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A Brussels Effect on Tirana?

The Influence of Albania's EU Candidacy on Domestic Political Functioning

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Abstract

Albania applied for EU membership in 2009 and was awarded the status of a candidate country in 2014. The accession negotiations begin in 2022, as part of the EU's Western Balkans enlargement policy. The prospect of EU membership can act as an impetus for countries to proceed with changes and reforms to meet the accession criteria. The EU's ability to exert an influence on non-member countries and promote the adoption of EU policies and acquis has been referred to as a Brussels effect. The paper examines whether a Brussels effect is empirically traceable in Albania's domestic political functioning, focusing on two distinct characteristics: clientelism and political corruption. To this effect, two indices of the V-Dem project are used, and a multidimensional scaling (MDS) is adopted to map Albania's relative position vis-à-vis the EU member states in specific periods, each one representing a qualitative different stage in the EU-Albania relations and their evolution over time. Results reported herein do not point to an empirically traceable Brussels effect in the case of Albania raising doubts for the actual effectiveness of EU's transformative power.

Keywords: Albania, corruption, clientelism, EU accession, MDS

Introduction

In 2022, membership negotiations between Albania and the EU begin as part of the latter's Western Balkans enlargement policy (*inter alia*: Panagiotou, 2021; Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020; Burazer, 2020; Vachudova, 2014). Albania was awarded the status of a candidate country in 2014, having applied for EU membership in 2009[1]. As pointed out by Panagiotou (2011), the 2009 application to join the EU represents a historic moment in Albania's history given that during the Cold War the country was the poorest and most isolated, authoritarian state during Enver Hoxha's brutally oppressive communist rule. Albania's membership application and aspiration to join the EU, was the culmination of a very bumpy and occasionally shaky transformation and transition journey towards democratic rule and a market economy (*inter alia*: Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Jusufi, 2017; Abrahams, 2015; Panagiotou, 2011).

As has been extensively debated in the long-standing relevant academic discourse, the prospect of accession and EU membership has the potential to act as an impetus for aspiring countries to proceed with changes and reforms aiming to converge towards the acquis communautaire in various spheres of polity governance, institutional functioning and policies (*inter alia*: Bartlett, 2021; Dudley, 2020; Kollias and Messis 2022; Lavenex, 2008; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003). Lavenex (2004) refers to this ability to exert an influence on non-member countries as the *extraterritorialization* of EU policies and the EU acquis. Policies such as the *European Neighborhood (ENP)* [2] and *Eastern Partnership (EaP)*[3] are regarded as instruments promoting EU norms and

[1] For a concise timeline of Albania's candidacy and process towards EU full membership: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en (accessed 13 January 2025)

[2] https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy_en

[3] https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en

policies to countries in the broader EU regional neighborhood that are not necessarily candidate or potential candidate countries[4]. Bradford (2012, 2020) terms the EU's "*Europeanization*" ability i.e. the externalization and propagation of rules, regulations, principles, formal practices and policies as the *Brussels effect*. Originally Bradford (2012, 2020) coined the term Brussels effect referring to the "*Europeanization*" of many aspects of global commerce. Since then, research examining the presence of a Brussels effect has spilled over in varied spheres including for instance regional, climate and more recently digital policies (Tümer and van Zeben, 2025; Kollias *et al*. 2025; Dabrowski *et al*. 2018; Bendiek and Stuerzer 2023).

In what follows we examine whether a Brussels effect can be empirically detected in the case of Albania's domestic political functioning. Specifically, we focus on key aspects of it as quantified by two indices of the V-Dem project (Coppedge *et al*. 2021; 2021a; 2021b). The V-Dem's indices encapsulate and capture principal aspects of domestic political functioning and institutional operation. The indices are the *political corruption index* and the *clientelism index* (henceforth: *PolCorr*, *Client*). The section that follows summarizes principal aspects of Albania's political functioning in view of its bumpy but nonetheless remarkable transition from communist isolation and repression during Enver Hoxha's dictatorial rule (*inter alia*: Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Jusufi, 2017; Abrahams, 2015; Kolasi and Kolasi, 2023). It also includes an overview of Albania's path towards EU accession that identifies specific phases of this process inextricably tied with the EU's Western Balkans enlargement policy (*inter alia*: Kollias *et al*. 2025; Panagiotou, 2021; Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020; Burazer, 2020; Zhelyazkova *et al*. 2019; Fakiolas and Tzifakis, 2008; Elbasani, 2008). The V-Dem indices that are used in the empirical investigation conducted herein are presented in section three. The section also includes a descriptive analysis aiming to offer an initial comparative glance of Albania's performance in terms of these two indices vis-à-vis the current EU member states. The methodology

[4] For example, countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Azerbaijan are included in ENP.

used to probe into the issue at hand and the findings are presented and discussed in section four. Specifically, we employ multidimensional scaling (MDS) to map Albania's relative position vis-à-vis the EU member states in specific periods that each represents a qualitative different stage in the EU-Albania relations and their evolution over time. This allows to discern whether a Brussels effect is present in the case of Albania's political functioning and the concomitant adjustments necessary during the process towards full membership. Finally, section five concludes the paper.

Albania's political functioning and EU candidacy: a bird's eye view

As noted by Abrahams (2015) in the early 1990s, Albania gradually set out on the road to achieve a profound and fundamental transition out of forty years of self-imposed communist isolation. For all intents and purposes, during the communist regime era[5], Albania was by far the most closed and repressive state in the European continent. Moreover, as Panagiotou (2011) notes, Albania's difficult transition to a democracy and market economy started at a period when the Balkans suffered from extreme instability, ethnic strife, hostilities and armed conflict provoked by the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991 (Juhász, 2022; Nation, 2004). Against this unstable geopolitical backdrop, following the collapse of its communist regime[6], Albania commenced a multifaceted and frequently volatile journey towards democratisation and the establishment of a functioning state. The initial post-authoritarian phase was characterised by the presence of fragile political institutions, social unrest, the devastating 1997 financial collapse, and efforts to establish a nascent legal and democratic framework (*inter alia*: Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Jusufi, 2017; Biberaj, 2000; Elbasani, 2004; Krasniqi, 2006). Although, just as the rest of the Western Balkans countries, Albania has come a long way since turbulent first decade of

[5] The communist one-party rule ended in 1991. Until his death in 1985, Enver Hoxha ruled Albania with an iron fist.
[6] The first multi-party elections were held in March 1991.

transition to parliamentarism, it nonetheless continues to encounter difficulties that, as Jusufi (2018) observes, are accentuated by regional, cultural and political polarization that are constantly present in domestic politics. Myftari (2025) observes that despite the initial relative progress in establishing a democratic rule, in recent years domestic political developments seem to indicate a notable democratic regression. As Ekman and Hoxha (2024) note, political conflict and dysfunctional parliamentary life have remained a dominant feature of domestic political processes since the collapse of the Hoxha regime. Clientelism and political corruption are two features shared with all the other Western Balkan candidate countries for EU accession (*inter alia*: Soyaltin-Colella, 2023; Hoxhaj, 2021; Radeljić and Đorđević, 2020). Both clientelism and political corruption undermine Albania's fledgling electoral democracy and the achieved democratization. Albeit, as shown by Yıldırım and Kitschelt (2020) as well as by Berenschot and Aspinall (2020) among others, different forms of clientelism and clientelist networks exist, a broad definition adopted in the relevant literature is that political clientelism involves an exchange between voters and politicians where the former exchange their political support and votes for various types of contingent rewards and reciprocal benefits from the politicians that control the distribution of public resources (*inter alia*: Kyriacou, 2023; Bardhan, 2022; Hicken, 2011). In the case of Albania, Kera and Hysa (2020) stress that the strong presence of such clientelist political relations and the associated informal private funding of politicians used for electoral purposes, distort the electoral process and influence electoral results thus casting doubts on the fairness of political competition.

Albania's electoral process has been characterised by recurrent allegations of malpractice, encompassing practices such as vote-buying, voter coercion, and the misuse of public resources. The 2025 parliamentary elections, whilst conducted following established technical standards, were overshadowed by intense political confrontation between the two dominant

parties[7]. The erosion of institutional trust has been compounded by repeated opposition boycotts, most notably the Democratic Party's withdrawal from the 2019 local elections. These actions have had a detrimental effect on democratic accountability and have served to limit electoral competition (Kera and Hysa, 2020; Abrahams, 2016). Additionally, such actions have enabled the ruling party to exercise political dominance and effectively hindered the involvement of opposition groups in governance structures. Results reported by Myftari (2025) point to a noteworthy decrease in the level of democracy over the last few years, a shift towards electoral authoritarianism an increase in vote-buying and a decrease in electoral fairness.

As has been shown in the relevant literature, political clientelism is closely related to corruption (*inter alia*: Lindberg *et al.* 2022; Trantidis and Tsagkroni, 2017; Rose-Ackerman and Palifka, 2016; Singer, 2009). For instance, Lindberg *et al.* (2022) note that political clientelism leads to increased corruption because, as politicians seek to establish illicit channels of electoral campaign funding they offer in return preferential access to government contracts and/or selective enforcement of property rights favoring their political supporters that provide the illicit funding or offer in exchange for their votes.

Despite the progress achieved, Albania continues to grapple with entrenched corruption issues that pervade various levels of its public sector. According to the 2025 Transparency International report, Albania ranks 80th globally, thereby emphasising entrenched perceptions of pervasive corruption[8]. High-profile scandals involving public procurement include the waste management projects (for example, the "incinerator affair"), and emergency contracts during the pandemic have drawn both domestic and

[7] See OSCE/ODIHR (2025). Final Report on the 2025 Parliamentary Elections in Albania. https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/albania/590598

[8] Transparency International (2025). Corruption Perceptions Index 2024. Available at https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024 (accessed on 10/05/2025).

international scrutiny[9]. Findings reported by Mungiu-Pippidi and Toth (2023) show that government favouritism stemming from entrenched clientelist relations is constant and frequent in Albanian public sector procurement and public project contract allocation with significant negative economic effects. Civil society as well as EU institutions persist in expressing concerns regarding the phenomenon of state capture, whereby political and economic elites wield disproportionate influence over the formulation of policies and the functioning of institutions. This undermines rule of law reforms and weakens Albania's democratic resilience[10].

Just as in the case of the other Western Balkan countries, the EU has played a crucial role in Albania's process of transition and transformation, chiefly by means of conditionality. Offering a typology of European conditionality, Becker (2025) notes that through time the principle of conditionality as a governance tool has been used by the EU in different forms and areas of application. Originally it started as an instrument of EU's external trade relations and development policy intended to positively influence the political and economic structures in the recipient country of EU's developmental assistance. Conditionality then gradually became a core tool of the EU's enlargement policy (*inter alia*: Kollias *et al*. 2025; Bartlett, 2021; Dudley, 2020; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2010; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009; Lavenex, 2008; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004).

As noted in the preceding section, Albania was identified as a potential candidate country at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit. Conditionality, which primarily requires alignment with the EU acquis and adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, has been a principal driver in the implementation of legal and administrative reform in Albania (Bartlett, 2021; Smith, 2003; Vachudova, 2005). Following the endorsement of the

[9] European Parliament (2023). Resolution on the 2022 Commission Report on Albania. Available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0285_EN.html (accessed on 14/05/2025).

[10] https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2023 (accessed on 16/05/2025).

Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2006, Albania attained candidate status in 2014. However, the opening of accession negotiations was deferred until 2020, primarily due to persistent challenges related to corruption, judicial independence, and electoral credibility[11]. The Albanian judicial system has long been characterised by its limited independence, politicisation, and public mistrust[12]. In response to mounting pressure from the European Union, the government initiated a significant overhaul in 2016, implementing constitutional amendments that led to the establishment of a comprehensive vetting process for judges and prosecutors. This process entailed a thorough evaluation of their assets, background, and integrity. Even though the vetting initiative is widely acknowledged as ambitious and necessary, its implementation has exposed deep structural problems. A substantial proportion of the reviewed cases have resulted in dismissal or resignation, indicative of pervasive misconduct or incompetence (Maxhuni and Cucchi, 2017). The aforementioned process has also resulted in bottlenecks in court operations, leading to delays in cases and reduced judicial capacity. According to a report by the European Commission (2023), the judicial reform process remains unfinished and unstable, with concerns regarding the speed of its implementation and the extent of residual political interference[13]. In what follows, we examine whether the protracted EU accession process that seems to have accelerated recently, has left an empirically traceable effect on the two dominant features that characterise Albania's domestic political functioning: clientelism and political corruption. That is, whether the prospect of EU membership and the conditionalities associated with it have exerted a Brussels effect and led to an improvement of Albania's performance vis-à-vis the current EU member states.

[11] See: Albania 2023 report (SWD(2023) 690 final). https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf (accessed on 16/05/2025).
[12] Freedom House (2023). Nations in Transit 2023: Albania. Freedom House, Available at https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2023 (accessed on 16/05/2025).
[13] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf (accessed on 16/05/2025).

The indices: a descriptive comparative presentation

As mentioned in the introduction, two indices compiled and published by the V-Dem V-Dem project (Coppedge *et al*. 2021; 2021a; 2021b) will be used to examine whether a Brussels effect is empirically traceable in the case of Albania. The indices used in the empirical analysis that follows in the next section are the *political corruption index* and the *clientelism index* (henceforth: *PolCorr*, *Client*). The first index, *PolCorr*, takes values in the range 0-1. Higher values indicate higher levels of political corruption and vice versa. The index is constructed by averaging the corresponding indices that quantify the levels of corruption in four different government spheres: public sector corruption, executive corruption, legislative corruption and judicial corruption. Hence, it offers an overall quantification of the levels of corruption in the main spheres of political and public functioning.

Table 1: Political corruption index's mean values 2003-2023

EU mean	**0.14**	**Albania**	**0.72**
EU member states			
Austria	0.08	Italy	0.21
Belgium	0.03	Latvia	0.12
Bulgaria	0.45	Lithuania	0.15
Croatia	0.34	Luxemburg	0.04
Cyprus	0.15	Malta	0.21
Czechia	0.23	Netherlands	0.02
Denmark	0.00	Poland	0.10
Estonia	0.04	Portugal	0.10
Finland	0.02	Romania	0.52
France	0.06	Slovakia	0.29
Germany	0.01	Slovenia	0.13
Greece	0.21	Spain	0.05
Hungary	0.40	Sweden	0.01
Ireland	0.04	UK	0.04

The mean value of the political corruption index for the period 2003-2023 is shown in Table 1. The start of the period under scrutiny, i.e. 2003, is the year when Albania, along with a number of other Western Balkans states, was identified as a potential candidate for EU membership at the

Thessaloniki European Council summit[14]. In other words, 2003 represents the first official step in the process towards eventual accession and membership. As can be seen in Table 1, the mean value for Albania in terms of this index during 2003-2023 is notably higher than the EU's average score (0.72 vs 0.14). Moreover, it is appreciably higher compared to the average score of the two worse performers among the current EU members[15]. That is Romania (0.52) and Bulgaria (0.45). The higher score reflects the presence of a comparatively more severe problem of political corruption. Since this index is averaging the levels of corruption in the public sector, the executive, the legislative and the judiciary, its value suggest quite extensive and widespread corruption across all the central pillars of a country's political and institutional functioning.

The issue examined in the section that follows, is whether the performance of Albania both in terms of this index as well as the other one used here has improved relative to the other EU member countries at the various stages – time windows - of the official accession process. As mentioned, Albania applied for membership in 2009, i.e. six years after the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit when it was identified as a potential candidate country. Then, in 2014 it was awarded the status of a candidate country. In the 2019 Enlargement Package, following the concomitant formal evaluation, the European Commission recommended the opening of the accession talks with Albania and membership negotiations formally started in 2022. These years – i.e. 2003, 2009, 2014 and 2019 - constitute the distinct stages and corresponding periods that mark the process towards EU accession. The corresponding four periods – i.e. 2003-2008, 2009-2013, 2014-2018 and 2019-2023 - encapsulate the evolution of the Albania-EU relations and, in principle, the former's progress towards meeting the accession criteria, invariably referred as the Copenhagen criteria since they were adopted at the Copenhagen European Council in 1993 and

[14] https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en

[15] Since Brexit took place in 2020, we opted to include the UK in the empirical examination conducted herein. Similarly, we opted to include all EU members, irrespective of their accession year.

strengthened by the Madrid European Council in 1995[16]. They constitute the conditions and principles to which countries aspiring to become an EU member must conform. In theory, the precondition from moving from one stage to the next reflects the gradual adoption and adherence to the accession criteria and the adaptation to the acquis Communautaire. The multidimensional scaling methodology, presented and applied in the next section, allows the mapping of Albania's relative position vis-à-vis the EU's members enabling the visualization and examination of the progress achieved in terms of these two indices at each different stage of the accession and membership process.

Table 2: Clientelism index's mean values 2003-2023

EU mean	**0.15**	**Albania**	**0.67**
EU member states			
Austria	0.08	Italy	0.18
Belgium	0.06	Latvia	0.20
Bulgaria	0.42	Lithuania	0.19
Croatia	0.23	Luxemburg	0.05
Cyprus	0.19	Malta	0.24
Czechia	0.09	Netherlands	0.02
Denmark	0.03	Poland	0.14
Estonia	0.09	Portugal	0.04
Finland	0.06	Romania	0.42
France	0.06	Slovakia	0.14
Germany	0.04	Slovenia	0.15
Greece	0.15	Spain	0.07
Hungary	0.44	Sweden	0.04
Ireland	0.18	UK	0.11

The mean values of the second index used herein, that is the Clientelism Index (Client) are presented in Table 2. The index quantifies the extent to which politics based on clientelistic relationships. As noted in the V-Dem's codebook, such relationships include the targeted, conditional distribution of resources in exchange for political support. However, it should be stressed that unlike the previous index for political corruption (*PolCorr*), in this case

[16] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legissum:accession_criteria_copenhague

lower scores indicate better performance, i.e. lower levels of clientelism and higher scores a worse situation i.e. higher levels of clientelism. As can be seen, the average score for Albania in this index during the entire period examined is notably higher compared to the EU's average (0.67 vs 0.15), indicating much higher levels of clientelist relationships in Albania's political functioning. Just as in the case of the previous index (*PolCorr*), Albania also exhibits notably higher levels of clientelism compared to the three worse performers among the EU current members: Hungary (0.44), Bulgaria (0.42) and Romania (0.42).

As it is plainly evident by the mean values scored by Albania in these two indices, during the entire period since its original identification at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit as a potential candidate country, it exhibits a significantly worse performance in terms of political corruption and clientelism compared to the current EU member countries. In the section that follows, we examine whether in the period elapsed since Albania was identified as a potential candidate country in 2003, relative progress has been achieved. Such progress would indicate the presence and influence of Bradford's (2012, 2020) *Brussels effect*, i.e. a testament to the EU's transformative power.

Methodology and findings

As noted in the introduction, for the empirical investigation of the issue under scrutiny, we opt to apply the Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) technique. Briefly, MDS is a statistical technique that visualizes the similarity or dissimilarity of data in a low-dimensional space. It provides valuable insights into complex relationships within data. In this analysis, we apply the "Classical MDS", a type of MDS where the input is a matrix of Euclidean distances and eigendecomposition is performed on a transformed distance matrix (Borg and Groenen, 2005).

MDS is specifically designed to represent the distances between objects visually. This is achieved by approximating the actual distances among units within a low-dimensional Euclidean space (Michailidis, 2008). A two-

dimensional setting is often preferred because it allows for easy identification of points on a Cartesian plane. In our case, the objects are countries, and MDS helps illustrate their relative positions in terms of the two indices used, focusing on Albania vis-à-vis the current EU members. By analyzing changes in the positions over time, we can examine whether Albania's performance in terms of the political corruption and clientelism indices has improved relative to the EU member countries during the various stages of the process towards membership that was initiated in 2003 when it was identified as a potential candidate country. Moreover, as a side-finding, the MDS mapping can uncover structural patterns in the data, such as country clusters, groups, and outliers.

According to Kruskal (1964), a critical component of MDS is the stress value, which quantifies the discrepancy between the observed distances in the original space and the distances in the MDS-generated space. A lower stress value indicates a better representation of the original data. The stress value, a measure of goodness-of-fit in MDS, plays a vital role in determining the quality of the visual representation. It is particularly effective for visualizing high-dimensional data in a two- or three-dimensional space, enabling researchers to uncover hidden patterns and relationships. MDS preserves the pairwise distances between data points as accurately as possible in the reduced space (Borg and Groenen, 2005). It is computed as follows:

$$stress = S = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i<j}(d_{ij} - \delta_{ij})^2}{\sum_{i<j} d_{ij}^2}}$$

where d_{ij} is the distances between the points in the configuration and ij is the observed distances between the objects. The distances are calculated by Euclidian distance formula:

$$d_{ij} = \{(x_{i1} - x_{j1})^2 + (x_{i2} - x_{j2})^2 + \cdots + (x_{in} - x_{jn})^2\}^{1/2}$$

The interpretation of stress value is as follows:

- Stress < 0.05: Excellent fit
- 0.05 ≤ Stress < 0.10: Good fit
- 0.10 ≤ Stress < 0.20: Acceptable fit

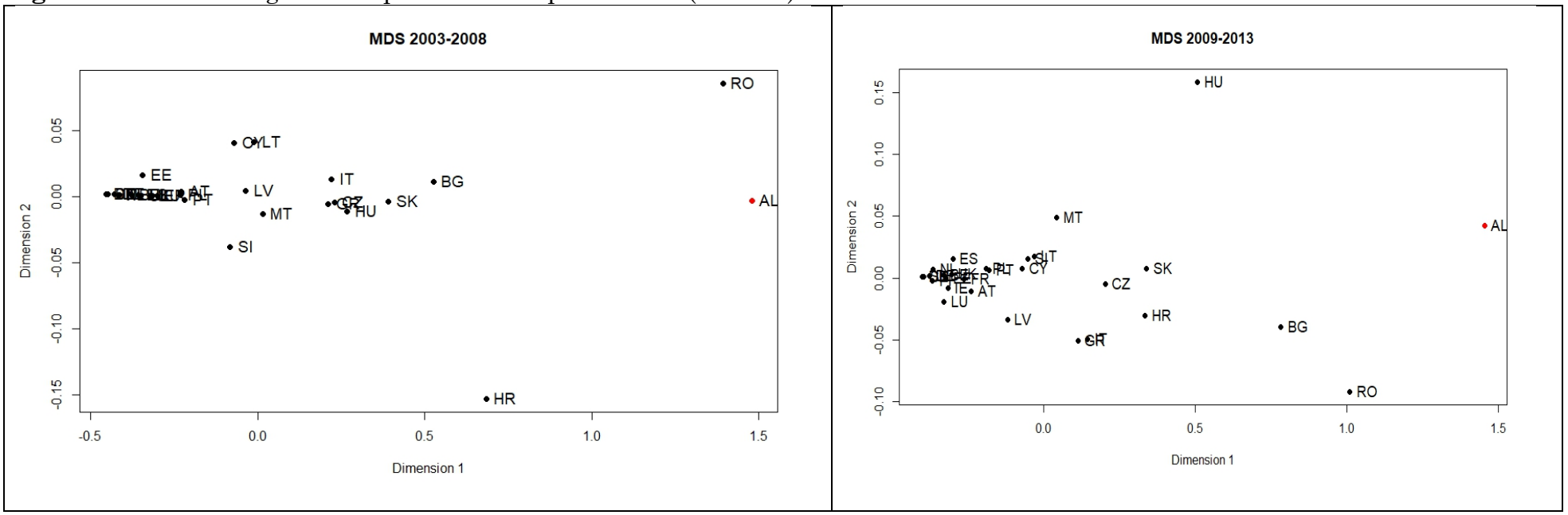
- Stress ≥ 0.20: Poor fit

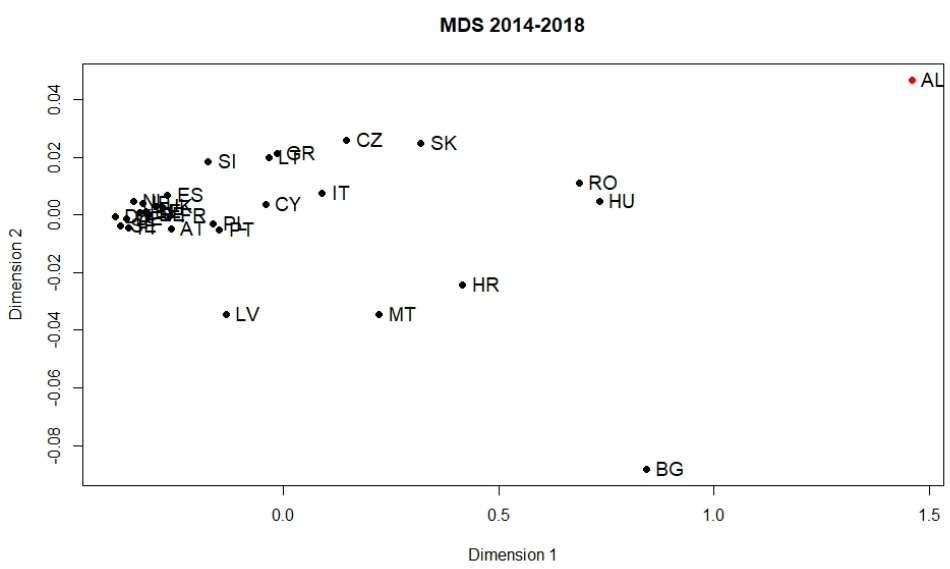
The procedure begins with inputting a dissimilarity matrix representing the pairwise distances between objects. This matrix is then reduced to two dimensions using MDS to optimize the placement of points in a lower-dimensional space while minimizing the stress function. The result is a visual configuration of points in the reduced space (Borg and Groenen, 2005). However, it should be noted that MDS has certain limitations. One such limitation is stress value sensitivity, where small changes in the input data can lead to significant variations in the stress value. Additionally, the low-dimensional representation may oversimplify the data structure, complicating interpretation. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, Multidimensional Scaling is a powerful tool for data visualization and dimensionality reduction. The stress value serves as a crucial metric for evaluating the quality of the MDS solution. While there are challenges, MDS's ability to provide intuitive insights into complex datasets makes it an invaluable technique across various disciplines.

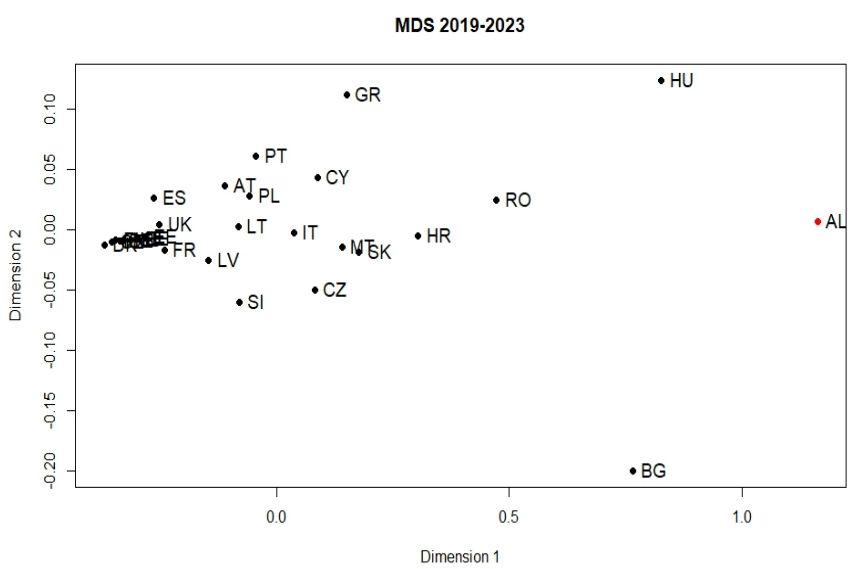
In Figure 1, the results from applying the MDS methodology in the case of the political corruption index (*PolCorr*) are presented for each of the four periods that represent the distinct stages in Albania's process towards EU membership that was initiated at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit when it was identified as a potential candidate country. As previously mentioned, the four periods shown in the MDS maps contained in Figure 1, i.e. 2003-2008, 2009-2013, 2014-2018 and 2019-2023, reflect the distinct stages that Albania's candidacy has gone through. The overarching observation that stems from the visual inspection of the four MDS maps is that Albania emerges as a significant outlier compared to the current EU member countries. However, what is important to stress is that Albania's relative position in each period in the four MDS maps, has not changed to any significant and worth mentioning degree. This seems to suggest that the EU membership process has not significantly impacted in a positive manner the comparative levels of political corruption. That is the membership process has not resulted in any significant convergence with

the EU member states in terms of this index. It is interesting to note that the MDS maps reveal clustering within the EU members as the countries' relative positions indicate. Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary emerge as the outliers among the members, while the relative position of other former east-European countries also points to noteworthy differences within the EU.

Figure 1: MDS findings for the political corruption index (*PolCorr*)





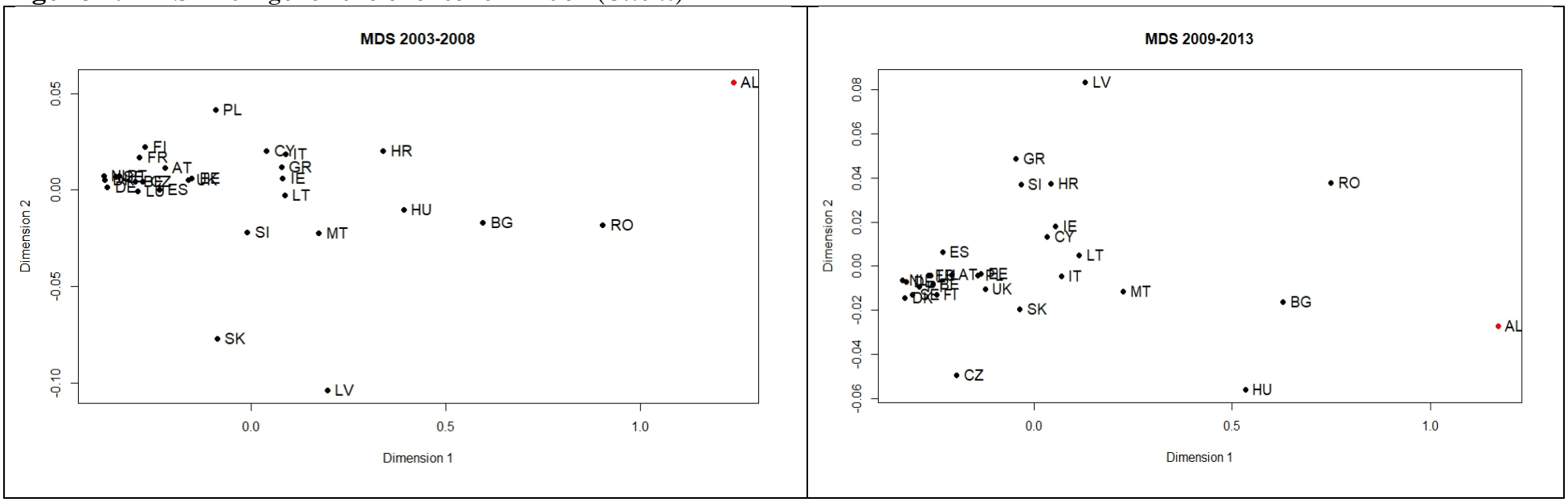


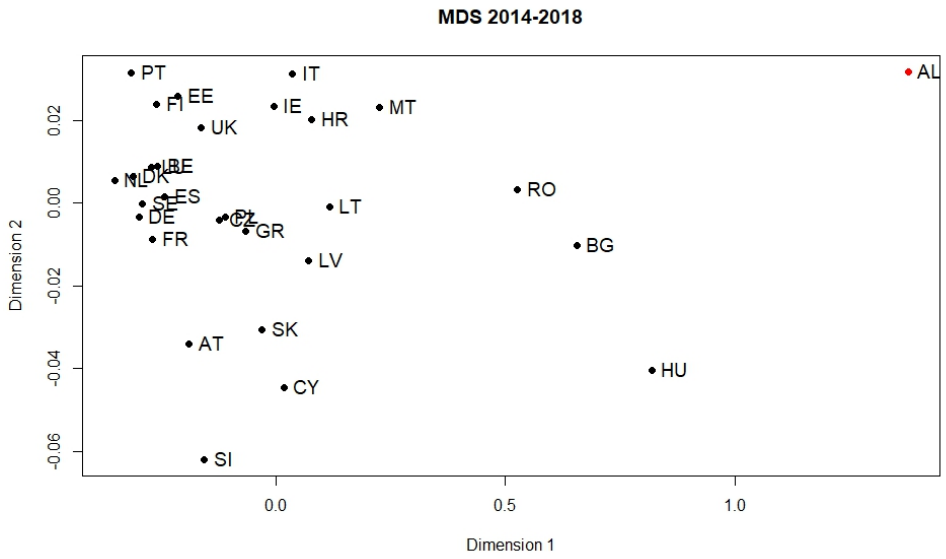
Periods	Stress Value	Goodness-Of-Fit in MDS
2003-2008	0.007172941	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2009-2013	0.006908234	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2014-2018	0.0112603	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2019-2023	0.02340756	Excellent fit (< 0.05)

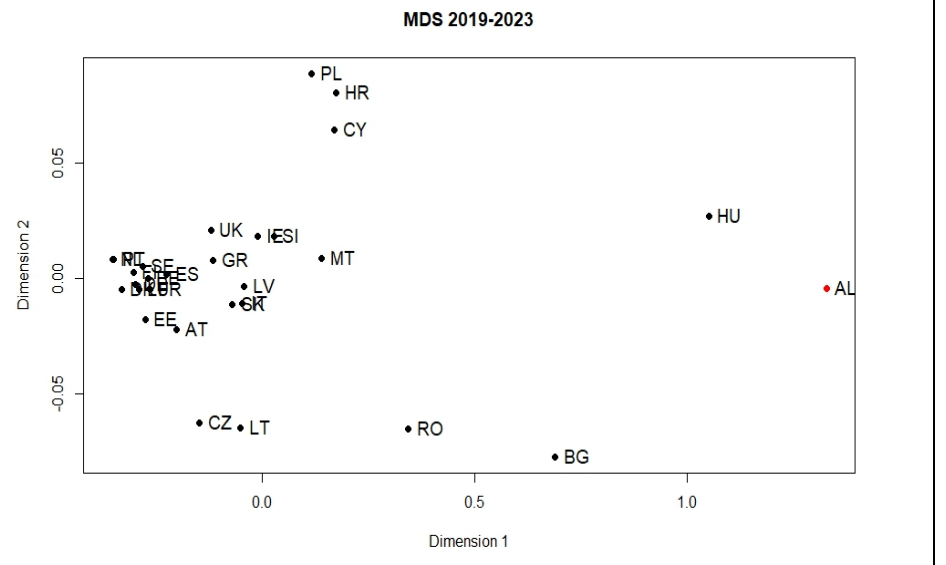
The MDS mapping results for the second index used are presented in Figure 2. Just as in the case of the previous index, the MDS maps for each of the four periods in the case of the clientelism index (*Client*), narrate a similar story. Albania emerges as a significant outlier in terms of the levels of clientelism compared to the current EU member countries. Moreover, once again, its relative position seems to be by and large unaffected throughout the stages of its EU application and accession process. Based on these findings, it would appear that a *Brussels effect* is not readily identifiable since the relative position of Albania in the corresponding maps, does not appear to have changed significantly.

In line with the findings reported by other studies (*inter alia*: Myftari, 2025; Bartlett, 2021; Mungiu-Pippidi and Toth, 2023; Kollias *et al*. 2025), the results for both the V-Dem indices used herein suggest that the accession process at best had a marginal effect on the relative levels of clientelism and corruption in the case of Albania despite the various policy instruments that have been applied over the years and assistance received to facilitate its pathway towards achieving the various criteria and conditionalities. This appears to be the case with most of the Western Balkans where such phenomena have not been eradicated or at least significantly reduced despite the conditionalities of the EU accession process and associated external assistance to thwart corruption and reduce clientelism (Soyaltin-Colella, 2023; Kurtoglu-Eskisar and Komsuoglu, 2015). Moreover, on a broader level, as can be observed in the relevant figures produced by the preceding MDS analysis, this also seems to be the case with some other former East-European countries. Despite their EU membership they still exhibit a noteworthy divergence compared to the other member states, raising questions concerning the EU's transformative capacity.

Figure 2: MDS findings for the clientelism index (*Client*)







Periods	Stress Value	Goodness-Of-Fit in MDS
2003-2008	0.01186261	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2009-2013	0.01170519	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2014-2018	0.01318496	Excellent fit (< 0.05)
2019-2023	0.02094386	Excellent fit (< 0.05)

Concluding remarks

Albania's association with the EU dates to the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council summit when it was identified as a potential candidate country. It applied for membership in 2009, was awarded candidate country status in 2014 and accession negotiations begin in 2022 as part of the EU's Western Balkans enlargement policy (*inter alia*: Bieber and Tzifakis, 2020; Burazer, 2020; Kollias *et al*. 2025; Panagiotou, 2021; Vachudova, 2014). Albania's difficult transition to a democracy and market economy was a very bumpy and shaky journey (*inter alia*: Panagiotou, 2011; Jusufi, 2017; Abrahams, 2015). Although it has come a long way since the collapse of the communist regime, it nonetheless continues to encounter difficulties and as Myftari (2025) notes, in recent years domestic political developments seem to suggest a democratic regression. Clientelism and political corruption are two features that characterize domestic political processes and undermine the progress achieved.

Applying a multidimensional scaling (MDS) methodology, the paper set out to examine whether the long process towards EU membership exerted a positive effect in terms of the comparative levels of clientelism and political corruption vis-à-vis the current EU member states. Using two indices of the V-Dem project, the paper mapped Albania's relative position compared to the EU countries in specific distinct periods in the process towards membership. As has been argued in the literature, the prospect of EU membership can act as an impetus for countries to proceed with changes and reforms to meet the accession criteria. The term *Brussels effect* encapsulates and summarizes the postulated transformative ability of the EU. The findings of the preceding empirical analysis did not reveal a traceable *Brussels effect* in the comparative levels of clientelism and political corruption in the case of Albania. The current relative levels of clientelism and political corruption represent important obstacles that hinder the process of European integration of Albania and the final accession to the EU. The results for both the V-Dem indices used herein suggest that the accession process at best had a marginal effect on the

relative levels of clientelism and corruption in the case of Albania despite the various policy instruments that have been applied over the years to facilitate its pathway towards achieving the various criteria and conditionalities. On a broader level, this also seems to be the case with other former East-European countries that despite their EU membership still diverge significantly compared to the other member states raising questions concerning the EU's transformative capacity. Whilst the principal factors underpinning the difficulties associated with Albania's integration pertain to its domestic institutional reforms, there are concomitant and interdependent factors which also exert an influence on the accession process. Thus far, the process of progressing towards membership has been hindered by enlargement fatigue. Domestically, the repercussions of protracted reforms and political deadlock have eroded public confidence in national leaders and the EU accession process (Elbasani, 2008; Bonomi, 2020). From a political standpoint, the ongoing rivalry between the Socialist Party (SP) and the Democratic Party (DP) has been a significant impediment to the establishment of a consensus on crucial reforms. On the EU side, reluctance among certain member states towards further enlargement, especially in the period following 2008, has engendered scepticism about Albania's chances, even when the relevant benchmarks have been met (Noutcheva, 2009).

However, the broader regional security landscape that has recently undergone a significant shift following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, led to the resurgence of enlargement discussions as a component of a broader European security strategy. Albania, a NATO member since 2009, swiftly confirmed its Western orientation by expressing support for Ukraine and aligning with EU sanctions and positions. This has served to enhance its reputation as a cooperative regional actor, in contrast to other Western Balkan countries with more ambivalent foreign alignments (Jelesijević, 2024, Qorraj *et al.* 2025). In this light, the EU now presents enlargement not merely as a tool for transformation, but as a strategic imperative to bolster European security. Nonetheless, while

European Council conclusions from 2023 and 2024 reaffirm commitment to the region, they fall short of offering concrete accession dates, highlighting the ongoing gap between political rhetoric and procedural realities[17].

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