

# The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2014

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### **Acknowledgement**

The Albanian Institute for International Studies would like to express its gratitude to Friedrich Ebert Stiftung for supporting the project “The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2014”

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## A. Introduction

In recent years, due to the financial economic crisis in the EU and the rise of far right forces in some of the member states, the enlargement process has been viewed as endangered and showing signs of fatigue. The accession of Croatia in 2013 reaffirmed the commitment of the European Union to push forward its enlargement agenda, despite combining it with a renewed agenda making rules and requirements stricter in the light of the difficulties faced during the last accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 as well as the difficulties faced during accession negotiations with Croatia. Croatia accession brought significant hope for the other countries in the region aspiring to become part of the Union.

In a press release in June this year, EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Stefan Fule declared among others: “The European door remains open for the Western Balkan countries. We all agree that this is the only way to ensure stability and peace in this region of Europe plagued by conflict for far too long. The conditions for getting over the threshold are clear. It is now up to the political leaders to live up to the expectation their peoples have and implement the necessary reforms – not for Europe’s benefit, but for the benefit of all citizens.”<sup>1</sup> A few days later the German chancellor declared that the countries of the Western Balkans have a “clear prospect” of joining the European Union, given they improve efforts to fight corruption, protect civil liberties and ensure rule of law.<sup>2</sup>

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1. European Commission Press Release. (June 2, 2014). Enlargement and Western Balkans: what’s next? Online: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-14-423\\_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-423_en.htm?locale=en).

2. Merkel: Western Balkans states have clear prospects of joining the European Union. Deutsche Welle. Online: <http://www.dw.de/merkel-western-balkan-states-have-clear-prospect-of-joining-european-union/a-17691433>

For Albania, the European Union signifies more than a union of prosperous states, whereby accession would be economically beneficial. Coming from a troubled communist and authoritarian past, being one of the most isolated countries in the world for more than 45 years, the EU integration is seen as the final completing step of transition for the country and its people. During the first anti-communist protests at the beginning of the 90's the recurring call of the younger generation was: "We want Albania like the rest of Europe". Thus, the EU in the mind of many Albanian citizens represents a set of values and norms that have in its backbone the principles of democracy, freedom and respect for human rights. The road of this small country towards fulfilling that call of 20 years ago has been long and will continue to be full of challenges.

This report offers a panorama of people's perceptions in Albania opposite the realities of the European integration process. It does so by gauging these perceptions in several dimensions of the process and tries to understand it from the perspectives of ordinary citizens, who are essential towards achieving the long time goal and aspiration of Albania. These perspectives are faced with the realities of the EU integration process and the challenges and difficulties the country is facing in the path of integration. The results and conclusions are directed to all the political and non-political actors in the Albanian society, with the aim to reflect upon people's perceptions and expectations as well as what can be further improved.

### **Albania on the road to EU membership**

The quest for belonging in the European family for Albania started as early as 1991 with the establishment of relations between the European Economic Community (of the time) and the newly established parliamentary republic. Since then considerable efforts were undertaken from both sides, which are visible from the intense chronology of relations between Albania and the EU in the last two decades. An important milestone was set during the EU-Western Balkans Summit in June 2003 in Thessaloniki, where Albania was recognized as a potential candidate for EU membership. In April 2009, Albania submitted its application for EU membership with the Stabilization and Association Agreement entering into force during the same period. The progress was smooth in all areas of obligations up until that period with another important step taken in 2010, when the European Commission, "presented a proposal on lifting the visa obligation for the citizens of Albania on 27 May 2010, which was subject to the fulfillment of outstanding criteria. The proposal was adopted by the European Parliament on 7 October and by the Council on 8 November 2010."<sup>3</sup> The last four years have seen the most progress in the country's aspirations, despite the political deadlock and crisis that halted the country's efforts.

The European Commission stated in December 2010 that Albania needed to meet the required criteria prior to the start of accession negotiations and implement in particular to meet the twelve key criteria identified in the Opinion, mostly related to the political dimension of the Copenhagen criteria. The report stated that "The Commission considers that negotiations for accession to the

3. European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Commission Opinion on Albania's application for membership of the European Union. P. 4. Online: [http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key\\_documents/2010/package/al\\_opinion\\_2010\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/pdf/key_documents/2010/package/al_opinion_2010_en.pdf).

European Union should be opened with Albania once the country has achieved the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria...requiring the stability of institutions guaranteeing notably democracy and rule of law.”<sup>4</sup> Following the 2010 opinion Albania adopted a national action plan for implementation of these twelve key criteria in 2011. These relate, inter alia ensure the functioning of Parliament and the appropriate parliamentary procedures as well as a reform of the electoral law, public administration reform, strengthening rule of law and the fight against corruption and organized crime.

In the 2012 Opinion, the European Commission recommended that Albania be granted EU candidate status, subject to completion of key measures in the areas of judicial and public administration reform and revision of the parliamentary rules of procedures. In the progress report from October 2013, the European Commission recognized these criteria to be met and recommended the granting of candidate status for Albania, which was denied once more by the European Council in December of the same year. The Commission now sees seven of the twelve key criteria to be met, and support Albania in the implementation of the remaining five.

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4. Ibid, p. 11

### **Nixed once more by the European Union**

Clearly, Albania’s path towards candidate country status has been often bumpy and characterized by previous failed attempts. December 2013 marked another unsuccessful attempt to finally gain candidate status, although the reasons this time were quite different compared to 2010, 2011 and 2012. The decision of the European Council to postpone the event in June garnered much deserved attention inside and outside the country, from decision makers to media outlets, which speculated broadly on the reasons behind such a decision.

Interestingly, the 2013 Progress Report on Albania released in October acknowledged Albania’s overall good and smooth progress in fulfilling the key priorities identified in 2010. Specifically the report states that: “The European Commission concluded that Albania made good progress on its path towards EU integration, notably by adopting measures identified as essential for granting candidate country status and by continuing to deliver reforms against the key priorities of the Commission’s 2010 Opinion...In view of this, the European Commission recommends that Albania be granted EU candidate status on the understanding that Albania continues to take action in the fight against organised crime and corruption”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Croatian rapporteur for Albania declared in December “we are sending a unanimous message to the Council: Albania deserves to be given candidate status. It has advanced on the reform agenda, namely with legal reforms, and has also reached a new level of political maturity through the orderly and peaceful transfer of power following the June elections”.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Key findings of the 2013 Progress Report on Albania. European Commission, MEMO. October 16, 2013. Online: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-13-888\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-13-888_en.htm)

6. Luxemburg Institute for European and International Studies. Weekly media report. Online: [http://www.ieis.lu/online/www/menu\\_vert/3630/3631/content/3633/4323/1066/ENG/Week%209-16%20December.pdf](http://www.ieis.lu/online/www/menu_vert/3630/3631/content/3633/4323/1066/ENG/Week%209-16%20December.pdf)

Despite the positive opinion of the Commission, Albania was blocked by several member states of the European Union, which voiced their concerns regarding the progress of the country but also other reasons lying within the EU. The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, one of the countries that openly refused to vote for Albania in the European Council meeting, said in an interview with journalists that “The EU’s founding fathers simply did not envisage that with the accession of new countries would trigger mass population movements across Europe. As we contemplate countries like Serbia or Albania one day joining the EU, we must find a way to slow down access to each other’s labour markets until we can be sure that it will not cause **vast migrations**.”<sup>7</sup> This was followed by his insistence that he is in favor of enlargement; however Britain is not currently supporting moves to grant Albania candidate status. Little is mentioned of Albania’s progress in fulfilling the required reforms and priorities set forth by the European Commission. Instead, the UK’s move seems more related to internal concerns of migration and population movement across Europe, which in times of economic crisis is creating a further burden for its economy. In this case, which is similar to other countries opposing the positive decision in December, the reasons can be found outside of the country, not internally and not related to Albania’s progress in the set objectives.

In an article written at EU observer a few days before the decision in December 2013, Kate Holman argued that “what most people in the EU fail to understand is how ‘European’ Albania already is, and how closely its history has been linked to neighbouring member

7. Grice, A. & Gibson, Ch. David Cameron takes his biggest gamble yet as he gets tough on Europe over migration. The Independent. Online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/david-cameron-takes-his-biggest-gamble-yet-as-he-gets-tough-on-europe-over-immigration-9018899.html>. His full speech can be found online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/european-council-december-2013-david-camerons-press-conference>

states. The French writer Valery Larbaud, visiting the country in the 1930s, wrote of “a beautiful little piece of our Europe, too long neglected and kept at a distance.”<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the decision of December 17, Enlargement Commissioner took to twitter to express his remarks on what is next for the country. He wrote: “There was particular praise for the intensified efforts of the new government in the rule of law sphere and new momentum of reform. We have a clear rendez-vous for June, where I fully expect, that as long as Albania maintains its current good work that it will get candidate status. It is now up to Albania – government, opposition and authorities to work together – to build on the impressive achievements to date”<sup>9</sup> There were also less than enthusiasts and critics of this decision, notable Eduart Kukan, president of the delegation for South East Europe at the European Parliament. He declared for Deutsche Welle that: “Everyone knew that some EU countries were diffident. But we all hoped that this time Albania would obtain candidate status”. He went further by saying that “being awarded the status would be seen as a sign of encouragement by Albanian politicians.”<sup>10</sup>

Obviously the decision was not well received in the country, with many experts deeming it unfair and not in proportion to Albania’s fulfillment of required criteria. In a comment for Euractiv, Ralf Gjoni, Senior Foreign Policy at the Albanian Parliament, called the December decision unfair, especially referring to the decision of the Dutch parliament to block Albania’s progress. According to him:

8. Holman, K. (December 16, 2013). Albania Deserves EU candidate status. EU Observer. Online: <http://euobserver.com/opinion/122466>

9. Albania will not get candidate status before June 2014. Balkan Inside Online: <http://www.balkaninside.com/albania-will-not-get-candidate-status-before-june-2014/>

10. Rukaj, M. (December 2013). Albania rejected, resoundingly. Observatorio Balcani e Caucasio. Online: <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Albania/Albania-rejected-resoundingly-146368>

“saying NO to Albanians, is not the right message to the region, and would discourage our pro-European efforts. Despite the Council’s decision we will continue with our reform agenda, standing firm in our belief that European values are still alive. But an EU without the entire Balkans in it, is not the kind of Europe I would want”.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the Prime minister of Albania, immediately after the decision, declared that the Council recognized the achievements of the new government, praising its work, and that the decision of several states to block Albania is related more to the internal situation in these countries. However, he also expressed his regret that certain internal developments in the countries of the EU impeded Albania to get the much deserved candidate status. The Ministry of integration took an official position of respecting the decision of the European council, while continuing to deliver on the required reforms, in order to gain the candidate status in June 2014. The aftermath of the decision was, however, followed by campaign of naming and blaming with the current opposition blaming the government for the failed attempt and the new government blaming the opposition for the distrust they created during the eight years in power, which made several countries skeptical regarding the real commitment of Albania in moving beyond the façade and actually delivering on the promised reforms.

11. The Netherlands Vetoes Albania’s EU candidate status. Euractiv. Online: <http://www.euractiv.com/enlargement/netherlands-vetoes-albania-eu-candidate-status-532360>

### Citizens’ voices

When the Albanian Institute for International Studies first conducted a survey on the European integration process, in 2003, the EU was turning into a buzzword conquering the public discourse and daily life as well. At first a certain group was targeted including: Public Administration officials, media representatives, NGOs and business groups in Albania. They were first and foremost impacted and impacted by the integration process directly and indirectly involved as experts, reporters and decision makers. The original aim of the survey was to assess the knowledge, expectations and opinions of certain groups regarding the EU and Albania’s integration in it, Albania’s chances to join the EU and the terms and implications of the Association and Stabilization Agreement of Albania with the EU. The survey’s purpose was to serve not only as a description of the state of perceptions and realities regarding European integration, but also to offer recommendations and serve as a tool to prepare an awareness raising and education campaign on EU and integration.

Many things have changed in the past 11 years in Albania, especially in the progress of the country towards European integration. Although these changes are reflected continuously in the methodology of the survey, the targeted groups and the design of the questions, the aim remains almost the same as the survey in 2003. We are not driven solely by academic curiosity to know how ordinary citizens see the process and how that is reflected in the commitment of the political elite which represents them. The aim is also to give an alternative voice to these citizens to hold their representatives accountable of the promises they make and what they actually deliver while in office. On the other hand the survey has turned into a yearly tradition of the Albanian Institute for International Studies and one of the main pillars of our work within the European integration process. In addition, it has served

as an essential source of information and statistics for Albanian and foreign academics working on Albania and the European Union; for students of political sciences, international relations etc., who have used the results of the survey in their thesis and research papers; for media outlets who have been reporting for many years on a regular basis everything related to European integration and have used the survey in their chronicles to make citizens' voices louder in the public debate; for decision makers, who are always targeted and with whom we share the results of the survey in order to transmit perceptions coming from their constituencies; and for ordinary citizens who are genuinely interested to be updated on the European integration processes.

As a unique form of survey regarding this topic, AIIS takes pride in its work and attempts to gauge people's perceptions and their expectations from this process, which is high up in the agenda of all relevant stakeholders in Albania. This year's survey builds upon the tradition and the experience from previous studies and offers a clear and comprehensive picture of people's take of the European integration process. Perspectives come from a wide range of individuals in terms of age, profession, education level and social status, while the survey attempts to mimic the society's pulse as a whole.

## B. Executive Summary

### I- Support and importance: The (Un) changing trends

Albania remains one of the most pro EU countries in the region, where support for integration, despite slight fluctuations has always remained above 50%, since the first survey we conducted in 2003. The majority of citizens in Albania see the European Union as the only feasible future for the country and a national interest. This is accompanied by a general lack of euro skepticism in the public discourse, both among decision makers and academics. From our decade long experience with people's perceptions and expectations of the European integration process, often the EU is viewed as a *Deus ex machina*, which will miraculously and immediately solve all the problems Albania is facing as part of its transition from an isolated small communist country to a democracy aspiring to become member of an unprecedented union of prosperous and democratic states. Another factor, impacting these often wrong expectations, is the little information or lack thereof, which creates gaps between the benefits and obligations of Albania, and any other country aspiring to join the EU.

In relative terms, this year support for integration in the European Union was the lowest. Coming from many years where support has varied between 85% and 95%, the 77.1% percent support rate from 2014, is a telling indicator of a sort of fatigue with the slow process and the general setbacks we have seen for many years. However, - in absolute terms, 77.1% is still a considerably high level of support and the process is in no way in danger of lack of popular backing, seen from people's perspectives and perceptions. However, one important conclusion we can draw from this trend is that slowly the European integration process is being demystified and a more

realistic approach is undertaken when thinking about it. Also, the fact that Albania was once again denied candidate status in December 2013<sup>12</sup> influenced the way people were thinking about the process and shows at a certain degree their discontent with that decision.

Often those who are against European integration are neglected because they represent only a small fraction of the Albanian society, despite the reasons they give for their lack of support. However, in a democratic society it is positive and an imperative to have critical voices, who contribute to a healthier debate over this kind of process, which is very important for the future of the country. Although standing at less than 10%, the voices against should be listened equally as the voices pro, in order to have a balanced view of European integration and all it entails. The highest percentage of those who wouldn't support Albania's accession to the European Union can be found in 2010, with slightly more than 10% of respondents answered no to a potential referendum on accession to the European Union.

Closely linked to the support for integration is also the importance citizens' place to the integration process. It is interesting to see a shift from very important, which was the answer of the majority of respondents in some of the previous years, to important but not essential which was the choice of the majority of respondents this year (52.6%). On the other hand, still a considerable percentage of 33.6% chose to rate the integration process as very important and the minority, 7.7% considered it not important at all. As noted in the paragraphs above, this is not surprising considering the timing of the survey, just a few months after the European Council refused to grant Albania candidate status in December 2013.

12. Which was granted in June 2014, a few months after we conducted the survey.

It is not enough knowing the level of support or importance without assessing the reasons behind these answers. Therefore, we asked respondents to choose from a list of reasons in order to explain their choice and also add other reasons that could not be found in the preliminary list. The reasons for support are split in two categories: economic and political, where the former have the upper hand in the responses provided by those interviewed. Thus, the majority of respondents chose more jobs as a reason to support the European integration process, with 29.2%, the improvement of living standards coming up second with 22.9%. Less poverty was also chosen by 17.6% of those who would vote for accession. Political reasons identified were more rule of law, less corruption and a stronger democracy. In light of current economic developments in the EU and Albania in general, makes sense that respondents would choose economic reasons to vote for integration into the European Union. In addition, citizens are primarily affected economically by this process, although the political reasons, such as rule of law and a stronger democracy are paramount to the progress of the country in the European integration path.

As for those who would vote against, again economic reasons dominate with 30.6% mentioning the financial crisis in the EU, which would harm the Albanian economy and a further 27.8% mentioning the endangered position of the Albanian businesses. Only a small percentage mentions threats to national identity as a downside of joining the European Union.

## II- **Albania in the EU: Readiness versus acceptance**

Throughout our surveys to measure peoples' perceptions and perspectives on the European integration process, we often ask respondents to assess the readiness of Albania to join the European Union at the moment and whether the EU should accept Albania even if the country is not ready yet. This year the majority

of respondents think Albania has not fulfilled all its requirements to become a member of the European Union, with 54.8% saying no, the country is not ready yet. On the other hand the optimistic group, 23.5% say yes, Albania is ready to join. However when it comes to the decision of the European Union, whether it should let Albania join despite its lack of readiness the majority, 41.3% say yes. One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon is that often people argue that the European Union should first let Albania join as a member state and afterwards the remaining conditions would be fulfilled. In addition, this discrepancy shows also how people view the process where much is expected from the other side, the European Union, even when little is given in return. Such a perspective is problematic, as it justifies the lack of commitment towards fulfilling the necessary requirements to become a member of the European Union.

One of the recurrent topics of the first six months of 2014 was without doubt the denial and then granting of candidate status to Albania, the former in December 2013 and latter in June 2014. Keeping in mind that the survey was conducted a few months prior to the event in June, we asked respondents to assess whether the December decision was fair and whether Albania would finally get candidate status in June, as the decision was approaching. Regarding the first question, the majority of those asked, around 55% were realistic in saying that at the moment the country is not ready to join the Union as it has not fulfilled all the required criteria set forth by the EU. However, another 23.5% believe Albania is ready to join the European Union at the moment. This reflects either a lack of information on the side of this group of respondents, having misperceptions about the process or reflects their hopes that despite the many challenges the country is facing currently, it is still the right time to join the Union with the hope that the rest of the challenges will be dealt with after accession. This question

was followed by another one, which required respondents to say whether the European Union should accept Albania even if the country is not ready to join. Interestingly, the majority, 41.3%, said yes, the EU should take Albania despite the readiness of the latter to undertake the responsibilities and obligations deriving from becoming an EU member state.

Regarding the second issue, the December decision of the European Council, respondents are split almost in half when asked if the decision was fair. 40.7% of them said the decision was not fair and that Albania deserved to get candidate status at that point, while another 39% said the decision was fair. For the first group an explanation can also be the debate that followed the decision, which was looking at reasons for the decline outside the country, namely in the rise of far right political parties in the member states, which pressured the decision of several of them. Another internal explanation for this response is the fact that the opinion of the European Commission after the Progress Report in 2013 was positive and it recommended giving candidate status to Albania. These are the main reasons for people to believe the decision was unfair considering the progress Albania was making at the time, in fulfilling the required priorities to get candidate status. On the other hand, those who believe the decision was fair refer mostly to the political context at the time of the decision. Since Albania has general elections in June 2013 and the new government took office in September of that year, and it is only rational, according to their thinking, that more time was needed for the European Union, in order to better assess the work and willingness of the new government to push forward the promised and ongoing reforms.

In order to evaluate beyond yes and no the attitudes of Albanian citizens related to the December decision, we asked respondents to name the actors responsible for the negative decision. The responses are split between those who name internal actors,

which comprise the largest group and the second group which names external factors responsible for the decision. The largest percentage of 37.6% considers the Albanian government the reason why the European Council decided against giving Albania candidate status, despite the positive opinion of the European Commission. It is however unclear whether they refer to the former government or the current one which took office in September of last year. The second actor, following the government are Albanian political parties, with 29.8% of respondents choosing them as responsible for this decision. This choice is understandable considering the high rivalry between the political parties in Albania and their continuous attempts to antagonize each other by ignoring achievements on both sides. This antagonism, for a long time has hampered Albania's progress in the European integration pace and has negatively contributed towards people's perceptions and lack of confidence in their work. This fact has been also a point of reference for the European Union, which has mentioned the high politicization of the Albanian society as one of the main challenges in Albania during the transition period. Another 13.7% identify the member states of the European Union as those who should be blamed for the refusal of the European Council to grant Albania candidate country status in December 2013. This rhetoric was used by many politicians, including the Prime minister, who openly blamed the rise of the far right in some of the countries of the EU as one of the reasons for the negative decision.

Respondents were later asked to identify some of the factors they perceive as being most important in the decision of the European Union to grant Albania candidate status and in general factors that are essential to the progress of the country towards the European Union. After analyzing the gathered data, the conclusion was that despite considering economic factors as important reasons to support or not the European integration process of the country,

when asked to identify the factors that are important for the progress of the country towards the EU they mostly relate to political reasons. More specifically, the majority of 20.7% mentions the political conflict in Albania with a further 20% mentioning the lack of rule of law in the country and closely related to the second, the third mentioned factor is the situation of crime and corruption in the country, with 18.3% choosing this option. The rest of the factors mentioned are the economic crisis in the EU and in Albania, the weakness of the Albanian democracy and last but not least the negative image of Albania in the EU member states. The factors mentioned by the majority of respondents fall well within the expectations during the design of the questionnaire. It is to be noted that rule of law, corruption and organized crime in Albania as well as the political crisis have been the buzzword used by all relevant actors, as hindering the normal progress of the country in its European integration process. However, mentioning also the negative image Albania has in most of the European countries is a telling element of what needs to be done in order to change some of these stereotypes. However, most of the respondents were optimistic when asked if Albania would finally be granted candidate status in June 2014, with 49.1% of respondents responding yes to the questions.

The realistic view on the European integration timeline persists even when respondents are asked to choose an approximate date when the country would join the EU as a full member. A total of 65% of respondents place the accession date between 2020 and after 2020, which is realistic enough considering it is a process which takes time and efforts. The minority is split between the overly optimists, who think Albania will join the EU by 2015 with 9.3% and the overly pessimists, who think the country will never join the European Union. It is rather good news that most of the people in Albania are aware of the time needed to fulfill all the accession

criteria and who acknowledge that Albania is not ready yet and much needs to be done, to bring the country closer to European standards.

### III- Important factors and institutions

The European integration process requires a holistic approach on the side of societies who wish to become part of the European family. In that regard each institution inside these countries should be held accountable for their role in this process. We asked people to rank some of the given institutions by their importance. It is interesting to see that the majority of respondents identify the Albanian government (34.8%) as the most important institution, an overwhelming majority considering that the second institution is chosen by only 17.3% of respondents and that is the Albanian parliament. It is clear thus that the executive and legislative in this order play the most important role in the country's aspirations towards integration in the European family. It is also interesting that for many years now people choose the Albanian society and the international community as the least important institutions for the integration process. This can be linked to the previous comment, regarding to the highly politicized society, who attributes most of the failures and achievements to politics. Despite the active involvement of the international community in Albania, and their efforts to assist the country, financially and through capacity building, so it will be prepared when the time comes, it seems that Albanian citizens are not fully aware of that role.

In addition to institutions there are several factors that impact the European integration process overall. From the survey it seems that Albanians place very little importance to the religious composition of the country, with 7.4% of respondents choosing it as the most important factor. The same goes for the regional situation in the Western Balkan countries, where 14% of the respondents think

it is the most important factor. As for the most important factors, two are chosen by respondents, respectively Albanian politics with 39.4% giving it a 10 and in second place, rule of law selected by 38.9% of respondents. Other factors include free and fair elections with 32.8% of respondents marking it with a 10, the Albanian economy (21.3%) and the European economy (19.3%).

With the eruption of war in Former Yugoslavia during the 90's, Albania was lucky enough to be out of the conflict, despite internal turmoil in this period. The events made the country assume the role of the stabilizer in the region, and it has done so successfully. Its relations or perceived relations with other countries from the region and beyond are very important to assess in order to understand the place of the country in the international arena. Asked to rank countries on a scale from 1 to 10, seems that in the eyes of Albanians the two most important strategic partners are the United States and the European Union. On one hand, the former has been a vital support for the country throughout its difficult transition years and is still today an important partner in Albania's efforts to become a consolidated democracy. On the other hand, the latter is the number one national priority for decision makers and ordinary people as well. It is only normal that the majority of respondents would rank them between 9 and 10 in the scale of importance.

At the bottom of the list are Russia and Serbia, towards each most of those interviewed consider these countries rather irrelevant. From the countries in the region, as expected, Kosovo, in their view, should be a priority in Albania's regional foreign policy. Interestingly though, respondents place less importance to other countries in the region, compared to countries like the United States, Italy and organizations such as the European Union etc. Such a tendency is also a clear indicator of the dependency of the country on the assistance of the above mentioned countries. On the other hand,

the European integration process, despite several attempts of the European Union to revitalize regional cooperation, has enjoyed all the attention of different actors in Albania. More efforts are needed to boost regional cooperation, as a means to put aside conflicts and differences, in order to live peacefully in the future European family.

#### IV- Sources of (dis) information

One of the challenges encountered throughout previous surveys, relates to the sources of information people use to get information on the European integration process or how well informed they are on what the process entails exactly. This year also we asked citizens to focus on a chapter dedicated to information sources. Respondents were first asked to self-evaluate how well informed they are on the EU integration process. The majority of those asked, around 52% said they feel moderately involved with the other side of the spectrum splitting between well informed with 15% and those who feel uninformed with around 20%. When asked further to name the sources they use to get information in general and more detailed information regarding the European integration process most of the respondents mention the internet and TV stations as their main source of information. Standing at the end of the list are usually academic articles, the activities of the EU Delegation to Albania, radio and newspaper. With the rapid changes in technology, the internet is becoming more and more the first source of interest for the majority of people, leaving behind some of the traditional forms of information such as magazines and radio.

Knowing where people go to when looking for news, is important in tracing the roots of some of the misconception and stereotypes people have regarding the European integration process. The power of the internet and TV should be properly used and not misused by different actors in the Albanian society. Considering the effect the media and the internet has on people's life, especially in the last couple of years.

#### C. Recommendations

The aim of the survey wouldn't be fulfilled if we were to stop with findings and analysis of the gathered data. The objective of the survey is of course to gauge people's perceptions regarding the European integration process. However, that would not be complete without drawing respective lessons and offering recommendations to relevant actors involved in the process. Therefore the aim of this section is to reflect upon the findings and data analysis to connect these findings with actual measures, in order to respond to the challenges seen from people's perceptions. The recommendations are directed primarily to decision makers and politicians as the most important stakeholders in this process and the change bringers. They also should be held accountable for their decisions and reflect upon the findings as they suggest the attitudes of the larger society on the issue.

##### *Levels of support – what to do with it?*

As noted in other parts of the report, the level of support for European integration as well as the importance of this process is overwhelming, which shows a unanimous positive attitude towards the aspirations of the country to become a member state of the European Union sometime in the not so distant future. How can this be translated in practical terms, especially for Albanian decision makers and politicians. First of all, it means they should be seriously committed to achieve this goal, not just say they are. Often, there is a discrepancy between what Albanian politicians say and what their actions really mean. The commitment towards the progress of the country in its European integration agenda should be sustainable and the process should not be held hostage by political animosities and rhetoric. Decision makers in Albania should listen more to the

voice of their constituents and be held accountable for any failures to deliver on the promised results and achievements.

On the other hand, the European Union through its mechanisms to assist Albania, should be aware of the country's enthusiasm regarding accession to the club and take note of the overwhelming support the European values and norms have among the citizens of a country like Albania. The failure of the country to be granted candidate status for several times in a row, started to pose a slight threat to the enthusiasm and support for European integration inside the country. However, with the June decision the EU is sending a clear message regarding the future of the Western Balkan countries, seen inextricably linked to the European Union. The enlargement policy of the European Union, can suffer changes from time to time, becoming stricter. However, the door is not to be closed on countries who rightfully belong to Europe, not only as a physical space, but also as a space of common values and norms corresponding to democracy and human rights. The EU, through its Delegation in Tirana should continue to play an active, but even more present role, so it is more visible to ordinary citizens, who view the process neither as decision makers, nor as opinion leaders, but as direct beneficiaries of this equation.

On a more critical note, people should also become aware of their role in this process, but not taking for granted that everything related to the European Union is good and positive. This dichotomy created, where everything positive is associated with the west (i.e. EU countries) and everything negative to Albania (as suffering from corruption, organized crime etc.). A healthy society is one where every opinion is heard, for and against, where people weigh their options and take into consideration both sides of coins in a situation. Critical debate is needed in order to better understand the European integration process and what it means for Albania to join the EU what are the necessary conditions to fulfill if the country

wishes to join the Union and what is to be expected after the big objective and national interest is achieved. This call is directed also to opinion makers in the country, those who sometimes directly shape the public discourse on European integration and have an impact on what people think about it.

### ***Information is power – advice in using this power***

One of the major concerns, which continues to show up in the yearly surveys is a general lack of proper information regarding the EU integration process. This element might sound in contradiction to the fact that it is a process highly talked about in the country. However, sometimes the information provided is incorrect, too simplistic or simply not enough to create a clear idea of all the constituting elements of the process. There are several actors responsible for this and the recommendations are as follows for all of them.

As the subtitle suggests, information is power and should be properly use to make the most out of it. Much of this power is assumed by media outlets, which serve as a bridging gap between people and their elected representatives. Media has a wider role than just transmitting information, it has a role of constructing approaches, perceptions and attitudes. Therefore, media outlets in Albania, including here broadcast media, written and social media, should use their access to this power to properly report on the issues surrounding the European integration process. Unfortunately, sometimes media representatives in Albania, i.e. journalists, are unprofessional, don't understand the process themselves, and therefore the information is often incomplete or incorrect. This has significantly influenced people's understanding of the process and their perceptions regarding accession criteria, obligations, requirements and other technical details. An important step would be more training for journalists dealing exclusively with

the European integration agenda, in order to clarify some of the most important aspects of this process as well as other relevant elements. Once this is done, reporting tends to become more professional as well as accurate. This will have visible and immediate effects on people's level of knowledge and their perceptions on different issues of EU integration.

On the other hand, politicians and decision makers are crucial to the integration progress. They often use issues related to the EU as buzzwords but without further clarifying them or going deeper into the meaning of their declarations and promises. Thus, a commitment on the side of decision makers in Albania is important to ensure a smooth progress of the European integration process and the mindset of ordinary Albanian citizens, who rely heavily on the information provided by their representatives.

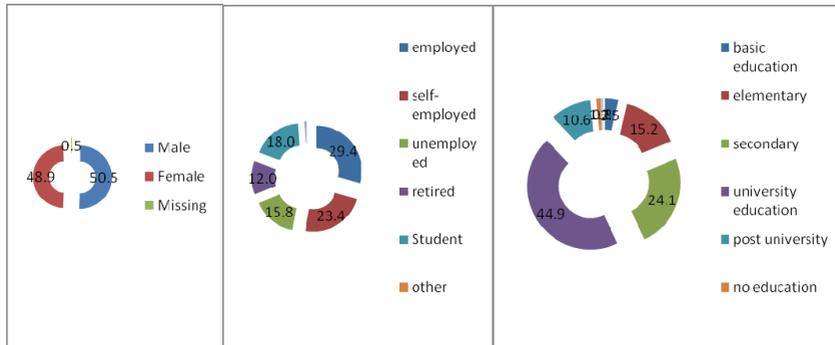
Finally but not last, it is also necessary for the European Union, through its delegation in Tirana, to continue with its activities and make them even more visible to the Albanian public. It was noted before, that Albanian citizens view the international community as peripheral to the integration process, and most of the job is attributed to internal actors. The EU delegation in Tirana is actively involved through different activities. Nevertheless, its presence should be more visible to others and play a more active role in informing people better on the EU integration process and influence their improved information on the process overall.

## **D. Findings and analysis**

### **I- The sample & Methodology**

The survey "The European Perspective of Albania: Perceptions and Realities 2014" was conducted in April 2014, for the eleventh year. In order to make comparisons possible, AIIS retained the same sampling and methodology of previous surveys. As such, 1200 respondents were selected randomly in 12 cities in Albania, divided in such a way as to reflect demographic distribution of the population in different cities in the country. The sample is largely representative of the overall population in Albania. The project team conducted face to face interviews with respondents selected randomly. This survey is quantitative and measures different aspects of people's perceptions and expectations regarding the European integration process. The questionnaire was comprised of 22 questions and has three parts, respectively: General information, Understanding integration and Strategic partners.

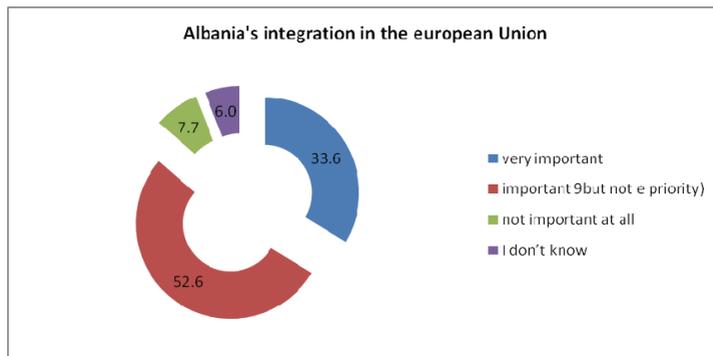
According to data analysis, the sample is split almost equally between men and women, 50.5% and 48.9% respectively. Regarding education level, the majority of respondents, 44.9% have a university degree and the second largest group of 24.1% with high school level of education. Finally, when employment is concerned the respondents are split between the two largest groups, specifically employed, which comprises 29.4% of the sample, self-employed with 23.4% and the rest split equally between students, unemployed and pensioners.



**II- Understanding integration: progress factors and expectations**  
**a. Support for integration**

The following section analyses the findings and results of respondents' expectations and opinions regarding issues of European integration, including support, readiness etc. One of the questions that appear in the questionnaire each year is related to the importance people place on integration, based on their personal point of view. The results of this question change often and from year to year, suggesting that circumstances related to developments in Albania or in the EU itself, have a considerable impact on people's perceptions of the process.

**Graph 1: For you personally, how important is Albania's integration to the European Union?**

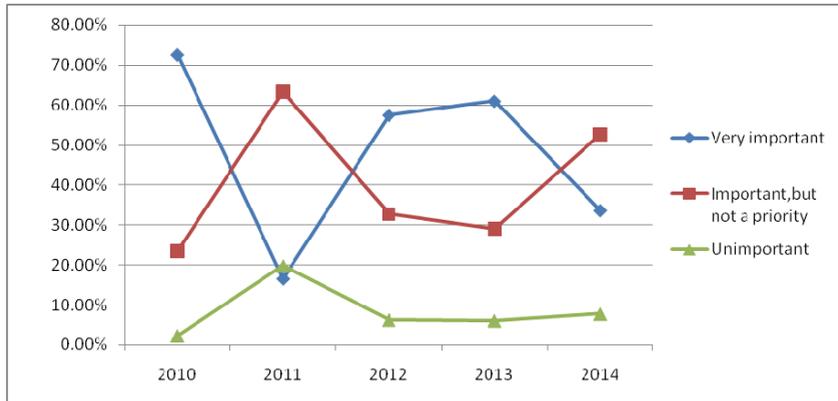


One of the most striking findings from the 2014 survey is a considerable decrease in the percentage of those who think European integration is very important, compared to last year results. While it is still true that European integration is overall an important process to the Albanian people, with 86.2% combined percentage of those who think it is very important and those who think it is important but not a priority, opposed to only 7.7% who think it is irrelevant. It is important to note here that the survey was conducted after the third rejection of the European Council to grant Albania the candidate status and prior to the positive June decision, after which Albania is officially a candidate country for EU membership. This helps greatly in explaining this change in enthusiasm from last year. As the following graphs on support for integration suggest, there is a slight tendency towards disappointment with the integration process linked to domestic and external reasons.

As already mentioned above, throughout the years the importance of the European integration process has varied among respondents, corresponding also to internal or external events. The graph below shows the change from 2010 to 2014 in those who think the process is very important; important, but not a priority and; unimportant. The graph clearly shows that there has been a reversal of answers between two options: Very important and Important, but not a priority in 2011 and 2014. The first one can be explained by the difficult political situation, which led to a deadlock that would explain this shift of attention. As the 2011 survey report also points out, it was also linked to increasing pessimism regarding a potential date for Albania to join the European Union. And the 2014 result is easy to deduce as it comes shortly after the negative decision of the European Council to grant Albania candidate status in December 2013. This fact, coupled with the rhetoric that followed in the aftermath of

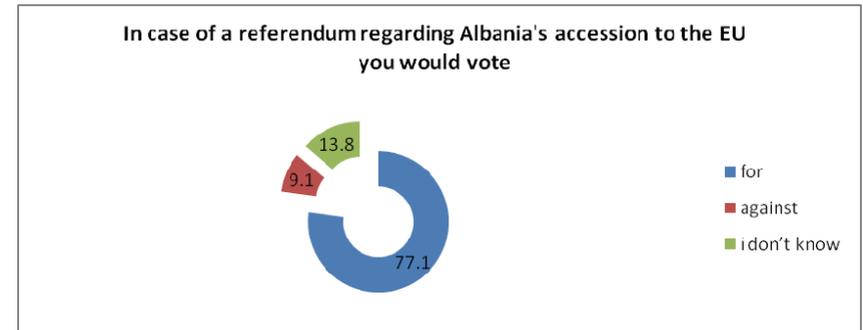
the decision explains the shift of importance of EU integration in citizens' perspectives.

**Graph 2: The importance of European Integration from 2010 to 2014**



As graph no. 2 suggests, the lowest number of respondents to consider European integration as very important is in 2011 with 16.5%, as opposed to the overwhelming percentages in 2010 (72.6%) and 2013 (61%). On the other hand in 2011 there was also the highest percentage of those who considered the integration process as unimportant, with 19.8%, which is 2% less than the percentages of all the other years combined. There is no doubt that overall, European integration is one of the items high up in the agenda of the Albanian citizens, as it is in the agenda of the government, however signs of changing perceptions and priorities should not be ignored. This is true, especially if we compare results from year to year, with the findings suggesting a fatigue and change of orientation in what people deem as most important.

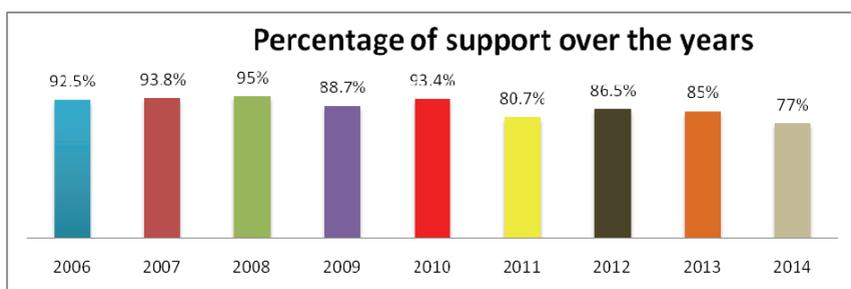
**Graph 3: Support for integration**



For the first time since AIIS started the survey (in 2003), the support for EU integration, in case of a hypothetical referendum, has fallen under 80%. This is not to suggest that integration is not important and Albanians could eventually say no to membership when the time comes. It is quite clear that Albanians strongly support Albania's integration to the European Union, with an overwhelming 77.1% of respondents pro accession and a slight fraction who would be against (9.1%). However, seen from a comparative perspective, there is a decrease in this support. As can be seen from graph 4, up until 2010 support was almost unanimous, ranging from 90% to a total support of 95%, the highest support which resulted from the 2008 survey. After 2010, support has fluctuated between 85% and nearly 75% (a 10 percent drop in all). Interestingly, the numbers suggest that in 2011 there was a drop of 12.7% in support for integration. This drop corresponds also to the downgrading of the European integration process from very important to important, but not a priority (as discussed in the graphs above). This was mainly attributed to the domestic political situation of the time, respectively the political stalemate that blocked Albania in many ways and significantly halted its efforts to push forward the integration agenda.

On the other side of the spectrum, those who would vote against are still a considerable minority, 9.1% and a significant 13.8% of respondents weren't sure whether they would say yes or no to accession. The highest percentage of vote against accession was found in 2011 (10.5%), which is still irrelevant compared to an average of 85% of those who support accession.

**Graph 4: Percentage of support in years**



This lower level of support, compared to all previous years, suggests a slightly rising pessimism, at least until candidate status was granted to Albania in June 2014. Albania is the only country in the region to be refused candidate status three times by the European Council. The trend comes against a regional background where Macedonia was granted candidate status in 2005, Serbia in 2012, Montenegro in 2010 and Croatia marks the first anniversary as an EU member state. While the other countries are moving rather quickly in the European integration process, Albania was stuck in an internal political crisis, against people's desire and hopes to move forward. In many reports Albania would fall behind together with Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the completely different background and challenges the latter is facing.

Before analyzing reasons provided by respondents as to why they would or wouldn't support Albania's accession to the European

Union, this part will explore some of the possible reasons, or circumstantial variables we believe contribute to such high levels of support, even compared to some of the other countries in the region.

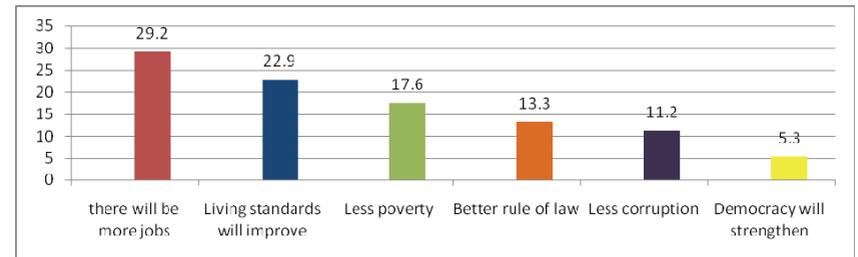
- 1- **Political rhetoric.** European integration is one of the highest priorities of each political party coming to power, despite their ideology. As a matter of fact, in the last general elections the winning coalition was called The Alliance of European Albania. Indeed the first item in the program is integration in the European Union. In the words of the program itself, "the process of accession to the European Union is a national objective, in view of democratization and the transformation of the Albanian society, in accordance to the values and principles of the United Europe".<sup>13</sup> It goes further to explain the commitment of the Albanian government to fulfill the necessary steps in the integration path. This is only an example of the high importance of the process in the political context, which replicates on people's perceptions and support for it.
- 2- **Media.** Closely connected to the first variable is also the role played by the media, traditional and social, in the images people create about the European integration process in Albania. Looking at the chronicles in TV stations, newspaper articles and other sources of information it is interesting to see that media outlets use the EU integration and other buzz words related to it in their headlines, top stories and on almost a daily basis. Such a heavy load of information coupled with the reliance of the majority of people in Albania on the media, offer plausible explanations for people's responses to questions related to the high level of support for integration and the importance people place to that process.

13. Programi i qeverise 2013-2017 i Aleances per Shqiperine Europiane. September 2013. Online: <http://www.ps.al/te-reja/19691/>.

3- **Historical reasons** (the communist past). As mentioned earlier at the beginning of the 90's, with major changes occurring around the world, Albania too underwent major changes, coming out of a communist system and beginning the road of democratization. The communist past is often considered as a gap in time and the European integration processes are often considered a return to origin, to the European family, where we rightly belong. These attempts to wipe out a part of our history have also contributed to Albanians aspirations for welfare, democracy, respect for human rights and other values and norms which are fanatically reserved by the European Union, which also contributes to a sense of belonging.

4- **Lack of euro skepticism and critical debate.** Albania is one of the most enthusiastic countries among those aspiring to join the European Union. This is clearly visible by the level of support over the years and the importance of the EU integration process. The lack of euro skeptics in the country or at least of critical debate regarding EU has contributed towards the overwhelming positive feelings Albanians have towards joining the EU. The topic is often approached in terms of the benefits of the country if it becomes a member state in the future. Little is discussed about the actual obligations, not only prior to accession, but what it really means to be a member state of the European Union and to what challenges a member country has to rise up to. There are a few critical voices among academics in Albania, however no serious threats to the public discourse on the European integration process.

**Graph 5: Reasons to vote for accession**



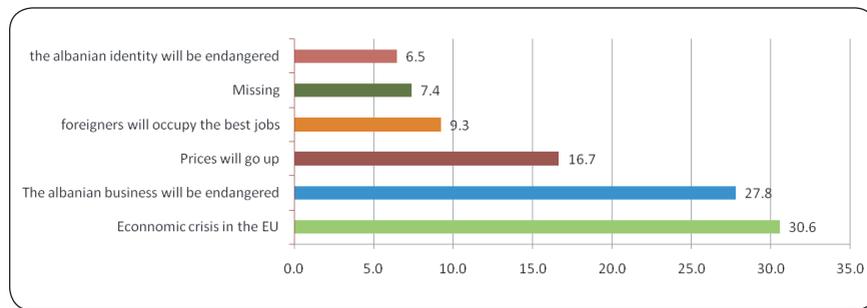
When asked to give reasons for their support of Albania's integration in the EU, respondents are split between economic reasons, which preside over political reasons such as less corruption, more justice and strengthened democracy. It is obvious from the graph below that economy and living standards play an important role in people's expectations about the eventual accession. The majority of respondents opted for the second option of the question, i.e. more jobs with 29.2% and the first option related to improvement of living standards with 22.9%. Less poverty was also chosen by 17.6% of those who would vote for accession with the rest of the respondents split between rule of law, less corruption and a stronger democracy. One explanation for this distribution is that economic reasons affect people more directly in their daily life. As for the other reasons, while being essential to Albania's integration progress, are less important only in the sense that economic welfare has far more visible impact on people's wellbeing.

A second explanation for such a result is the current and past unemployment rate in Albania. According to INSTAT<sup>14</sup> the unemployment rate in Albania has considerably increased from the first quarter of 2012 to the first quarter of 2014, jumping from

14. Albanian Statistics Institute. Unemployment rate over the years. Online: <http://www.instat.gov.al/en/themes/labour-market.aspx>

12.9% in total to 17.7%. The most problematic trend in this increase is found among young people, where unemployment spiked in 2014 to 31.3%, compared to 22.9% in 2012. Unemployment, coupled with the difficult economic situation in the country, hit by the financial crisis in the Eurozone, makes people vulnerable and less optimistic about recovery and thus the EU is seen as salvation from economic difficulties. In addition, economic reasons have been the main driving factors in the respondents' responses for the last three years, where in the 2012 and 2013 results a similar ranking of reasons can be found. However, in 2011, due to the political circumstances, the top reason respondents identified were strengthening of democracy by an overwhelming 41% and rule of law, with employment mentioned only by 7% and living standards by 19.7%.

**Graph 6: Reasons for voting against**



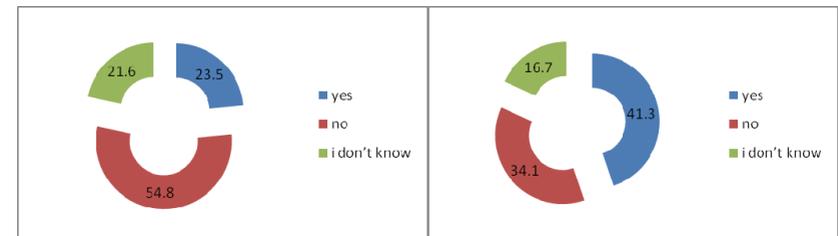
For the 9.1% who would vote against accession, the two major reasons are: the financial crisis in the EU, which would harm Albania, mentioned by 30.6% of the respondents and the position of the Albanian business, which according to them would be endangered, identified by 27.8% of the respondents. Again, even the small fraction who would vote against would do so overwhelmingly for economic reasons. Only 6.5% mentioned the danger to preserving national identity, once the country joins the EU. It is ranked last

in the identified reasons, falling behind the increasing prices, with 16.7% and occupation of the best job positions by 9.3%. As with the reasons to vote for, over the years economic reasons have been upfront when people think about the possible “dangers” of Albania joining the European Union.

**b. Albania and the EU: readiness and expectations**

**Graph 7: Is Albania ready to join the EU?**

**Graph 8: Should the EU accept Albania even if it is not ready?**

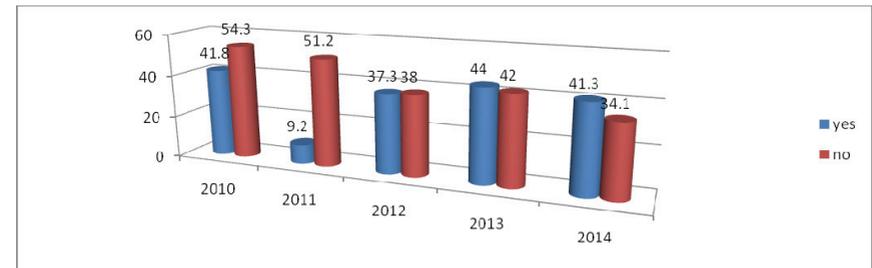


The majority of respondents acknowledge the fact that Albania is not ready to become a member of the European Union at the time, with 54.8% answering no, Albania is not ready to become an EU member state and an optimistic 23.5% saying that the country is ready to join at the moment. Further, 21.6%, which is considerable, did not have an answer to this question. The two above are put together to compare respondents perception about Albania's readiness and their opinions whether the EU should accept Albania even if it has not fulfilled all the necessary criteria to join. As the second graph suggests, a slight majority of 41.3% think the EU should indeed let Albania join with 34.1% saying the opposite. Apparently, even though most of the respondents acknowledge the fact that Albania has a long way to go and much work is needed to achieve the standards required by the European Union, they

would still prefer the EU to disregard the conditions and accept Albania as an EU member state. A possible explanation is that people in Albania often think that the country should join the EU and afterwards efforts can go into catching up with the other countries in the Union.

The two questions often appear in the survey AIIIS conducts. It is interesting to note that only recently (2013 and 2014) since 2010 there is a shift in citizens' response on the question whether the European Union should accept Albania even though the country is not ready yet. If we compare results, as the graph 9 below does, it is clear that in 2010 and 2011 a consolidated majority of respondents were against the idea, acknowledging that the country needs to comply with its part of the bargain in order to become part of the European family. However, small changes started in 2012 when the respondents were almost equally split between those who said yes and those who said no. In 2013 and most recently, in 2014, when asked the same question the majority of respondents would tend to be more hopeful and say that first the EU can accept Albania as a member state and afterwards the latter shall continue to progress towards the needed reforms and fulfill obligations. This expectation is rather unrealistic in the face of the approach the European Union has taken for quite some time towards future enlargement in the Western Balkans. In order not to repeat some of the mistakes during the last enlargement wave, before Croatia, the European Union has taken a tougher stance and raised its benchmarks for countries wanting to join. On the other hand, this shift of opinion seems to come not from lack of knowledge and information on how enlargement works, rather it reflects to a certain extent the fatigue with a long and complicated process and a desire to be part of the European family sooner rather than later.

**Graph 9: Should the EU accept Albania even though it is not ready? (Over the years)**



In December 2013 the European Council refused once again to grant Albania candidate status, despite the advice of the European Commission. In the past two years, citizens involved in the yearly AIIIS survey, have been overly optimistic with the majority responding yes to the question if Albania would get candidate status (in 2012 and 2013), with 39.2% and 49.2% respectively. However as graph 10 below shows, in light of the December decision we asked respondents if the decision was fair and the respondents are almost equally split between those who think the decision was fair and those who considered it not fair. Considerable is also the percentage of respondents who don't know or refuse to answer (20.3%). The decision sparked a nationwide debate in Albania as to why the country failed again the test. For the first time in public rhetoric domestic actors were not the only ones to be blamed. Member states of the European Union, especially those who were openly against a positive decision were "blamed". In a press release from December 18, 2013, a day after the decision of the European Council to wait until June 2014 for a final decision on granting Albania candidate status, the newly elected Prime minister, Mr. Edi Rama, remarked among others: "...therefore I can't not express regret that the historical process of the European Union enlargement and the fate of European countries undergoing this process, like ours,

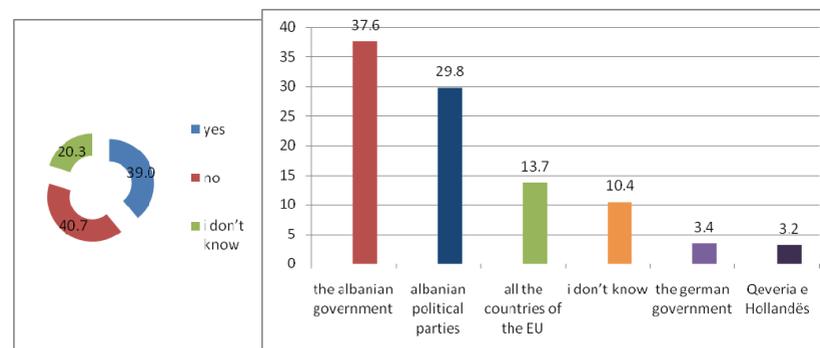
is complicated by internal political circumstances or elections in member states, where under the negative influence of extremists forces problems with the economy, migration and unemployment transform into artificial obstacles for the policy of enlargement, which is the greatest success in the history of the transformation of the European continent”.<sup>15</sup>

Based on the debates that followed the December decision, especially in the media, we decided to ask respondents to identify actors they deem responsible for such a decision, coming after several other attempts to get candidate status. It is interesting to see that despite the shifted rhetoric last year, the two major actors respondents consider responsible are the Albanian Government with 37.6% and Albanian Political Parties, with 29.8%. However, there is a considerable 13.7% that names all the EU member states combined and a small percentage of those who identify Germany (3.4%) and the Netherlands (3.2%), which were the most strongly against granting Albania candidate status at that point in time, arguing more needed to be done by the new government to prove its commitment for reforms and progress. Regarding the majority of responders who point to the Albanian government as responsible it is unclear if they refer to the new government, which took office in September (only three months prior to the decision), or the former government, which was in charge of the European integration processes and related reforms for the last eight years. However, the message people are sending is that more commitment and efforts are needed to ensure that the country is following the right path towards its end goal: joining the European Union.

15. Press release: Të vazhdojmë pa u ndalur ndertimin e Shqipërisë Evropiane. December 18, 2013. Online: <http://www.kryeministria.al/al/newsroom/lajme/te-vazhdojmë-pa-u-ndalur-ndertimin-e-shqipërisë-evropiane&page=28>

**Graph 10: Do you think the decision of the European Council not to grant Albania candidate status in December was fair?**

**Graph 11: Which of the following actors is responsible for Albania’s failure to get candidate status in December?**

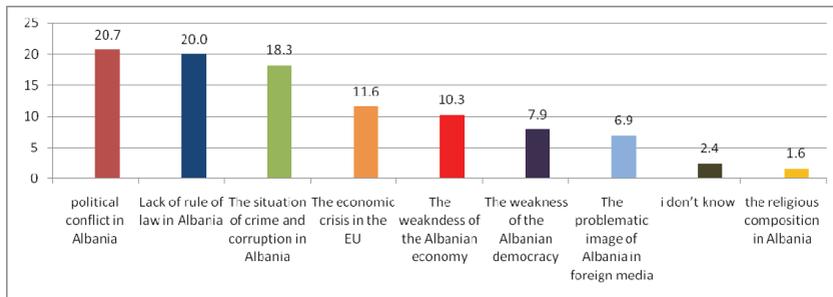


Pointing only to responsible, individual and collective actors, to explain such a decision, which came as a surprise to the public opinion in Albania, would not be helpful in providing the complete picture and the context. Therefore, respondents were asked to identify the different factors they think were detrimental to the European Council’s decision in December. As graph 12 below suggests there is a very narrow difference between the two first factors selected by the majority of respondents. Political conflict in Albania seems to occupy the first spot with 20.7% and the lack of rule of law with 20%. Furthermore, the situation of crime and corruption in Albania ranks third in respondents’ choices with 18.3%. The first three factors are also frequently mentioned by the European Union, when assessing Albania’s progress towards integration. According to the decision of the European council in December 2013, “The Council welcomes further action in the fight against corruption and organized crime and the engagement of the new government to intensify efforts in this domain. The Council

hopes to take a decision in relation to the EU candidate status for Albania in June 2014, depending on the approval of the European Council, upon the condition that Albania should continue with the encouraging progress made so far”.<sup>16</sup>

Other factors mentioned as influencing the negative decision, were the economic crisis within the EU by 11.6%, often mentioned in the media and by different actors, weaknesses of the Albanian economy mentioned by 10.3%. Interestingly, despite being often discussed, the problematic image of Albania in foreign media is chosen only by 6.9% of respondents. The choices of the respondents are another indicator of the work needed inside the country, by domestic actors to tackle problematic issues such as corruption and the rule of law.

**Graph 12: Which of the following is the main factor of this decision?**



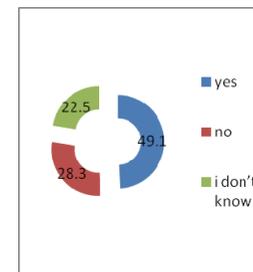
When the survey was conducted it was two months before the Opinion of the European Commission and decision of the European Council to grant Albania candidate status. In order to measure the pulse and expectations of citizens regarding this important decision for the country we asked them if Albania would be finally granted candidate status in June. As Graph 13 shows, a clear majority seemed optimistic, responding yes (49.1%). However, there were also pessimists who

16. European Union doesn't grant the candidate status to Albania. Independent Balkan News Agency. Online: <http://www.balkaneu.com/european-union-doesnt-grant-candidate-status-albania/>.

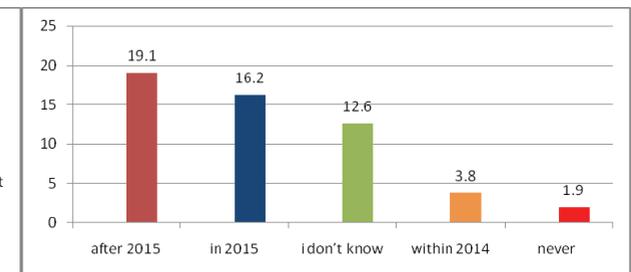
thought even this year the status would be postponed and another 22.5% were confused and didn't know what would happen in June.

For the minority who thought the June decision would be again negative there was a rather pessimistic outlook with the majority saying it would happen after 2015 followed by the second largest group who thought Albania would become a candidate country in 2015 and an almost irrelevant percentage of 3.8% of respondents who were somewhat more optimistic and placed the date within the year. Being refused many times the candidate status, a precedent in the region, at a certain point the issue became a fairy tale occupying the center of attention, where sometimes people forget that candidate status is only the next step towards opening accession negotiations.

**Graph 13: Will Albania be granted candidate status in June?**

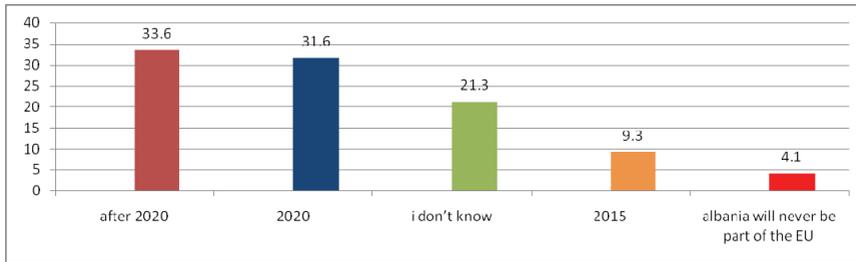


**Graph 14: When will Albania get candidate status?**



The process of becoming an EU member state will be long and despite a group of optimists who believe Albania will be part of the EU within 2020 (31.6%), a more realistic group places the date after 2020, a group which also comprises the majority of respondents. A large group of 21.3% of respondents, didn't know when to place the date and the two smallest groups, the overly optimistic (9.3%) think 2015 will be the date when Albania will join and the least hopeful (4.1%) who think Albania will never become part of the European Union.

**Graph 15: In your opinion, when will Albania join the European Union?**

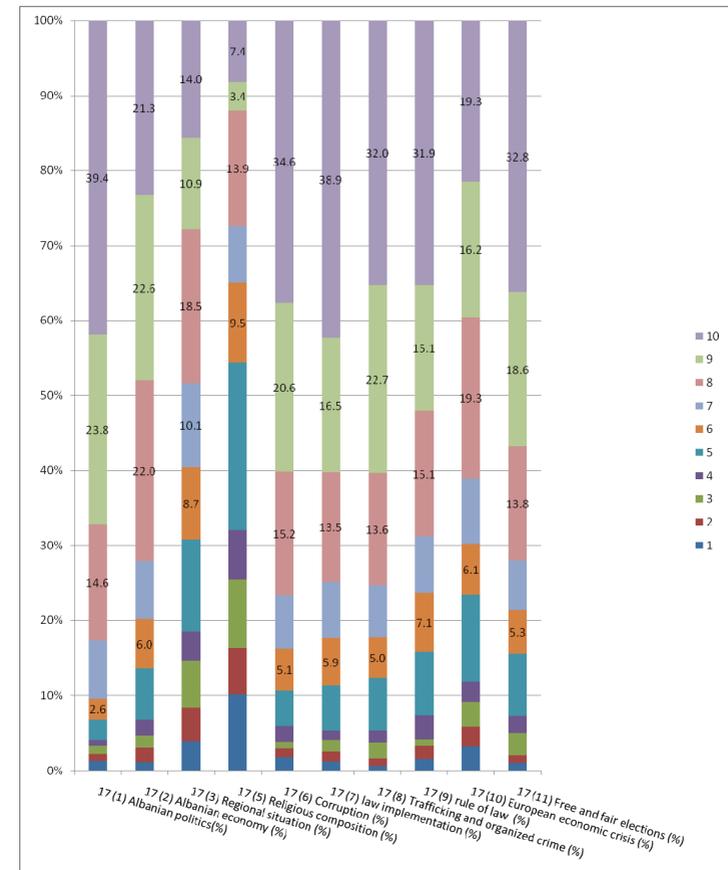


As mentioned earlier, the European integration processes are affected by several factors that determine the successes and failures of different efforts. Therefore, respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 10 a number of factors, where one would be the least important and 10 the most important. Seems Albanians place the least importance to the religion composition of the country, with only 7.4% of the respondents choosing it as more important. The second least important factor is the regional situation, with only 14% of respondents giving it a 10. Although the accession process is a bilateral one between the European Union and individual countries, the EU also sees the Western Balkans region as a whole and has a regional approach to the enlargement strategy. Therefore, the regional context, especially stability, plays a very important role in the overall progress of the Western Balkans countries. However, the choice of respondents to not consider it a deciding factor, might refer to the fact that Albania has served as a factor of peace and stability and has no significant disagreements with individual countries.

On the other hand, two are the most important factors chosen by respondents, respectively Albanian Politics with 39.4% ranking it as the most important factor and rule of law selected by 38.9% of respondents. Other important factors, placed in the middle, are corruption and trafficking and organized crime. All these factors, as pointed out previously have gained the attention of the

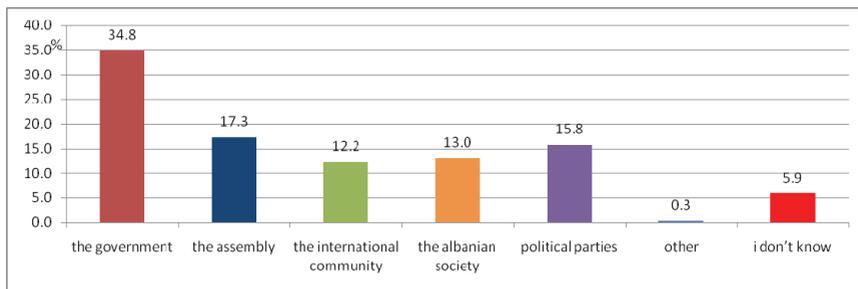
European Commission in its yearly reports and have become buzz words that are repeated almost on a daily basis. Makes sense that people consider the aforementioned factors as the most important ones that should and do influence the progress of the European integration process or lack thereof. Other factors include free and fair elections with 32.8% of respondents marking it with a 10, the Albanian economy (21.3%) and the European economy (19.3%).

**Graph 16: On a scale from 1 to 10 how important are the following factors for the European integration process?**



When asked which institutions are more important in the integration process an overwhelming majority of 34.8% identifies the Albanian government followed by a group of 17.3% which points to the Assembly as the key actor pushing forward the process and key reforms. The rest of the respondents are split between political parties (15.8%) and the Albanian society (13%). For several years the international community has taken less and less attention regarding its role in the European integration process, with only around 12% naming it as an important institution in the process.

**Graph 17: Which of the following institutions is more important in the integration process?**



**c. Strategic partners in the evaluation of Albanian citizens**

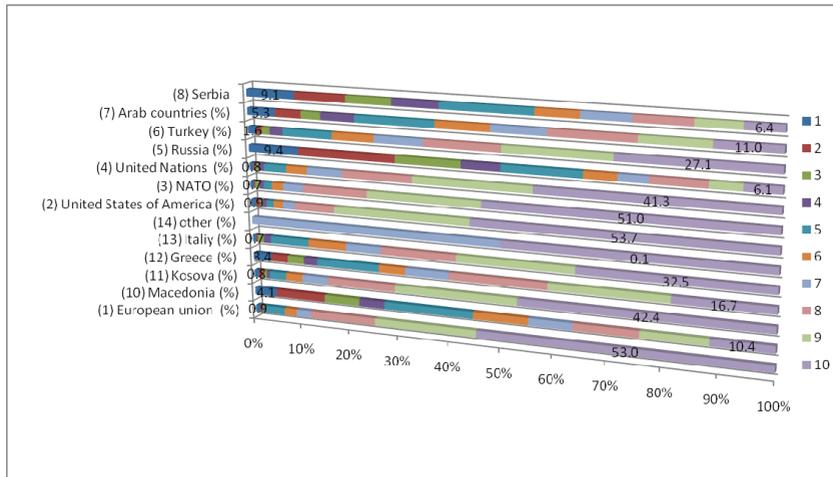
For a considerable period during the communist regime Albania had little to no contact with the outside world, becoming one of the most isolated countries in the world. The philosophy was to rely on its own forces and no one was to be trusted. Thus, speaking about strategic partners, cooperation and importance of relations with our countries from the region and wider was sporadic and only after the fall of the Albanian iron curtain during the 90's the concepts were circulating again with much freedom and actually became important aspects of the democratization process in the country. To better understand how people perceive Albania's

position in the regional and international arena we asked them to identify Albania's major strategic partners and the countries they think are most important for our national interest.

It is not surprising to see that the two countries (and group of countries) that are most important in the eyes of Albanians are the United States of America, with almost 80% of respondents evaluating its importance between 9 and 10 on a scale from 1 to 10; and the European Union with approximately 70% of respondents evaluating its importance between 9 and 10. The result suggests that despite the European Union occupying central stage in the public discourse and media, people consider the United States as the most important strategic partner of Albania, due to the long time support it has provided for the country from the most difficult times after the fall of communism until now. Ranked third is NATO, where Albania is a member since 2009. The marking of the fifth anniversary of NATO membership which brought it to the limelight of celebrations and reflections on achievements perfectly justifies the presence of NATO in the perceived most important partners for Albania.

On the other hand, standing at the bottom of the list are Russia and Serbia, with the majority of respondents considering these countries the least important compared to the others. Although Russia has never been on the side of the important partners for Albania, it is rather surprising to see it is the least important partner in the view of the majority of respondents. An explanation might be the recent crisis in Ukraine and Russia's intervention which evokes also parallels with Kosovo and Serbia. Regarding countries from the region and immediate neighbors, our expectations were fulfilled since Kosovo is considered the most important partner, followed by Italy.

**Graph 18: From 1 to 10 how much attention should the Albanian government pay to the following countries?**



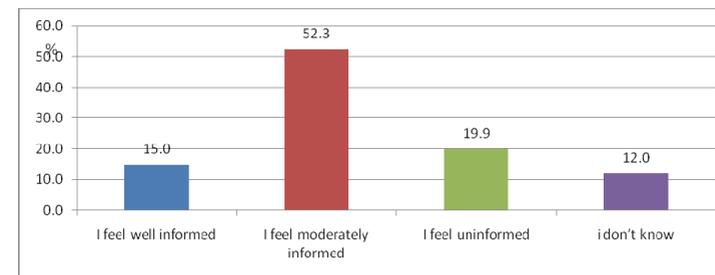
**d. Sources of information**

The level of information of Albanian citizens regarding the European integration process is often cause for concern as our findings throughout the years suggest that there are gaps between what people know about the European integration process and what the latter actually entails. In the 2013 survey, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt uninformed regarding the European integration process, with 50% responding they feel moderately informed and 28% felt there was lack of information. Only 18% felt well informed. Furthermore, from the 2012 survey a considerable 27.3% of respondents thought Albania was already a candidate country, even though it received candidate status only in June of this year.

This year, when asked how much informed they feel, the clear

majority (52.3%) responded moderately informed while in the second place rank those who feel there is a lack of information on the process (19.9%). Only 15% of respondents feel well informed on the different aspects of the European integration process, which is a concerning trend. Considering the high level of support for European integration, as well as the importance Albanians place to this process, this lack of information should raise concern among policy makers, media outlets and civil society organizations to make it more visible to the larger public.

**Graph 19: Do you feel properly informed about the European Union and Albania’s integration?**

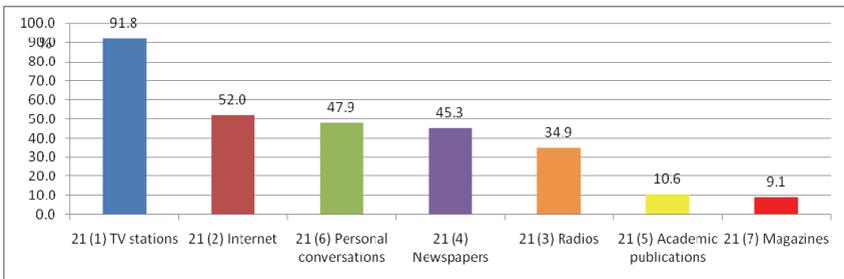


In order to assess where the information comes from generally, we asked respondents to choose the source of information they use the most for general news. As expected 91.8%, almost all of them, selected TV stations as their main source of information, where they get updated about what is happening around them. In second place, the internet was selected by a further 52%. Interestingly, newspapers have dropped significantly in the ranking with only 45.3% choosing them as sources of information. Even less use the radio (34.9%) and academic publications (10.6%) as well as magazines (9.1%).

Almost the same results can be seen when asked to choose the

sources of information regarding the European integration process. 90.1% selected television channels with a further 44.6% choosing the internet and ranked third are newspapers with 44.2%. The least used sources of information are different academic publications and activities and information provided by the European Union Delegation to Albania, through its EU info centers, which are spread in different cities of the country.

**Graph 20: What sources do you use for news in general?**



**Graph 21: What sources do you use to get knowledge on the European Union and the European integration process in general?**

