly higher mean WHO-5 scores than the 59.31 observed here, a difference we attribute to the predominantly female composition of the present sample (Fanaj et al, 2025a; Fanaj et al, 2025c; Fanaj et al., 2026b).

The main contribution of this study concerns the structure of the pathways rather than the size of individual coefficients. International meta-analytic evidence identifies resilience as the central mediator of youth well-being (Cui et al., 2025). In this Kosovo sample, psychological distress held that role: all five significant indirect pathways passed through it. Resilience still mattered, but it did not raise well-being directly (β = .046, p = .371); it acted only by reducing distress. We interpret this configuration as a sign that, under chronic macroeconomic insecurity, young people spend their psychological resources mainly on managing distress, which leaves little capacity for active flourishing. This interpretation needs to be tested in other cultural settings.

The advantage of perceived financial sufficiency over objective income (H1, H2) replicates international findings (Reyes & Yujuico, 2014; Steare et al., 2024) and shows the same pattern in Kosovo for the first time. The weaker role of objective income does not mean that material conditions are unimportant. A person's sense of financial security is a subjective reflection of their actual economic circumstances, as the significant effect of objective income when tested on its own shows (β = −.259, p < .001). Perceived sufficiency acts as the proximal link, but poverty is not merely a matter of appraisal. The non-linear effect predicted under H2 did not appear, probably because the sample truncated the lower tail of the income distribution.

Our H3 received partial support. Resilience mediated the effect of physical activity, but only by way of reduced distress. This pattern fits an instrument that measures recovery from stress rather than a broad set of psychological strengths such as hope, dignity, and family solidarity (Rodríguez-Rey et al, 2016). The model explained only 6.1% of the variance in resilience, which points to contextual factors that were not measured here but that Kosovar research has identified, including dignity, family solidarity, hope, and poly-strengths (Kelmendi & Hamby, 2024).

H4 was not supported. Mental health literacy operated neither through resilience nor through distress; instead, knowledge had a direct negative effect on well-being. Four mechanisms could account for this. First, knowledge may be a marker of earlier exposure to distress. Second, recognizing mental health problems may prompt self-labeling, which would be consistent with an effect on well-being rather than on symptoms. Third, young people may gain knowledge without gaining access to care, since services require out-of-pocket payment and are not promoted institutionally (Fanaj et al, 2025b). Fourth, the scale may conflate knowledge with stigma-related attitudes. Whatever the mechanism, greater mental health literacy cannot be expected to improve well-being unless institutional service capacity grows at the same time.

Contrary to H5, application use was associated with lower, not higher, distress. Apps may serve as an accessible self-help resource, or lower distress at baseline may make sustained digital engagement easier. H6 was supported: distress left 68% of the variance in well-being unexplained, which indicates that distress and well-being are distinct dimensions rather than opposite poles of one continuum (Boyes & Hermens, 2026).

Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design rules out causal inference. This applies in particular to the income–distress pathway, where bidirectional effects have been documented (Alloush, 2024), and to the literacy finding, for which reverse causality is a plausible alternative explanation. Convenience sampling limits generalizability. Lower-income youth were under-represented, which probably explains the absence of non-linear income effects. The sample was 91.7% female, so inferences apply mainly to young Kosovar women, and its ethnic homogeneity prevents generalization to minority youth, who report lower well-being (Fanaj et al., 2026a).

Because the analysis relied on observed composite scores, measurement error was not controlled. This is a particular concern for the BRS, whose item performance suggests possible translation artifacts. Physical activity, application use, and perceived financial sufficiency were each measured with a single item, and the WHO-5 captures mainly the hedonic side of well-being. The model revisions were partly data-driven, and self-reports from a single informant may introduce common-method variance. Unmeasured variables such as remittances, social support, hope, and coping strategies probably account for much of the 93.9% of unexplained variance in resilience. Future research should use gender-balanced and ethnically diverse community samples that include young people who are not students, longitudinal panel designs, psychometric validation of the Albanian versions of the BRS and MHLS, multi-item measures, and latent profile analysis.

Conclusions

This study offers the first joint structural model of the material and psychological determinants of well-being among Kosovar youth. The revised model fitted the data well and explained 32.2% of the variance in well-being. All five significant indirect pathways ran through psychological distress; no determinant was linked to well-being without first reducing distress. Perceived financial sufficiency was the strongest predictor of distress and clearly outperformed objective

household income. Resilience contributed only by suppressing distress. Contrary to theoretical expectations, application use was associated with lower distress, and mental health literacy had a small negative effect confined to the knowledge subscale. Because distress left most of the variance in well-being unexplained, the two are best treated as distinct dimensions rather than as opposite poles of a single continuum.

Within the limits of a cross-sectional design, the findings carry four practical implications. Financial support for youths should aim at predictable income rather than at larger absolute amounts. Mental health literacy campaigns should be linked to institutional referral and service pathways. Digital mental health applications are a feasible, low-cost option with no evidence of harm, although their clinical effectiveness still needs formal evaluation. Physical activity deserves priority as a public health goal in its own right, given that 53.2% of participants reported one or fewer active days per week. Together with a distress prevalence of 35.5%, these results make a strong empirical case for formal youth counselling and community mental health services in Kosovo.

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