# THE DEPOLITICIZATION OF PUBLIC SPHERE: THE CASE OF ALBANIA
## (DEPOLITIZIMI I SFERËS PUBLIKE: RASTI I SHQIPËRISË)

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay analyzes the depolitization of public sphere in Albania and the rising scale of burocratization and technocratic politics (through such mediums as electoral systems), which have substituted 'the political' domestically. Here we analyze how this has happened through instrumental usage of international actors from Albanian political class to legitimize contested processes, technocratizing the language under the justification that Brussels wants us to behave in such manners. This technocratization of language brings in itself a sense of alienation of the citizens and atomization of society, depoliticizing the public sphere. Moreover, as it is also elaborated in the example brought in this study that certain reforms which serve only particular segments of politics, are argued as international recommendations delegating responsibility, but also living little room for electorate's choices.

**Key Words:** depoliticization, international actors, transition, public sphere.

**PËRMBLEDHJE**

Kjo ese analizon depolitizimin e sferës publike në Shqipëri dhe shkallën në rritje të burokratizimit dhe politikave teknokratike (nëpërmjet mediumeve të tillë si sistemet elektorale), të cilat kanë zëvendësuar 'politikën' në sferën e brendshme. Këtu analizojmë se si ka ndodhur kjo nëpërmjet përdorimit instrumental të faktorit ndërkombëtar nga klasa politike për të legjitimuar procese të kontestuara duke teknokratizuar gjuhën nën justifikimin se 'kështu e do Brukseli'. Ky teknokratizim i gjuhës sjell në vetvete një alienim të qytetarit dhe atomizim të shoqërisë duke depolitizuar sferën publike. Për më tepër, sikundër shtjellohet edhe te shembulli që ilustrohet në këtë studim, reforma të caktuara që i shërbejnë vetëm segmenteve të caktuara të politikës, argumentohen si rekomandime të ndërkombëtarëve duke deleguar përgjegjësi, por dhe duke lënë pak vend për zgjedhje nga ana e elektoratit.

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper analyses the de-politicization of public sphere in Albania and the rise of bureaucratization and technocratic politics (i.e. through such mediums as electoral systems), which have somehow supplanted 'the political' in the domestic sphere. I argue here that this has primarily happened through the instrumental use of the international factors by political class in general in order to justify either their lack of results/perfor-

*Aktet e Takimit Vjetor, Vëll. II, Nr. 2*

169

mance, as a way of legitimizing unpopular policies that suit only particular groups or individuals within the society, or for purposes of shielding many contested political issues from the public, by 'technocratizing' the language and answering to media calls for greater transparency, by claiming that 'Brussels is asking us to commit to such reforms'. Thus, they delegate responsibility to the international partners and hide behind an increasingly bureaucratic language that leaves little room for vulnerability, while simultaneously threatens the alignment of citizens and a subsequent depoliticization of public sphere.

This essay is composed of two main parts. First, the paper delineates a theoretical framework that builds around such concepts as 'the political', 'politics' and 'de-politicization', by trying to conceptualize and operationalize them for purposes of this paper. In the following sections, one empirical snapshots of a particular political *event* is undertaken to show the role or the appropriation of the EU and OSCE (to name just two international organizations), to serve political ends that paradoxically in turn, has led to de-politicization of public sphere or at least, hint at that direction, on the medium or long run. I choose to use this snapshots that look at particular details of Albanian political reforms and the intervention or use of international actors, given the space constraints that do not allow for a full case study that would comprehensively cover its object of analyses. In the end, a conclusion that encapsulates the main findings and possible recommendations is presented.

### Politics, the 'political' and 'depoliticization'

In Fred Dallmayr`s words: "[w]hereas politics in the narrower sense revolves around day-to-day decision making and ideological partisanship… 'the political' refers to the frame of reference within which actions, events, and other phenomenon acquire political status in the first place" (Dallmayr, 1993 as quoted in Critchley 1992). While Beardsworth points out at the distinction between 'politics' and 'political' as twofold. He sees *politics* "as designating the domain practice of human behavior which normativizes the relations between

a subject and its others…" (Beardsworth 1996: 158). Whereas, the *political* for him is "the instance that gathers or establishes such practice *as* practice. The 'political' is, in Platonic vein, the trait that allows us to describe/recognize a gesture of thought or action *as* political" (Beardsworth 1996: 158). In other words, if politics is within the scope of the social, the 'political' comes into existence where there are contested issues and when the limits of this social sphere are itself contested. Politics in this sense only follow the 'political' and come into public fora, once the 'new order is institutionalized'. As Edkins (1999) puts it swiftly: "the political becomes the moment that depoliticizes: The most important political moment, the moment of decision, itself brings about the forgetting of the political that installs politics" (Edkins 1999).

It is this paradox, duly noticed by the author that also recalls the most important ethic characteristic of the political as pointed by Derrida: "that of 'decision', which in itself carries responsibilities and allows little room for ambiguities or ambivalence. What continues is only a 'return to calculability within a delimited context of a specific social world" (Edkins 1999).

Mouffe sees the distinction between the two, as one between the antagonism that is inherent in human nature, therefore inescapable and that is 'the political' dimension and 'politics', which according to her 'indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions', whose purpose is that of 'domesticating hostility and trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exist in human relations' (Mouffe 2000). She stresses in another book, co-written with Laclau that the 'political' has a prime importance because the society cannot be constructed around an objective reality. In other words, one cannot simply use objective lenses to understand the society. "*The truth* of society is that its *identity does not exist*" (Laclau and Mouffe 1996) write the two authors. This is why the society is framed through a discourse that in turn, helps in defining own`s identity in relationship to the other. If a society is to exist in an objective form, it needs some symbols, or 'empty signifiers', like 'freedom', 'democracy' and so on, in

Laclau and Mouffe`s language. It is vis-à-vis these symbols that the society creates a given identity that does not exist *apriori*. The political process is the fight that seeks to define and reach an understanding around the meanings of such symbols that in turn define society in general. The 'political' in this sense is the way that processes vague (societal) symbols by delimiting them and creating the necessary conditions for contestation.

The moment where contestation comes to an end, because of an agreement, or 'decision' if we are to use Derridean language, paradoxically we are faced with depoliticization. To put it differently, when the climax of the 'political' is achieved, which is the 'decision'; we are faced simultaneously with a depoliticization process that tames the political subject (Edkins 1999). This kind of taming or constraining can take a variety of forms and usually leads toward an increasing of technologization and bureaucratization that replace the 'political' and makes the sphere of politics distanced and unattainable by general public. As a result the people withdraw from public sphere and renounce even their basic political rights and/or obligations, such as voting participation.

### EMPIRICAL SNAPSHOT: THE ELECTORAL REFORM

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

Most of the Albanian post-communist elections (except the 1991-1992), have been characterized from irregularities that range from neglect to outright theft of votes. The international observers, especially the ones from OSCE have always rated Albanian elections as problematic, partially free or generally regular and free, but with minor problems. But even when international observers have accepted the elections as generally in line

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

In 2005 general elections, the same story was repeated in even a larger scale, with the Democratic Party this time performing better, due to better organizational skills and use of the system. However, the third biggest party, the Socialist Party for Integration, headed by former prime minister, Ilir Meta, strongly contested the results, which he (as well as foreign observers and international organizations, such as OSCE), declared that did not represent the will of the Albanian people. Moreover, the composition of the new parliament was really paradoxical, with parties that before had barely reached the threshold, now having ten or eleven deputes. On the other hand, the deputes that were elected directly were representative of only one or the other two biggest parties (Democratic or Socialist ones) and were often perceived as shady businessmen that have either bought the votes, or outperformed the other candidates due to their higher capacity of campaign conducting, because of higher personal investment (in finan-

cial terms) that their opponents. Together these factors led to raising calls from international bodies (such as US Department of State, OSCE or EU), as well as some political parties and segments of civil society, to amend the electoral system, in order to have a fairer representation of popular vote and democratic will.

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

One of the under-publicized elements of this new proposed deal is that it plans a 'closed lists' system, which means that the public can vote only for the party, without having any chose in electing their favorite candidate. The candidates are ranked beforehand from the respective leaders, in these closed lists and they will take their seats, according to the percentage of votes that each party will receive in general elections. This allows the heads of the two biggest parties to give primacy to their clear favorite ones and to get rid with any constructive or otherwise opposition from within the party, by threatening the ones who dare to do so, with their outright expulsion from these party lists. This would increase the unity of the party around the leader, but on the other hand would lead to a growing dissatisfaction of general public with lists where they do not have any voice or choice and that this would lead to a further de-politicization and withdrawal of citizens from public sphere (Kalemaj 2008).

Although OSCE has not been seen as an impartial arbiter of this process from various media, civil society or small political parties, empirical evidence does not directly show this. In a declaration for media, the spokesperson of Socialist Party, Mimi Kodheli, declared that the Socialist Party's stance is compatible 100 percent with that of OSCE in both opposing the open lists that would allow for a public scrutiny and choice among the candidates (Balkanweb 2008). The OSCE public stances are often politicized and attributed specific political interpretation by different political parties, to remove sensitive issues away from public scrutiny, technocratizing the speech.

To conclude, it must be stressed that international actors not only have largely played a significant role in influencing the political processes in Albania (Cili 2007), but in addition their actions or inactions have been given a one-sided interpretation of 'technocratization' of politics. By this I mean, that some of the hottest topics in Albanian political debate, have been cautiously withdrawn from public sphere and solved in behind-the-door situations, away from any public scrutiny and to the detriment of small parties, civil society and ordinary citizens. Furthermore, anytime the prime political actors, especially the government have been criticized in this regard or for failure of certain policies, they had addressed these criticisms by pointing out that they had the support or advice of international institutions in doing so. This has been the most effective mean to silent the adversaries and opponents in a society that still needs to learn how to walk in its own, without complexes of inferiority that have been continuously persistent in the prolonged transitionary post-communist period.

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1. This has been shown *inter alia*, with less and less voting participation and a growing number of 'gray population', which are people that are not affiliated with any political bloc. In the last local elections, the turnout has been close to 50 percent, while a last year Tirana election (to elect a depute that would have replaced the current President-elect in his Parliamentarian seat), showed that less than 40 percent of citizens able to vote, actually showed up and voted for their preferred candidate.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has offered an explanation of how the role of the international actors (notably the EU and OSCE) in Albanian domestic sphere has been appropriated by Albanian politicians as means of justifying unpopular policies and increasingly technocratizing the public matters and language in order to avoid public scrutiny and participation. The intervention of these third-party actors has thus served a twofold purpose. On one hand, it has led to an increasingly dependence and reliance of Albanian political class in general to the legitimacy provided by outside, which has been especially helpful in terms of growing alienation from the public back at home. On the other hand, it has affected the role of 'the political' in public space and has led to its depoliticization. This double-paradox has made possible a growing dissatisfaction and lost if interest by general public in politics, while making both sides of Albanian political spectrum more and more dependent on international arbiter to secure its legitimacy. As a result, the public fatigue with political rhetoric and peoples` withdrawal from political space[1] can only be understood within a framework of growing bureaucratization of politics and the depoliticization of society.

As I argued especially in my discussion of the current process of reforming the electoral system, this depoliticization will only deepen on the medium and long run, if the proposed changes of 'closed lists' is to be pushed forward. The tacit agreement of two biggest political parties, with the strong support of the international arbiter (be that American Ambassador, head of OSCE or the chief representative of the EU), although it will provide greater stability and less political strife, it endangers the participation nerve and democratic spirit of citizens and reduces the freedom to choose. But as Hannah Arendt reminds us: 'if we understand the political in the sense of polis, its end or *raison d`être* would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear' (Arendt 1954). If this freedom is shrunk, citizens` incentives of participation are going to be reduced as well and therefore one can except little else, but a political demobilization that in turn threatens the area of politics and its spirit of 'agonal' pluralism. In this sense, what seems to be a blessing for main political leaders, as well as their foreign partners in the short term, can serve as a liability, whose cost will need more than the usual remedies to be corrected. As Chantal Mouffe warns us: "compromises are, of course possible; they are indeed part and parcel of politics; but they should be seen as mere temporary respites in an on-going confrontation" (Mouffe 2000).

From this perspective a 'grand' compromise between two largest parties under the blessing of OSCE and other international actors will most likely provide a sort of stability that is reminiscent of the previous post-2001 détente, which ended up abruptly and led to even more antagonism and confrontation between the parties. The time of 'grand bargains' has passed and it is a necessity for '[a] well-functioning democracy [to call] for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions. If this is absent, there is danger that democratic confrontation will be replaced by confrontation among other forms of collective identification…' (Mouffe 127). In the Albanian case, such compromises in the past have only produced negative effects and have led to a growing corruption, less political accountability, less citizen participation or public scrutiny in political affairs. Moreover, no one wants to witness the 'antagonistic' crisis that as past experience has shown is due to follow a period of relative calm and illusory stability.

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