

Czech University of Life Sciences Prague

Faculty of Economics and Management

Department of Information Technologies



Bachelor Thesis

**Digital propaganda and voting behavior in the case of
Albania**

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Digital propaganda and voting behavior in the case of Albania

Objectives of thesis

Main objective:

Over the course of several years, Albania has experienced a continual manifestation of subtle variations of digital propaganda intertwined with the phenomenon of electoral activity. The main objective of the thesis is to investigate the perception and awareness of computational propaganda among the general public and voter behaviour in Albania.

Partial objectives:

- Investigate the historical context and background of electoral irregularities in Albania
- To perform sentiment and statistical analysis
- Compare the experiences of Albania with other countries in terms of electoral manipulations and computational propaganda

Methodology

The methodology will encompass the implementation of surveys and interviews targeting individuals directly or indirectly affected by aforementioned phenomenon, as this has not yet been thoroughly examined in the case of Albania. For the purposes of this thesis, the study will serve as a starting-point from which to conduct and compare similar studies concerning Albania and/or the Balkan political diaspora.

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Declaration

I declare that I have worked on my bachelor thesis titled "Digital propaganda and voting behavior in the case of Albania" by myself and I have used only the sources mentioned at the end of the thesis. As the author of the bachelor thesis, I declare that the thesis does not break any copyrights.

In Prague on 11.03.2024

Renis Jakini

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my family who was always there for me when it mattered the most, but more importantly, I would like to dedicate this thesis to *Amadea*, the most important person in my life who motivated me in every step and every difficulty I have faced so far.

Digital propaganda and voting behavior in the case of Albania

Abstract

Albania, part of the Western Balkan countries, has been continuously manifested with various types of digital propaganda over the course of several years. The citizens of Albania stand on different viewpoints of the present propaganda in their country whether they agree that this phenomenon is a problem, or whether it is not even happening in their daily life and processes. This study aims to examine the perception and awareness of the citizens of Albania by various methodologies such as an anonymous survey concerning the level of propaganda topic in their homeland, by statistical analysis approach through the formulation of hypothesis from the data of the survey, by sentiment analysis approach of the comments of Albanian citizens in social media apps. At the same time, individual anonymous interviews with real-life experiences of digital propaganda, voting processes and corruption were conducted as well, to cement the main objective of the study.

In conclusion, the implementation of the methodologies above show a really important result of how residents of Albania, in respect to the selected sample of the study, view their country and the propaganda present there and at the same time, show how these citizens are deciding to leave the country and have a better life, in most of the cases in European countries, rather than tackling these problems in the country they are born.

Keywords: Computational Propaganda, Elections, Albania, Sentiment Analysis, Statistics, Social Media, Interviews

Digitální propaganda a volební chování v případě Albánie

Abstrakt

V Albánii, která je součástí západního Balkánu, se v průběhu několika let neustále projevují různé druhy digitální propagandy. Občané Albánie zastávají různé názory na současnou propagandu ve své zemi, ať už souhlasí s tím, že tento jev je problém, nebo že se v jejich každodenním životě a procesech vůbec nevyskytuje. Cílem této studie je prozkoumat vnímání a povědomí občanů Albánie pomocí různých metodik, jako je anonymní průzkum týkající se úrovně tématu propagandy v jejich vlasti, pomocí přístupu statistické analýzy prostřednictvím formulace hypotéz z dat průzkumu, pomocí přístupu analýzy sentimentu komentářů albánských občanů v aplikacích sociálních médií. Současně byly provedeny také individuální anonymní rozhovory s reálnými zkušenostmi s digitální propagandou, volebními procesy a korupcí, aby se upevnil hlavní cíl studie.

Závěrem lze říci, že implementace výše uvedených metodik ukazuje skutečně důležitý výsledek toho, jak obyvatelé Albánie, s ohledem na vybraný vzorek studie, vnímají svou zemi a propagandu v ní přítomnou, a zároveň ukazuje, jak se tyto občané rozhodují raději opustit zemi a mít lepší život, ve většině případů v evropských zemích, než řešit tyto problémy v zemi, kde se narodili.

Klíčová slova: Počítačová propaganda, volby, Albánie, analýza sentimentu, statistika, sociální média, rozhovory

Table of content

1	Introduction.....	11
2	Objectives and Methodology.....	12
2.1	Objectives.....	12
2.2	Methodology	12
3	Literature Review	13
3.1	History.....	13
3.1.1	The Big Transition.....	13
3.1.2	Overview of the Political Context of Albania	15
3.2	The Voting behavior	15
3.2.1	The Process Behind	15
3.2.2	Voter’s choice – The factors	17
3.3	The Rise of Digital Propaganda	18
3.3.1	How Do Manipulation Campaigns Use Digital Advertising as a Weapon?19	
3.3.2	Propaganda and corruption in electoral processes in Albania	20
3.3.3	The Role of Social Media	22
3.4	A Wide Balkan Comparison	23
3.4.1	The historical and political context of Western Balkan.....	24
3.4.2	Kosovo	26
3.4.3	Bosnia And Herzegovina.....	26
3.4.4	Serbia	27
3.4.5	North Macedonia	28
3.4.6	Montenegro.....	29
3.4.7	Similar Characteristics of These Countries	29
3.5	Future Directions.....	30
3.5.1	Related studies	31
3.5.2	Main Summary	32
3.6	Research Questions	33
4	Practical Part.....	34
4.1	Statistical Analysis Approach	34
4.1.1	Explanatory Data Analysis	35
4.1.2	Data Retrieval I.....	43
4.1.3	Data Preparation I.....	43
4.1.4	Cross-Data Analysis	44
4.2	Sentiment Analysis Approach.....	49
4.2.1	Data Retrieval II.....	49
4.2.2	Data Preparation II.....	51

4.2.2.1	Data Cleaning	51
4.2.2.2	Analyzing the data	52
4.2.3	Data Interpretation	53
4.3	Interview Analysis Approach	54
5	Results and Discussion	56
5.1	Results from Statistical Analysis Approach	56
5.2	Results from the Sentiment Analysis Approach	60
5.3	Results from the Interview Analysis Approach	63
6	Conclusion	65
7	References	67
8	List of pictures, tables, graphs and abbreviations	70
8.1	List of pictures	70
8.2	List of Graphs	70
8.3	List of Tables	70
8.4	List of abbreviations	71
Appendix	71

1 Introduction

Over the course of several years, Albania is known as a country where the propaganda, especially the digital propaganda has the most influential role in every political process, where everything related to elections, voting processes, its results and the day-to-day interactions of the general public are a subsequence of this very first phenomenon which has shaped the life of Albanian citizens.

While this topic is a starting point in this direction, on the other hand it is one of the most interesting and intriguing phenomena happening in Albania right now. Studying and investigating digital propaganda in Albania is crucial, because the propaganda is touching the most important systems of the country, including the voting system, the mindset of people, the settings of the government and every real-life scenario of every individual including their personal life, their workplace experience and most importantly, it is influencing the future of the country, the youth.

Subsequently, young students and the general workforce are leaving the country in serious numbers, with the aim to find a better place, propaganda free, in order to have a life where meritocracy is deserved and not bought. While at the same time, a large percentage of this group is still remaining in Albania, where the reasons may be personal, financial, the overall dissatisfaction of the selected sample is obvious and is not improving, but rather, the numbers are negatively declining each and every day.

The overall objective of the research is to understand how the Albanian citizen understands the term “Digital Propaganda”, how they perceive the propaganda in their life and whether they are aware or not if this phenomenon is part of their home country or not. More often than usual, people of countries that experience this kind of propaganda, especially when it is a digital one, which intertwines deeply in everybody’s life, deny the fact that this occurrence is happening or are not even aware of the term or the consequences of it.

Moreover, the main focus will be in the substrata of people who are eligible to vote, meaning citizens eligible to vote in Albania, since voter’s behavior is crucial to study the digital propaganda in the political events and at the same time it is the age group which directly linked with every process in the country.

2 Objectives and Methodology

2.1 Objectives

Over the course of several years, Albania has experienced a continual manifestation of subtle variations of digital propaganda intertwined with the phenomenon of electoral activity. The main objective of the thesis is to investigate the perception and awareness of computational propaganda among the general public and voter behavior in Albania.

Partial objectives:

- Investigate the historical context and background of electoral irregularities in Albania
- To perform sentiment and statistical analysis
- Compare the experiences of Albania with other countries in terms of electoral manipulations and computational propaganda.

2.2 Methodology

The methodology will encompass the implementation of surveys and interviews targeting individuals directly or indirectly affected by aforementioned phenomenon, as this has not yet been thoroughly examined in the case of Albania. For the purposes of this thesis, the study will serve as a starting point from which to conduct and compare similar studies concerning Albania and/or the Balkan political diaspora.

Part of the methodology as well, will be the to perform:

- Statistical Analysis
- Sentiment Analysis

3 Literature Review

Albania, or also called the “Land of Eagles” is a sovereign country located in South-eastern Europe, in the Balkan part of the continent. As we know, the countries located in this area had a similar political and economic development due to various reasons across their history. Some of these countries lacked a main state figure to develop their country to the highest places and some other countries were penalized from the previous reigns in their respective history. In the case of Albania, it happened to be a mix of both reasons and other motives across the years, where each one of them influenced in the other and in this way, a chain-reaction was born, which in this chapter, we will see, that how much it contributed to the voting behavior and the digital propaganda associated with it across the years.

3.1 History

Like many countries in the past, it was the turn of Albania to overcome the Republic Party, or as known during that time the Party of Labor reign, which was nothing else but communist dictatorship, a harsh one, which even nowadays has contributed to many consequences. And this harshness was not around for a few years, but for around 50 years, almost half a century, which it must be said that, for the future generations to come, it really affected the way they thought, interacted and perceived the world around them, the world which was common for the rest of the planet during those years, but a completely new one to the country of Albania. (Mezini, 2002)

Even though communist countries followed a similar way of reign and alliances, during the 1970s Albania was totally isolated as a country and any liberating movement from 1950s until late 1980s was severely punished from the state committee, where not only the person who committed “the crime” would be punished, but their whole family and generation would be in huge trouble. As it can be imagined these crimes would differ from admitting having seen a dream against the ideology of the Party of Labor to the actual crimes which are punishable nowadays. It is more than understandable, that in a communist place like this, the voting process was near inexistent.

Citizens could not choose between two or more candidates, there was only one choice and as a part of totalism regimes, people had to pretend to go to the public voting areas and “to select” the politician they believed was the best for the job, the running for Prime Minister job. In other words, everybody during the fifty years, was obligated to select one name and only. The most unbelievable part of this totality was that people across the country believed that the Prime Minister of that time was right, his ideology was the most efficient one and any other Liberian approach was wrong and non-sense. People, somehow, were fed with a false doctrine over the years and the only way out of it was for them to see the outer world, the countries outside Albania and this was made possible only after the death of the communist ruler. (Biberaj, 2011)

3.1.1 The Big Transition

Shortly after the communism reign, the big transition arrived. Comparing with the other countries in the region, Albania’s change of government was a bit different. There were changes in the political parties from time to time. Also, in terms of financial basis, from a state-based economy to a democratic market-based one. This resulted to be a very difficult

transition, especially for the people, who had the most drastic change in terms of their social life, from a closed country to an open society based on the Western world.



Figure 1- Political Transformation of Albania

As a country, just chained off a total tyranny of a reign, the economy was non-functional, the society was traumatized and there was an extreme poverty across the population. (Civici, 2014)

Because of this grave state of economy, the Albanian transition process needed time to heal, to improve, or to even attempt to go back to the bright years of King Ahmet Zogu. People, sick and tired of all those years in complete isolation started to destroy everything, from greenhouses; machineries; hundreds of irrigation systems, to breaking the glasses of households and factories. This was very understandable at the time because it seemed like a response of all that time, where everybody believed firmly what the Party stated. At the same time, a certain part of the population took advantage of the raging events happening and started forming quickly trafficking human being nets all; money laundering schemes; the rise of narcotic substances and weapons. All these components impacted hugely in the strengthening of certain individuals and parties, which soon would be the main faces of the political background for many years in Albania.

Despite profound changes and clear accomplishments in all aspects of life, there was still much work to be done. (Nexhipi, 2019)

3.1.2 Overview of the Political Context of Albania

Even though, everybody was happy that the isolation times were over, and everybody was free in this newly fresher country, the initial steps for political democratization were not as faithful as those of other countries in the region.

During those years the most important political parties were The Democratic Party (PD) and The Socialist Party (PS). As we said above, before the democracy, people could only “vote” one party, but now things seemed to be different, because for the first time in many years, Albania had multiple options to choose for their government. As a result, outside of the educated elite of the capital, the concept of political parties and much more critical political opposition was almost entirely non-existent, or at best unformed. Even undemocratic ideas and attitudes were being spread along people, that did not even have any prior relationship with communism either. On the other hand, the other part of the community, aggregating in over 50% of the population were peasants and due to that, they had no clue or any familiar concept about the democratic ideas of the time. (Çullhaj, 2016)

It is important to mention, that during these years, the interference of foreign superpowers, especially from the United States was vital. Its aim was to establish a powerful central presidential government, to come with a solution for the foreign and existing native political issues.

There is also some positive news to take out of this time. In 2006, Albania made it possible to sign with EU the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Also in 2009, Albania became a complete member of NATO. These major steps helped and kept helping Albania down the road to the acceptance into the EU, even though the democratic standards are still not met accordingly with what is requested from the foreign organizations in the region. (Ferrara, 2014)

3.2 The Voting behavior

Since Albania finally got rid of the communist regime, the path of democratic regime has been paved. Almost a quarter-century has elapsed since then, and the counting of votes after each electoral process has been fairly contested by the opposition. Manipulation in the manual numbering process is documented in all reports of international organizations responsible for election monitoring in Albania. This is an existing problem even nowadays, especially for a country, who was begging for freedom and free choice.

The idea was and still continues to be, to have a full electronic voting behavior system, where the manipulation would be near zero and the actual free will of the citizens would be fulfilled.

3.2.1 The Process Behind

During the years from 1991 to 2008, votes for the electoral processes are done in voting halls. After the voting process is finished the 4 most important parties bring one commissioner each and they count the votes. Because of this, other parties tend to believe that the results are manipulated by these major parties. Due to this a huge number of the small parties, who do not have commissioners in the counting tables, more often claim that their votes were stolen, the process was manipulated, and a chaos is formed. The consequences of these events often lead to hunger strikes, protests, and manifestations across the city from these small parties. Usually, the request of these parties is to reopen vote boxes

and recount the votes, but sadly at the time, this procedure was prohibited from the constitution. (Teneqexhi, 2017)



Figure 2- Hunger strike in the Albanian Parliament from LSI party
(VOTE IS SACRED)

Because of the discontent of the other parties, the Albanian Government makes some important changes. Now the counting of votes would happen in big places with the possibility for proper monitoring and counting process. In the table, there are still four members in total, who belong to the major parties involved in the election. The other small parties have no choice, but to trust the process, but the difference this time is that they can monitor the process.

The process works in this way:

Every single vote paper is manually passed in front of an HD camera, and everyone in front of a large monitor can view it. During this process, a digital video is recorded for future proposals, and the commissioners gather the papers in accordance with the parties to whom the votes belong. But picture 72 subjects on the ballot paper. It is critical to emphasize that the commissioners do not count the papers during this process, only group them. However, the observers (the other parties) must count their votes in front of large monitors if they can. To tally his party's votes from the monitor, the other parties must be extremely focused. It is an extremely time-consuming task, where for a second, you can lose track of the running votes. There were also some suggestions to implement electronic techniques in 2013, but they were short lived. The new technology, which was a pilot project, suggests counting the votes by scanning the papers. All the papers in a box must be hand unfolded, straightened, and properly stacked with the head up. This stack of papers is inserted into the scanner, and the software creates enough alphanumeric data to provide the result. However, the maximum number of subjects on a page for this sort of scanner is 42. The Albanian case is unusual. We have 72 parties registered with the Central Commission of Elections for elections. This is why the project could not come into reality and was shortly abandoned. (Kuneshka, et al., 2018)



Figure 3 - Actual Monitoring Infrastructure

3.2.2 Voter's choice – The factors

Studies and evaluations of democracy in post-communist, thus developing, countries do not usually demonstrate the same beliefs about linking democracy level with voter turnout in elections. Because of that, studies suggest that a democracy in lower levels has a bad influence in the participation of elections. Same, opposed to the first statement, in developed countries with developed democracy, the participation is also low. But nonetheless, it can be agreed that democracy level plays an important role in this discussion. It should be considered that for nations emerging from a communist regime, as Albania did, and because of the extreme poverty this transition brings, citizens are falsely promised by the major more powerful parties and due to this the election participation is hugely favored to the parties who “promise more”. (Berdufi, et al., 2016)

As a result, the electorate may become passive, resulting in lower voting turnout.

Another component is corruption, which is linked to voter turnout in elections. In post-communist countries, the same logic applies to the corruption determinant. Corruption of voters or the voting process itself is frequently referenced and is a persistent issue in Albania. Many studies suggest that the Albanian citizens are really influenced from corruption in a variety of ways. This happens because, people think that the electoral process is already corrupted and there is nothing they can do about it, so a part of them totally abandon the process and another part just attends it for the sake of participation. Either way, it results into the voter becomes passive. (Kostelka, 2014)

According to popular belief in Albania, each voter is increasingly concentrated on resolving individual and family difficulties, such as ensuring a minimal economic family life. Other points of view and research findings indicate that the same economic situation increases voter involvement in the world of politics. Of course, we should explore a third possible viewpoint as well.

The economy or its variations have little effect on voter turnout. As a result, if the voter does not base his or her decision on economic grounds, additional aspects such as democratic, psychological, sociological, and so on, should be considered and analyzed. This last logic, as well as the democratic aspects, should be considered. According to studies and theories, voter turnout in post-communist nations is influenced by the key influencing elements of

democratic level, electoral process, corruption, and objective factors such as economic development, GDP, inflation, and unemployment. According to polls in Albania, these four economic variables are the most pressing issues for Albanian voters. (Berdufi, 2018)

Last, but definitely not least by importance, it is vital to take a look at the electoral campaign finances in Albania. The findings indicate that electoral campaign funding in Albania, particularly in-kind donations, are not completely open. Despite laws and constraints, informal contributions to parties and campaigns are difficult to track. Clientelist practices are widely employed during elections, and they distort elections because they are used to solve everyday concerns in exchange for votes, as a kind of intimidation, or as preferential treatment of voters. Individual and corporate contributions to political parties are restricted by law to avoid undue influence on political choices. While such constraints technically exist in Albania, data suggests that there are gaps between legal norms and practice, which can undermine the quality of elections and administration. (Kera, et al., 2020)

3.3 The Rise of Digital Propaganda

False information and other forms of deceptive, anti-democratic communication have surfaced as issues for Internet regulation. While such operations are not restricted to political politics, attempts to influence, and disrupt elections have raised serious concerns. Data-driven digital advertising is critical in the facilitation of political manipulation efforts. Manipulation operations, rather than being isolated events, highlight fundamental flaws within digital advertising markets and infrastructures. Manipulation campaigns and international influence operations rarely rely solely on digital advertising; they also use false front groups, impostor social media accounts, search engine algorithms, and bots to corrupt online dialogues, among other tactics. Authorities have begun to recognize and respond to a new set of challenges related with deceptive online political messages in recent years. The phrase "manipulation campaigns" refers to a variety of deceptive communication methods that use data-driven advertising to target vulnerable people in an attempt to modify speech or behavior to meet strategic goals. (Bradshaw, et al., 2018)

While the digital methods of manipulation campaigns can be utilized by anyone, the most sophisticated operations will almost certainly be backed by individuals with significant resources to spend to these efforts. Historically, major ad platforms have operated as open marketplaces, open to any advertiser that meets basic quality rules. Platforms have tightened limitations in recent years in response to issues, introducing various processes for advertiser verification and blocking access to ad services for particular organizations.

Three interlocking communication capacities are provided by digital ad infrastructure.

1. The first is the ability to construct thorough customer profiles through consumer monitoring.
2. The ability to target highly segmented audiences with targeted messaging across devices and contexts is the second.
3. The third attribute is the ability to automate and optimize tactical elements of influence. (Crain, et al., 2019)

3.3.1 How Do Manipulation Campaigns Use Digital Advertising as a Weapon?

It's difficult to picture the huge and expansive infrastructure of monitoring, profiling, and optimization that powers data-driven advertising being constructed without public promises of its benign intentions. Representatives of the digital ad business have repeatedly assured people and authorities that the goal of this sophisticated targeting is merely to make advertising more efficient, which benefits both consumers and advertisers. For example, the Digital Advertising Alliance of Canada asserts that targeting results in "better ads" for user because, "when advertisers use online interest-based advertising tools, you get ads that are more interesting, relevant, and useful to you." (Zimmer, 2018)

Concerns regarding manipulation have long haunted both commercial and political advertising. There is a substantial critical communication literature that examines the strategies used by advertisers to affect desires, imaginations, and cultural meaning-making processes.⁴⁶ There are many parallels between digital techniques and traditional advertising practices. It would be a mistake to focus solely rupture in critical strategies to data-driven advertising. Political manipulation campaigns also weaponize digital advertising by utilizing it to identify and target vulnerable points of influence, albeit in some situations the strategies used by political manipulators differ from those used by commercial manipulators. Political manipulators may employ some of the same behavior modification strategies; however, the majority of known political manipulation campaigns focus on amplifying or channeling group-based identity threats. (Matz, et al., 2017)

How can the Political Weaponization of Digital Advertising be stopped and what are the policy approaches that must be made?

As foreign interference and manipulation tactics sparked global debate about social media and disinformation efforts, key social media companies began to indicate that they were prepared to take on new duties. Prior to 2016, prominent social media corporations exhibited little concern about whether their networks were aiding in the spread of disinformation or manipulating content. Regulations governing digital advertising have not kept up with rapid technology advances. Regulators have also been unable to evaluate the more gradual paradigm shift represented by digital advertising, in which data-driven targeting and testing have become essential aspects of persuasion. Aside from the demonstrated failures of tech companies to respond on their own, self-regulation approaches have several inherent flaws:

- a) there is no powerful position for public advocates when industry and public interests diverge.
- b) self-regulations are difficult to enforce.
- c) they may not be well coordinated across companies and are subject to change without public or democratic input.

Authorities must take steps to ensure that most choices about digital ad systems are not left to the sole authority of private firms, who rightly priorities their own financial interests over other concerns. Here are some approaches:

- 1- **The "infrastructure approach"** - investigates how policy may reduce the communication abilities driven by data advertising that allows operatives to target vulnerable targets for influence, as well as how digital media structures can be

designed in ways that positively encourage free and open democratic communication.

- 2- **The “militarization approach”** - The militarization framework comprises countries that promote increased surveillance of—and potentially control over—digital media by military and intelligence organizations. This approach's defenders also call for the deterrent of external attacks through counterattacks, sanctions, or diplomatic measures. It should be underlined that encouraging increased surveillance and militarization of digital communication creates new risks to free and open democratic dialogue.
- 3- **The “bad actors’ approach”** - is the most conservative and least radical of advertising company structures. In this situation, governments or tech corporations concentrate their efforts on identifying a select group of "bad actors"—such as foreign agents—responsible for political manipulation. This method attempts to remove these troublemakers or the bad content they have created without reforming the digital advertising architecture of data collection, content targeting, and testing, which allows for exploitation. (Englehardt, et al., 2016)

3.3.2 Propaganda and corruption in electoral processes in Albania

As it is mentioned above, unfortunately even that after 1989 the new era began in Albania, a democratic era where people are supposed to vote in a free manner and the voter turnout should be corresponding with the actual votes, it must be said that a lot of corruption and propaganda is happening in this post-communist country. There is always some problem with the votes counting and with the political budget of each party during the election manifestations. Also due to this, different findings show a strong difference in deficits during pre- and post-elections quarters. Also, at the same time despite the electoral code clearly prohibiting broadcasters from airing election propaganda as news content, Albanian TV networks have released their current election advertisement pricelists, with several of them advertising spaces for paid appearances on editorial shows. Albania's Central Electoral Commission, CEC, has received notification of a total of seven TV channels' advertising pricelists, with five of them - News 24, Report TV, A2 CNN, Fax News, and ABC News - providing products and services ranging from "paid news" to "special identities" or simply "mentions" on TV shows. An invitation to participate in a televised discussion costs several thousand euros, according to the information, and is the most expensive "item" for sale. Albania's electoral code forbids TV stations from presenting election propaganda as journalistic material and imposes severe limits on the amount of sponsored advertising that political organizations can purchase. Networks are also required not to price discriminate against particular political issues. The election law also includes comprehensive rules on news content, giving rival parties equal time, and prohibiting the transmission of political propaganda on "news shows." The CEC then supervises television broadcasts during campaigning and has the right to levy fines. During election campaigns, the sale of press space or participation on talk shows is nothing uncommon in Albania. According to a BIRN report published in 2017, certain broadcasting networks openly advertised sales of time on their news and political chat shows to candidates running for MPs or mayors. (Karaj, 2019) According to the research of the genesis of the link between politics and media, Albanian media appears to be entirely politicized. Even as previously demonstrated, neither established laws nor the regulatory and controlling authorities of the law have sufficient

capacity to exercise influence on the media, because they are themselves politically engaged. As a result of increased commercial interest, the media has succumbed to politics, demonstrating yet another moral component of Albanian media. As a result of their political enslavement, they have been contradictory in the editorial views they have taken, sometimes becoming minions of the parties in power and at times attacking their work. Can the Albanian media break free from this stereotype, which has been linked to politics throughout history? As previously said, this is well anchored in the birth of the media's relationship with politics and the reasons provided thus far, but reality has also demonstrated that the media cannot escape anything because of which they were founded. If political interests were entirely separate yesterday, they are now linked with economic ones. Thus, another factor demonstrating the media's subordination to politics is the lack of transparency in financial resources derived from parallel enterprises with owners. (Piechota, 2011)

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

ALBANIA

Score

36/100 [What does the CPI score mean?](#)

Rank

101/180

Score change

↑ +1 since 2021

Figure 4 - CPI rank of Albania

Score changes 2012 - 2022

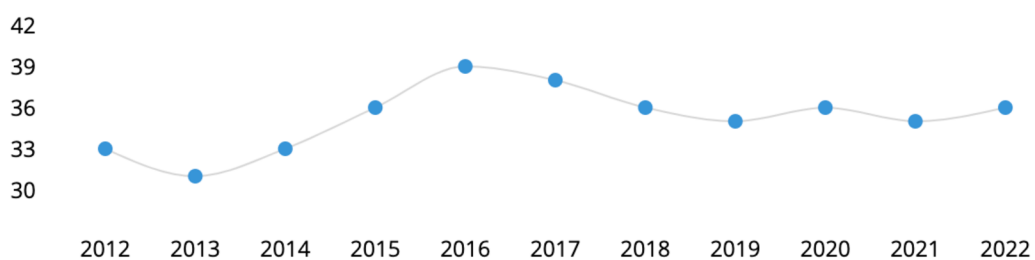


Figure 5 - Score changes in CPI through the years

When the majority of the press tends to be favored more to the ruling political party (using different strategies), the people, also, are more likely to watch and be fed with more news supporting that particular party. Due to this, media is portrayed as secret agents, who play a major role in promoting the ideology and viewpoints of those specific political parties to the nation's society.

Aside from this direct use of the media for campaigns, there is also the creation of records by reporters that do not meet any criteria for journalism but are indications of the parties' political activities in an attempt to gather electoral credits through the media. Based in a

study on the influence of public relations in the media conducted by a group of lecturers at the Department of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tirana, 80% of news reported in the press can come from public relations sources, the majority of which are found in the political sector and the internet. According to what has been stated above, the press in Albania is more of an instrument that sits between information and propaganda, and while it seeks to be professional, the impact of several reasons within as well as outside of Albania gives it a propagandistic nature. Due to the high level of news originating from political parties' public relations and political marketing tactics, the powerful influence of politics in the media, and the influence of its ownership on the content of the news, the media becomes an easy prey to political party propaganda messages, and it does not even try to be secret. It is a media characteristic that has a significant impact on how the public uses the media, because it emphasizes public differentiation according to the media, contributing to societal polarization, widening the gap between the media and individuals-voters who do not identify politically, and making professional efforts on her part difficult. Furthermore, a lack of meaningful information and informative content might lead to skepticism of media coverage. (Kajsiu, 2012)

3.3.3 The Role of Social Media

The application of technology has transformed how politicians interact with voters and conduct electoral campaigns. The influence of new technologies on the features of political participation has its own set of qualities, including interactive communication, openness, and accessible to all citizens. The internet is both an information source, a communication tool, and a component of the public realm. The crises of conventional forms of political engagement have given rise to new channels and modalities of participation. With the presence of social media, now politicians and citizens can communicate with each other really easy. The engagement is done through various online applications or websites such as the powerful Marc Zuckerberg's Meta (known as Facebook), or even Instagram or Twitter. Here in these websites, it can be seen promotions of different levels of political campaigns (pre- and post) and because of this the social media is valued as an instrument for advertisement and communication. The number of projected voters and followers of any political candidate is estimated using Facebook groups and pages, tweets, and stories. These media outlets may sway voter preferences in favor of one political candidate or another. (Weinstein, 2014)

Politicians are now facing new issues because of this mode of communication. Politicians have a vast social media network, and their posts on popular networks such as Facebook can reach a large number of people. Through social media, political experts and other major influences engage to the conversation about politics. Social media can serve as an open space for virtual political discourse and opinion forming processes by allowing users to obtain data in real time and openly express their thoughts and opinions. Citizen participation, social media use, political trust shift, and democracy are overall indicators that are reasonably autonomous from one another, with the latter relating to acceptance of democratic political institutions and their operation rather than support for democracy as an ideology. That means, that certain individuals that are against the current democracy, are not against democracy as a form of reign in general, but they wish the current one would work in a more efficient way. (Schäfer, 2013)

For the extent of this discussion, there are two main conflicting views on the role of press in the political processes:

- According to popular belief, the media is important because it offers valuable information to voters, which promotes political selection and accountability. Improved political accountability leads to overall higher policy and welfare quality. This indicates that information exchange via media plays a critical role, as citizens require access to knowledge in order to make decisions regarding politics. According to research, media exposure affects voter participation and may have a favorable long-term influence on political interest.
- On the other hand, of course, we cannot assume that the use of media in politics results in an overall improvement in policy quality. The reason for that is that even though the media has all these benefits, it should not be forgotten that a considerable amount of fake data is always appearing across the internet and all the social medias. All the information and graphs and summaries of data, that can be found online need to be proof checked before using it as a truthful source of reliability. (Hasrama, et al., 2020)

The media is a vital aspect during campaign elections because it keeps people up to date on the development of the nominee and allows them to change their vote choice.

- The media constantly broadcasts the propaganda created during the campaign. They are immediately informing the public about what is going on. Campaigners purchase advertising space in order to reach a larger number of people more quickly.
- By refusing to advertise tiny parties, the media can selectively broadcast misinformation. Meanwhile, the media can be political with players in their own right.
- Propaganda can be disseminated through traditional media channels. Although a comprehensive transcript is not available, newspapers display the campaign message in news sections and advertisements.
- The media presents campaign propaganda in the setting of content that they have created. They present their own ideas on who they want to win by providing campaign and public policy reports. (Pasmaçiu, 2015)

3.4 A Wide Balkan Comparison

As seen from the history, Balkan as a region and all the countries, which are part of it had a rough road to political and economic development. Of course, some of the countries evolved faster, they recovered in no time and the political state of these specific countries flourished. But on the same time, most of the other countries, due to the severe regimens of the past, took a considerable amount of time to get back on track. Religion, language, culture, and ethnic distinctions are all present in the Balkan Peninsula. Under these conditions, the uniformity of states, particularly those founded on the consolidation of blood and territory, is challenged by the increasing speed of global movement and, as a result, by the transformation of power forms, with unexpected consequences for their alleged security, either territorially or constitutionally. Nevertheless, it is under these incompatible, if not

conflictual, circumstances that the countries of the Western Balkans are putting their hopes of stabilization, progress, and democratization into the perspective of the EU integration, when neither the peripheral areas nor the central states have significantly settled their accounts with Europe's mobile and fluid identities, the four EU freedoms, and cultural cooperation. (Bianchini, 2015)

3.4.1 The historical and political context of Western Balkan

After the wars in 1990s, the European Union and The United States have been trying with different legal instruments to implement the Western Balkan nations into the Trans-Atlantic organizations. Now, countries such as Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, and Bosnia & Herzegovina must put a lot of work, in order to follow the steps of Croatia, who became part of the EU in 2003. Because of the reason, that in these countries mentioned above, the reforms in the rule-of-law are not going as planned and are way behind the initial idea, the EU admission for the moment is suspended. According to a 2020 poll performed by the International Republican Institute, the region's inclination for joining the EU remains unchanged. The polls and other data show widespread unhappiness with the region's present political leadership, which is frequently comprised of the same ruling parties and contentious political individuals in power since Yugoslavia's split. According to these polls, residents in the Balkans are primarily concerned about unemployment, corruption, and an awful quality of life. (Cappello, et al., 2019)

In recent years, the region of Southeast Europe has seen a disproportionate number of conservative politics. The VMRO-DPMNE in North Macedonia, the SNS in Serbia, the SNSD in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the DPS in Montenegro have all abused their power in elections, the media, the rule of law, and public finances. Nonetheless, politicians prepared to break the rules of the game to gain an edge for themselves and their party have affected all countries. Several indices that assess the quality of democracy, notably the Varieties of Democracy index, support this pattern. (Bieber, 2020) (Kmezić, et al., 2017)

Disinformation is difficult to combat in the Western Balkans due to complicated media environments. The Balkan information arena is a mix of government-owned or connected mainstream news institutions, weak regulatory frameworks for online platforms, and an increase of new media sources, all while local newspapers are declining. Furthermore, countries are seeing smaller public discourse zones, with individuals and media being assaulted for questioning or critiquing the administration. Balkan audiences generally get their news through television, and the main stations are typically controlled by ruling parties, who frequently spread inaccurate or politically motivated storylines. Social media and online portal use is expanding among younger generations, which brings its own set of issues as sources of information on these platforms become more veiled and tales may be swiftly disseminated and widely distributed. Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania utilized a private telecommunications operator, Vodafone, to leave voice recordings advising Albanians to wash their hands and "protect one another from the media and the misleading news it promotes. (Erebara, 2020)

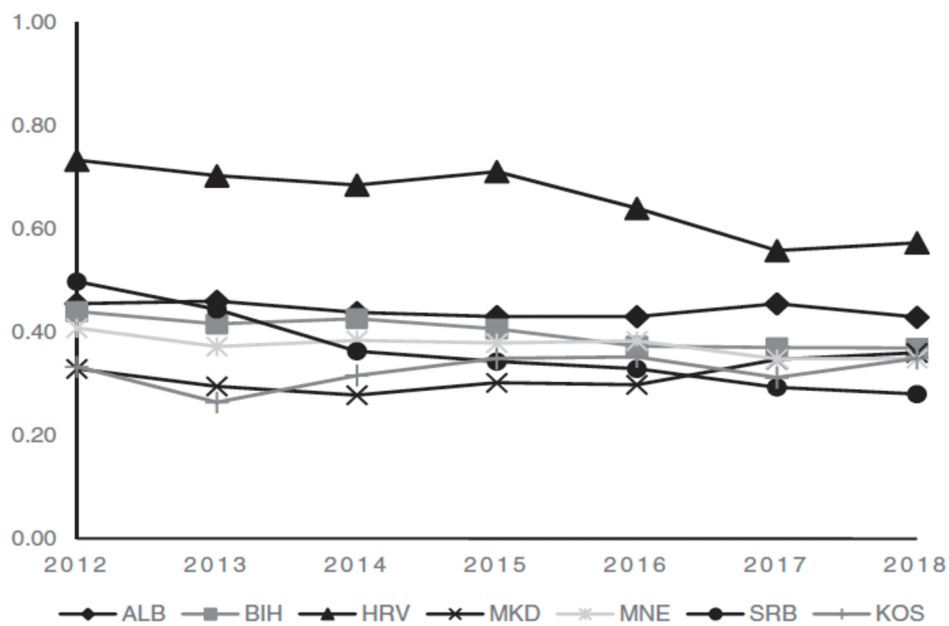


Figure 6 - V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index 2012-2018

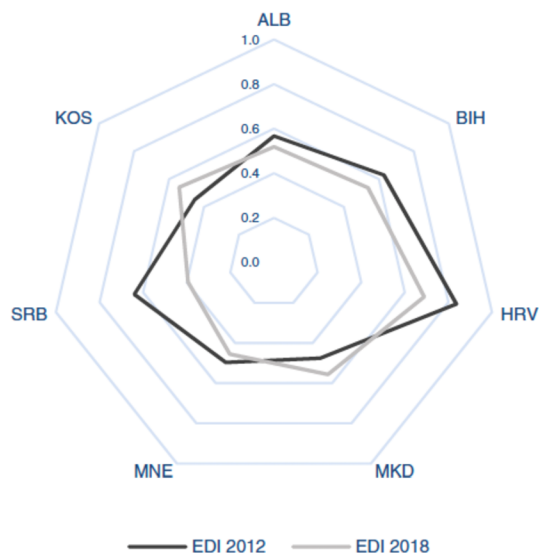


Figure 7 - Change in V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index 2012-2018

Russia manufactures and spreads disinformation in the Western Balkans. National politicians and organizations, in the contrary, serve as key players in the issue. Nonetheless, their role is typically reduced or skipped in in favor of stories that represent Russia and China as the key disinformation specialists in the Balkans. Local players spread false and misleading tales on their own initiative, sometimes coinciding with Russian narratives but acting independently to fulfil domestic interests. Some of these Western Balkan authorities are even developing novel ways to exploit "the danger of disinformation" to limit individual liberties and target political opponents, journalists, and ordinary individuals who use traditional and social media to protest government policies. Politicians across the region of

the Balkans identify critical voices as misinformation carriers, despite the fact that many provide valuable, regulated, and truthful reporting. (Doncheva, 2020)

3.4.2 Kosovo

Kosovo has the region's worst progress in terms of freedom of the press and transparency, dropping to 78th place in the World Press Freedom Index ranking for eight levels since 2020, when it was rated 70th. According to Reporters Without Borders, the media environment in Kosovo has become more unstable because of the coronavirus crisis, with journalists and media facing physical and verbal assaults, hacking attempts, pressure for self-censure, and a lack of transparency regarding media ownership. In terms of the source of disinformation, Kosovo differs from the other Western Balkan countries. As a country with a challenged position and a dedication to international recognition, Kosovo faces a significant risk of foreign disinformation campaigns with a geopolitical interest that does not intend to interfere in domestic or daily politics, but with an overall view of the state's existence as a whole. (Freedom House, 2021)

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) monitored election campaigns in news outlets on the internet and social media platforms from January 24 to February 13, 2021, during the Kosovo Parliamentary Elections on 14 February 2021. NDI evaluated 3693 news articles, 1289 Facebook posts, and 500 tweets relevant to the monitoring scope, among which 214 news articles and social media entries in Albanian and 50 in Serbian featured unsuitable or violent language. This analysis demonstrates that online portals and social media accounts generated divisive language throughout the election campaign by developing and manufacturing direct assaults and de-contextualizing politicians' words. Furthermore, sexism was evident on portals and social media, with inflammatory language used to attack female candidates regarding their personal lives, physical looks, and so on, as identified by the NDIA report as misogyny. Among different intentionally manipulative narratives or news, the one that reached an enormous amount of people on Facebook was a story that was created in the Kosovo Parliamentary elections on October 6th, 2020, and revived and brought back, the false accusations against a female candidate for president, Vjosa Osmani. According to NDI, the message reached 57,638 individuals on Facebook for the 2021 parliamentary election campaign. It is worth noting that Kosovo has the largest percentage of internet users in the region, with approximately 95 percent of the population using social media on every day of their lives. Kosovo has less Russian and Serbian-originating disinformation than other nations in the region due to language and cultural distinctions among the majority population. Nonetheless, misinformation persists, and media independence is under attack. Kosovo is one of the most apparent examples of how disinformation in the region is frequently manufactured locally, with domestic political actors' agendas in mind. (National Democratic Institute, 2021)

3.4.3 Bosnia And Herzegovina

Even though political and even media aspects seem to be divided along ethnic lines, Bosnian society is not as divided as the world around it thinks that is. Still, the three major political parties are divided by ethnicity: the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije, SDA-Bosniak), the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajdnica,

HDZ-Bosnian Croat), and the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata, SNSD-Bosnian Serb). Television, the most popular platform for consuming news in the country, is the major conduit for propagating party narratives. Each of the major member groups has its own broadcaster. All three broadcasters are effectively under the influence of the ruling parties.²⁰ Reported from the BBC, there are over 200 commercial TV and radio stations, with Serbian and Croatian networks further complicating an already complex media landscape. Bosnians, particularly young Bosnians, are flocking to online portals and Facebook for news, particularly when newspapers fall bankrupt, with many forced to close completely. (Šarić, 2012)

Additional studies revealed the difficulties faced by local journalists who are under pressure to produce information that is aligned with the objectives of the owners of their news organizations. Furthermore, journalists face libel claims for reporting negative articles about politicians. These realities worsen the country's disinformation problems. Bosnia still has a split internal political climate following the conflict. The concept of authority distribution is more successful in the case of a distinct community with political connection, but it is more difficult to create peaceful coexistence in communities with strict divisions such as ethnic, religious, and linguistic. BiH need stronger incentives for inter-ethnic collaboration as well as attention to political legitimacy. Instead of power sharing, the state should promote tolerance and peace building among factions. Post-war elections favored nationalist parties that advocated for ethnic separation. In this approach, the electoral system must be close to inter-ethnic cooperation prior to elections, fostering political pluralism that can assist steer long-term human-to-human relations. (Kartsonaki, 2016)

3.4.4 Serbia

Serbia is Montenegro's northeast neighbor and the biggest state in the Western Balkans. It has the closest relationship with Russia, as seen by its energy relationships, regular state visits, highly advertised military alliances, and cultural-religious links. Serbia is also well-known for its tangled ties with the West. Despite the tensions, a sizable proportion of Serbs favor a Western European orientation; if a referendum were held today, roughly half would choose to join the European Union. Serbians continue to feel strong anger against the West, particularly the United States, but also Western institutions, for their treatment of Serbs. Furthermore, because of NATO's 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia to resolve the war in Kosovo, most Serbians are strongly against to joining the alliance. (Stronski, et al., 2020)

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has demonstrated authoritarian characteristics, with Freedom House classifying Serbia as only "partly free," citing Vučić's government's stranglehold on the media and antagonistic treatment of reporters and members of the public. The hatred is manifested through orchestrated disinformation campaigns, harassment, and physical acts of violence directed at anyone who criticize the government. Although gendered harassment of journalists is common throughout the Western Balkans, Serbia has a particularly terrible reputation for how it treats female reporters and journalists. Vučić's mode of operation, especially his manipulating of the independent media, provoked major protests beginning at the end of 2018 and continuing in July 2020, in which people criticized his handling of the COVID-19 situation and voiced their concerns about Serbia's worsening condition of democracy. Despite considerable dissatisfaction with Vučić's authority, his

SNS-led government retains control of the majority of mainstream media outlets. Their reach extends to major tabloids such as *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraf*, where many Serbs acquire their news. These newspapers, which are recognized as deception and disinformation spreaders, are produced in large quantities and highly affordable, costing only 25 Serbian dinars or 25 cents in USD. (Aleks, 2018)

The Serbian administration has additionally complied with a worrying global pattern in which politicians attempt to undermine genuine voices, such as journalists, by accusing them of spreading disinformation. Simultaneously, the Serbian government has attempted to enhance its political messaging. The Serbian party in power used Russian techniques to denigrate journalists and fraudulently boost the popularity of the party and its positions. On Twitter, a "8,000-strong troll army promoting Serbia's ruling party" and targeting its opponents was discovered. Prior to deleting the 8,558 accounts for "inauthentic organized movement," Twitter discovered that these troll messages were consistently making their way into major Serbian and Russian media. (Milivojević, 2020)

3.4.5 North Macedonia

North Macedonia has moved up two places in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index rankings. Nonetheless, threats and insults directed towards the media and reporters, such as verbal and online abuse, go unchecked. The legal basis for achieving media freedom exists, but it is frequently subject to political determination and choice in case resolution. The media scene in North Macedonia has altered dramatically since the 2017 years, when the media was completely under the authority of the party and aided its disinformation and propaganda efforts. Following the 2017 election, a change in governmental institutions promised a new pluralist and democratic society. Nonetheless, political elites and bribery have dominated the media landscape. (Marusic, 2021)

Till 2017, the party in power (VMRO-DPMNE) pushed the country into a nationalist and anti-western mentality, leading the country 11 years away from democratic procedures. After 2017, a few steps were achieved, the name was changed, North Macedonia was granted NATO membership (2020), and the pro-European mood was restored. Even though the government's strategy regarding EU integration and NATO membership was not generally embraced by citizens, the ideology of the nationalistic party remains. However, these are marginalized ideas that arise only in specific circumstances, such as elections. (Bliznakovski, 2021)

The political conflict between the party in power and the other side (VMRO-DPMP) is currently centered on narratives of Macedonians' and the state's identity security, as well as processes that bring the country closer to EU membership. Investigative journalists and fact-checking organizations in North Macedonia have found a vast network of disinformation tactics starting in Hungary and Slovenia, which are linked and funded by Hungary's President, Victor Orban. This kind of disinformation campaign includes conservative internet media sites and publications that backed and perpetuated Gruevski's system. The latest Civilmedia research for news coverage during the North Macedonian constitutional presidential election held on July 15, 2020, each day followed the posts on news outlets and social media platforms that caused attention and a large number of reactions, which included elements of disinformation, offensive language, abuse to campaign individuals and other performers. The region of North Macedonia has 1.71 million internet users, with social media accounting for 57.6% of the overall population. (Saraqini, 2020)

3.4.6 Montenegro

Unlike the traditionally complicated Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro is portrayed as a stable Western Balkan nation. Nonetheless, Montenegro's internal relations, as well as those with neighboring countries, show cracks of their own.

Montenegrins largely acquire their news from television and online news websites, however 65% of the population has a high level of skepticism for the media. New radical online portals renowned for promoting misinformation have gained popularity as well. Local journalists emphasized in4s, a right-wing, pro-Russian, Serbian government-backed website that has become one of Montenegro's top ten most viewed websites. (Radović, et al., 2016)

Much of the current misinformation in Montenegro is centered on the division between the long-ruling DPS party (now in opposition) and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The contentious Law on Religious Freedom in Montenegro, which was passed in December 2019, caused widespread demonstrations. Referring to the European External Action Service (EEAS) and local journalists, both sides of the disagreement used misinformation. The EEAS discovered inaccurate reporting from Serbian media (part of which was state-owned), Russian-owned sources in Serbia (Sputnik Srbija), and certain Montenegrin media websites. These websites spread unverified, extreme content written by social media users and based on claims made by Russian, Montenegrin, and Serbian officials, including church representatives. DPS was also involved in disinformation campaigns, disregarding the scope and reasons for protests, which were triggered initially by the religious law but grew to include citizens who took to the streets in opposition to Ukanovi's government, corruption, and lack of progress over the past three decades. Montenegro, which bills itself as a stable republic on a politically unpredictable peninsula, demonstrates that it, too, suffers from disinformation spread by government and rival parties. (Palloshi, et al., 2021)

3.4.7 Similar Characteristics of These Countries

Countries transitioning from communist systems share some features as they aspire for democratization and EU admission by attempting to integrate laws under EU norms while also improving respect for the human rights declaration. These are the features that we could consider in terms of success and improvement of today's situation, imagining them as weaknesses and strengths. Some of the similarities between these countries that make them more prone to disinformation operations, whether from within or beyond, are as follows:

- Low amount of trust in the nation's media organizations and structures.
- Non-legal and writing control of online media.
- Insufficient degree of investigatory journalism.
- Poor advertising of verification organizations and existing regulatory structures in the countries at the local and national levels.
- Polarized society, divided into two major camps, particularly ideologically different, but with similar personal objectives that result in financial advantage. (Jankuloska, 2020)

At the same time, some of the benefits and chances that such nations can take use of to improve their status include, but not limited to, the following:

- All countries are geared or seem to be oriented towards the European Union and the NATO alliance, making them less susceptible to the deception of the eastern camp. Kosovo and Albania, in instance, have 100% civil judgements.
- The existence of cooperative portals on the internet in a common understanding language between the nations.
- Regional collaboration without barriers to language for confusion or systematic exposing of disinformation.
- Developing countries towards democracy, allowing current authorities to include an authentic media education for future generations.
- Eliminating oligarchic society and enhancing and investing in media individuals and media capacities. (Greene, et al., 2020)

A society's democratic ecosystem may only be perceived clean if it has not been contaminated by an excessive amount of disinformation and digital propaganda. Even though media organizations are regarded as monitors of a country's democracy, they require self-regulating methods because they cannot be said to be curative of social and political illusions if they (the media) are not immune to bad influences. This notion is especially applicable to the media, which is highly vulnerable to disinformation on the internet and, as a result, instead of exerting influence on the growth of public opinion, is becoming its destroyer. This is especially evident in the media's unprofessional approach to politics, which frequently turns into arms of political organizations or their headquarters during electoral campaigns. A separate issue is the lack of more information of legal rules in social media activities. This is especially obvious in Albania, where the environment for social media is uncontrolled in electoral legislation, creating the circumstances for a battleground for an election effort to be launched with unknown financial sources.

The lack of legislative regulation of social media is a source of contention and disrupts people's private relationships. As a result, an uncontrolled verbal fight has emerged in which authorities and the judiciary fail to penalize those responsible for these diseases.

On the contrary, because the growth of internet usage is not necessarily a reflection of media culture on social networks, having access to the internet on a big scale is not directly proportional to media education. (Hysa, 2021)

3.5 Future Directions

In the case of Albania, the EU attempted, as part of its expansion policy initiatives, to assist in the fight against corruption and criminal organizations through encouraging judicial system reform as a crucial initial step in improving the rule of law, in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria, given that all Western Balkans countries face significant problems with substantial levels of corruption and close connections between powerful public officials and structured crime systems. (Vurmo, 2020)

As a result, since Albania was given EU candidate status in 2014, the EU has identified the judicial system as one of the most corrupt sectors of government in every yearly progress report. The Commission has frequently said in its EU conditions that if Albania does not change the judicial system in accordance with the Copenhagen criteria, it is doubtful that accession discussions will be opened between Albania and the EU. Albania's court system receives less than ten euros per citizen. The average EU Member State budget allocation for the legal system is 64 euros per capita, with an average amount of 53 euros per capita.

This information reveals that Western Balkans states are not dedicating enough money to the judiciary in compared to EU member states, and thus, when the collaborative action plan is developed, such funding must be increased. It remains way ahead of schedule to say whether or not the Albania rule of law reform is an accomplishment as a consequence of the EU rule of law conditions until the entire process is finished, and it is still too early to say whether the EU model used in Albania can be promoted in the remainder of the Western Balkans region through the rule of law initiative—and at this point yet, the process is producing some encouraging results, as half of the reviewed judiciary officials have been selected. (Hoxhaj, 2021)

Nevertheless, Albania has clearly proved that the EU cannot rely too much on soft law measures and those based on the OMS governance method, as designed thus far in the EU-Western Balkans 2018 plan.

However, establishing the rule of law on paper, as in the example of Albania, demonstrates that it is insufficient to enhance and preserve the rule of law in practice. The European Commission's rule of law effort for the Western Balkans is an exciting new approach, and it has the possibility to provide a more effective structure for the EU and the Western Balkans to engage in an evidence-based policy dialogue with the introduction of the new negotiations for membership structure for Albania in 2020. (Vankovska, 2020)

3.5.1 Related studies

Surveys continue to be the core of social science research, but they can be used in practically every subject. They provide information about practice, attitudes, and knowledge. Effective survey research, on the other hand, is more difficult than it appears.

Surveys, like all research, should have a defined research question(s) and use the fewest number of high-quality, important survey questions that will interest the target group. Researchers and readers alike need to put themselves in the shoes of those who participated. The questionnaires should yield repeatable findings, measure what they are designed to measure, and take less than 10 minutes to complete. The nature and purpose of the survey influence the selection of questions and choices for answers (scales). Questions that are ambiguous with responses that can be stored digitally or manually transcribed are better suited for interviews and certain types of written surveys. Closed-ended questions are commonly used in online and postal surveys, with the responder selecting an answer from an organized list of possibilities. Both open and closed responses have benefits and drawbacks. (David, et al., 2017)

In addition, over the past few years, sentiment analysis has achieved significant recognition, not only among academics but also among companies, government agencies, and

organizations. Many individuals communicate their opinions and points of view through various online resources. It is a must to use user-generated data to analyze it automatically in order to continually track public opinion and assist decision-making. Consequently, sentiment analysis has grown in popularity in recent years among research communities. Opinion analysis and opinion mining are other terms for sentiment analysis. (Sánchez-Rada, et al., 2019)

The chapter is written in the basis of 2 objectives. The most important objective is to understand the perception and awareness of a small amount of the population of Albania regarding the political activities, the process behind the voting and their satisfaction with media, its propaganda addressed to the participating parties and with the post-election condition. Also, as a partial objective, it will be the comparison with the countries in Western Balkan, specifically the ones studied in the chapters above, to understand the similarities and differences in how people comprehend the digital propaganda and media control over the important political activities happening over their heads.

3.5.2 Main Summary

While being a country emerging from a harsh dictatorship, Albania during the years, had its ups and down towards the economic and political development as a country. Considering all the wounds in people's life, changing the way they think and perceive the reality around them, forming a completely new perception of the way you vote for your rights, the way you live the life and everything else accompanied with that.

Sure, as a country, comparing with the year when the new era of democracy began, Albania had a lot of development and still continues down the road of full democratization and hopefully in the upcoming years, to the acceptance into the EU. Nonetheless there is still a lot of work to be done, especially into reforming the rule of law, so it will amend as much as possible with the terms of other European nations.

Sadly, even today, there is a lot of digital propaganda concerning the political elections each and every year they are being held. As discussed in the chapters above, the reasons are quite different, but all of them have a root cause: The way people developed the way of perceiving their rights and the other's rights in every aspect of living, but in the terms of political issues, in the voting process. When talking about the voting process, there is a lot of work to do in order to improve it.

This can be seen anywhere across the country, with the corruption in the pre- and post-elections campaigns, where people are falsely promised year after year and still fall in the same trap. It is not something easy for a nation, who survived, in some way, a 50-year tyranny of one single man, where every Albanian was forced to believe the promises made to them. Subsequently to this, even today that Albania is registered as a democratic country in every poll and every international document, its habitants still, deep in their understanding are stuck in the previous regime, where there was only one option of a truth and there was no room for objection.

If the citizens of this modest country can finally understand that they themselves, form the nation they live in, then a huge percentage of the digital propaganda and corruption, which in Albania's case is directly linked with the manipulation of the media and its instruments, such as the TV channels, the news broadcasting websites and more, then, all this phenomena will drastically decrease and this development will pave the way to European integration.

3.6 Research Questions

While digital propaganda is a phenomenon that may be happening in Albania and many countries of the world or not, it is important to emphasize, that the opinion of people living in these countries, especially, due to the scope of this thesis, in Albania, is really crucial in order to get some final output.

This paper addresses one crucial research question, which is to find out *what the perception and awareness of the general public of Albania's citizens on the digital propaganda and voting behavior is in political events and processes of the country in the recent years, as well, linking it with its past.*

Moreover, to support the first and most important research question of the paper, there are also some questions that arise during the research part. These questions are also part of the partial objectives and include:

- What is the context and background of political irregularities in Albania and its investigation?
- In the scope of the paper's topic, what is the citizens of Albania opinion of the countries in Western Balkan in terms of the digital propaganda and voting irregularities?

As it can be seen from the research questions based on the partial objectives, these are follow-up questions, based on the first and most important research questions and serve as a continuation of the study, where the first question from the list above is mainly concerned during the literature review of the paper, where the history of Albania is briefly investigated and whereas the second question is based on the statistical analysis of the people's opinion for their neighboring countries in the West Balkan.

4 Practical Part

The Practical Part of this thesis focused to understand the perception and awareness of the Albanian public for the voting behavior and the digital propaganda concerning the political events in the recent years.

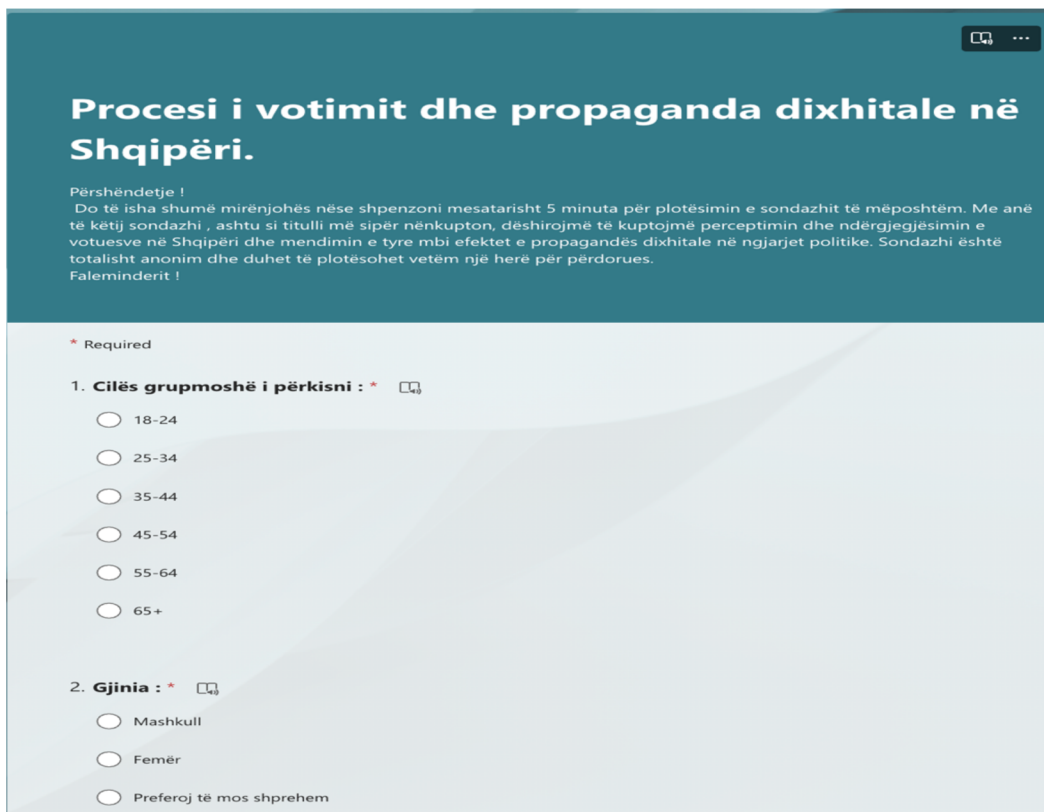
The Practical Part was divided into 3 chapters:

- a) **Statistical Analysis Approach**
- b) **Sentiment Analysis Approach**
- c) **Interview Analysis Approach**

4.1 Statistical Analysis Approach

For the Statistical Analysis Approach, a survey was conducted. The survey was based on gathering and analyzing information provided from different age groups of Albania's citizens. For the scope of the survey, Google forms was the software used.

The survey through 18 questions in total tried to understand in more depth what do the people that live in Albania think of the current political situation in their country; how the digital propaganda is influencing their choices in the voting processes and moreover the general opinion of the near future, whether the existing problems will be solved, or another outcome will happen. The survey was distributed by using a link to the Google Forms to **101** participants in total. After the survey was closed, all the responses were collected from Google Forms and exported to an Excel file. Then using all the Excel tools and features, such as pivot tables and multiple insert data forms, some explanatory data analysis was conducted.



Procesi i votimit dhe propaganda dixhitale në Shqipëri.

Përsëritet !
Do të isha shumë mirënjohës nëse shpenzoni mesatarisht 5 minuta për plotësimin e sondazhit të mëposhtëm. Me anë të këtij sondazhi, ashtu si titulli më sipër nënkupton, dëshirojmë të kuptojmë perceptimin dhe ndërgjegjësimin e votuesve në Shqipëri dhe mendimin e tyre mbi efektet e propagandës dixhitale në ngjarjet politike. Sondazhi është totalisht anonim dhe duhet të plotësohet vetëm një herë për përdorues. Faleminderit !

* Required

1. **Cilës grupmoshë i përkisni :** *

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

2. **Gjinia :** *

- Mashkull
- Femër
- Preferoj të mos shprehem

Figure 8 - Survey in Google Forms

4.1.1 Explanatory Data Analysis

Demographic Data	Gender		Total
	Female	Male	
18-24	22	18	40
Rural	2	5	7
Bachelor's degree	2	3	5
High school Graduate		2	2
Urban	20	13	33
Master's degree or higher	1	1	2
Bachelor's degree	17	9	26
High school Graduate	2	3	5
25-34	17	18	35
Rural	1	4	5
Master's degree or higher		1	1
Bachelor's degree	1	2	3
High school Graduate		1	1
Urban	16	14	30
Master's degree or higher	11	9	20
Bachelor's degree	2	4	6
High school Graduate	3	1	4
35-44	3	3	6
Urban	3	3	6
Less than high school		1	1
Bachelor's degree	2	1	3
High school Graduate	1	1	2
45-54	5	6	11
Rural	1	2	3
High school Graduate	1	2	3
Urban	4	4	8
Master's degree or higher	1		1
Less than high school	1		1
Bachelor's degree		1	1
High school Graduate	2	3	5
55-64	2	7	9
Rural		3	3
Bachelor's degree		1	1
High school Graduate		2	2
Urban	2	4	6
Master's degree or higher	1		1
Bachelor's degree	1	3	4
High school Graduate		1	1
Total	49	52	101

Table 1 - Demographic data of the survey.

As it can be seen from the table above, the most dominant group age of the respondents is 18-24 with a 39,60%, closely followed by the age-group of 25-34 which takes 34,65% of the total people that completed the survey. This is a really good result, because the aim of the survey mentioned above takes more importance when the youth is more present. These surveys serve us to understand what the next generation's opinion lies on and also emphasizes that young citizens still care about their future in this country, due to the fact of the survey competition.

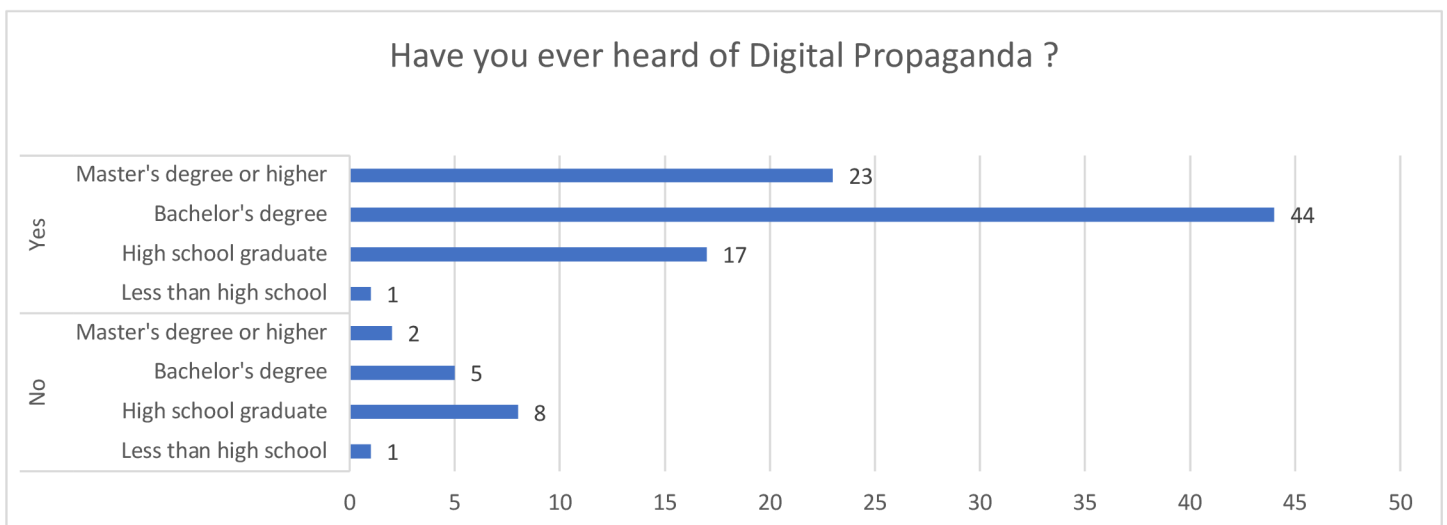
Moreover, there was almost a perfect distribution of the gender of the participants, with 51% of total being categorized as "Male" and 49% as "Female". It is important to mention that there was another category of the gender labelled as "Prefer *not to say*" but out of 101 respondents, there were no instances of this option at all.

Part of the table was also one of the questions in the survey about the educational level of participants. This is also an important input because based on the education level, not necessarily, but in the most occasions, it plays a vital role (in this thesis case) defining whether the digital propaganda as a phenomenon is known more to the people whose education level is higher compared with the other groups.

Moreover, we can see that the majority of the participants have at least a bachelor's degree (49 instances out of 101) or more, which includes having a Master too (25 out of 101) bringing a total of 74 people having an optional & higher educational level in Albania, which is a great occurrence. Meanwhile on the other hand only 25 people only have a High-School diploma and only 2 out of the whole survey have an education level of less than High School (Elementary and Secondary school only).

In total the majority of the respondents live in an urban area, more accurately, as the graph shows, 82,18% of the total and only 18 people or 17,82% of the grand total live in rural areas.

Based on the table above and the data from the other questions in the survey, we can analyze, how the education level impacted on the fact whether people know about digital propaganda or not.



Graph 1 - Have you ever heard the term Digital Propaganda?

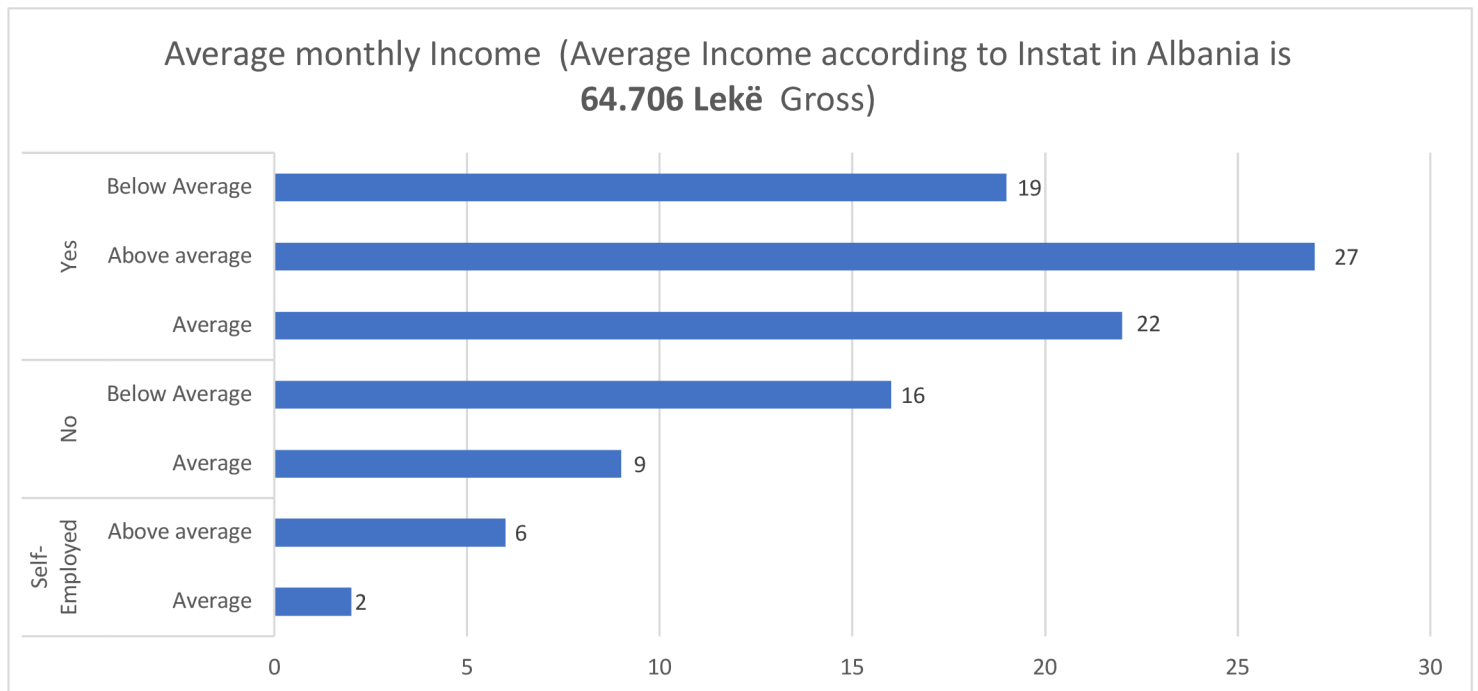
Above we can see that in total 85 people have heard the term “Digital Propaganda”, which keeping in mind that in total there are 101 participants, it means that 84,16% of people at least know what this phenomenon is. On the other hand, 16 people never heard of it before, which is, in terms of percentage, 15,84% in total.

These numbers are distributed above based on their level of education, and here we can see the correlation, that the largest group of people that do not know this term or have never heard about it, is the group with the High School diploma as their highest form of education.

Participants had to rate their monthly income into 3 categories:

The categories as shown above were compared with the Average Monthly Income per June 2023, according to Instat, which is an official national website with the aim to provide transparent, neutral, and timely statistics that help the user to judge on the developments of the transformation processes in Albania. (Instat, 2023)

The Average monthly income according to the source above is 64.706 Lekë Gross, which translates into approximately 15,248.33 CZK. Also at the same time, participants were asked if they were employed or not in three options. The Graph below shows the results:



Graph 2- Average Monthly Income according to the state of employment (Instat, 2023)

As it can be seen from the data above, for people that are employed, only 27 of them have a monthly income above average, the rest, more accurately, 22 have an average salary and 19 participants have a below average salary.

For people that are not employed, meaning that they are answering this question based in their family earnings, what is important to note is that nobody has a salary above average (always in terms of the family members salary), but instead most of them (16 in total) have a below-average monthly income.

The third category of employment is: Self-employed, meaning when an individual or a group of people have their own business running and they are not working the usual company-

based jobs as an employee. The stat that stands out in this case is that, even though only 8 participants out of 101 in total are self-employed, which is relatively a low number, there is no occurrence of respondents getting paid with a below-average salary.

In total the majority of the respondents live in an urban area, more accurately, as the graph shows, 82,18% of the total and only 18 people or 17,82% of the grand total live in rural areas.



Graph 3- Ways Digital Propaganda is spread

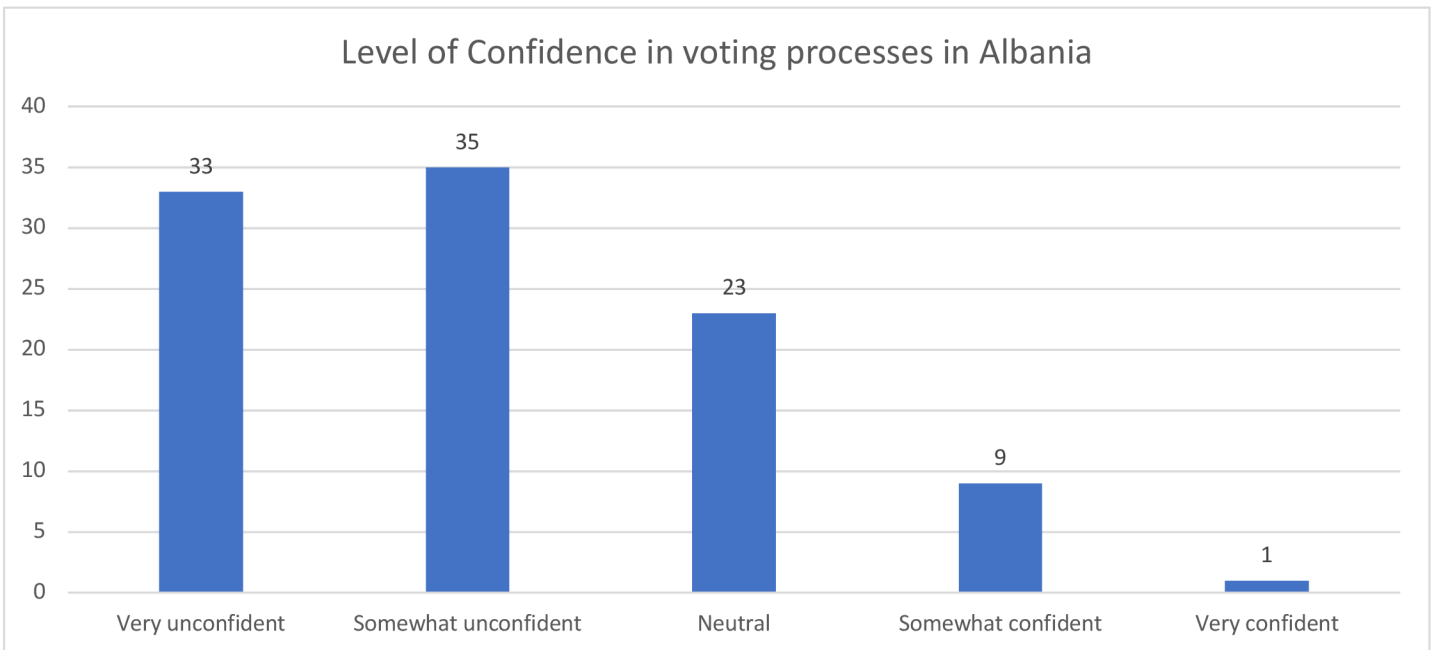
In one of the questions of the survey, participants were asked on which are the ways the digital propaganda can be spread. As it can be seen in the pie chart above, there are more instances of the answers in total than participants in general. The reason is because this question was a multi-answer one, which means, logically, people could choose more than one option for the spreading tool of propaganda, because more often than usual there are different ways or reasons for a certain problem. From the data above, the “TV Shows and News” way is the most chosen option in the survey with 75 instances, accompanied with “Facebook” and “Instagram” closely following each-other. Twitter got only 12 votes in total and is quite understandable, because it is one of the least used apps in Albania.

During the survey, participants were asked about how much they trust the voting process and integrity in general in Albania & at the same time they were asked about the level of satisfaction in the transparency of the voting process too. These are one of the most important questions of the survey, because the main objective of the thesis is to understand the perception and awareness of the public in these topics in Albania. The results of these questions are shown in the two bar charts below.

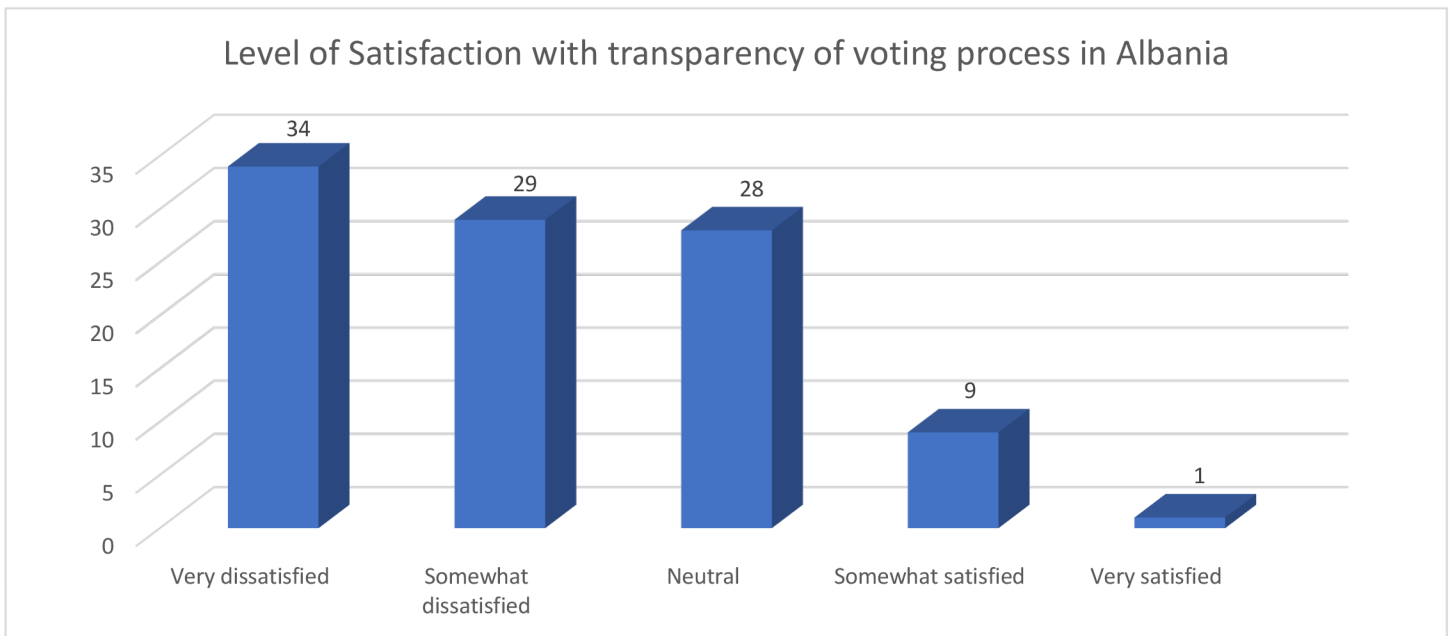
33 people are “Very unconfident” and 35 people fall in “Somewhat unconfident” too. This means that 68 out of 101 participants are not confident or have no trust at all with what is happening in the last couple of years in terms of the voting process and political events in Albania. 23 of the participants have a neutral view on the topic and only 10 people of the grand total have a positive approach to this phenomenon. Only 1 person out of 101 is very confident with everything going on in Albania in terms of the voting process.

On the other hand, in the second bar chart below, the question is different, but the outcome is the same. The question, in this case, concerns the level of satisfaction across individuals for the transparency of voting processes in Albania. The results of the survey show that participants are really dissatisfied with this phenomenon in their country. More correctly 34 people are “Very dissatisfied” and 29 are “Somewhat dissatisfied”. 28 respondents take a

neutral opinion. Also, for this question, only 1 participant is “Very Satisfied” with the transparency in political events and voting processes in Albania.



Graph 4 - Level of Confidence in voting processes in Albania



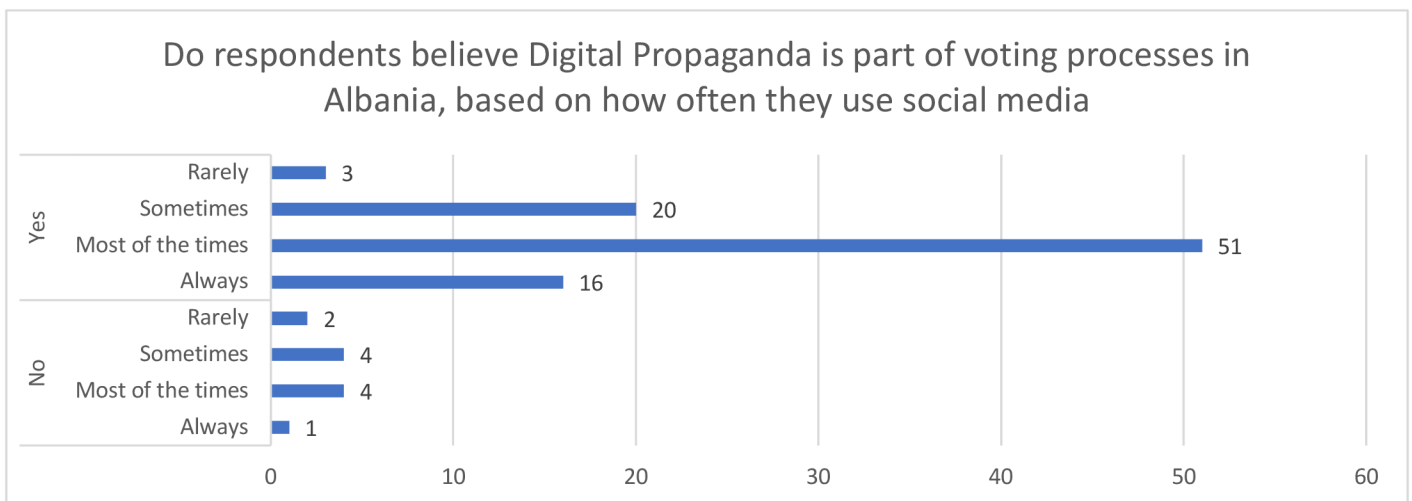
Graph 5 - Level of Satisfaction with transparency of voting process in Albania

Participants of the survey were asked if they believe that digital propaganda is part of Albania’s political events and voting behavior. From the combined data below, it can be seen that out of 101 participants, 90 of them voted as “Yes”, which is a staggering 89,1% of the total. The rest believed that Digital Propaganda is not part as a phenomenon.

Also based on the result above, respondents were asked on how often they use the social media apps, since digital propaganda is being investigated. The results below show:

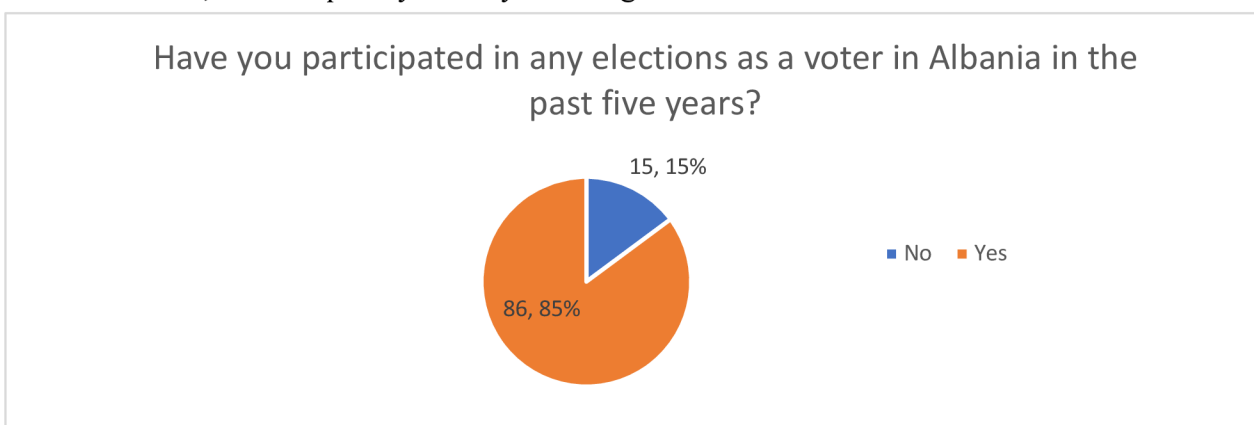
For people that do believe that digital propaganda is present, 51 of them use social media “Most of the times” and 16 use social media apps “Always”. 20 use them “Sometimes” and only 3 participants out of 90 use social media “Rarely”.

On the same time for people that think that digital propaganda is not part of Albania’s political events and voting behavior, who take 9 votes in total out of 101 answers, which is a very low percentage, it can be said that generally citizens in Albania do believe that these phenomenon are present in their country. Similarly like the description above, the distribution of their opinion based on the usage of social media, is shown below. Worth to be noted is the fact that out of all respondents, nobody chose “Never” as an option for their social media usage.



Graph 6 - Social media usage based on believing whether digital propaganda is part of voting processes in Albania

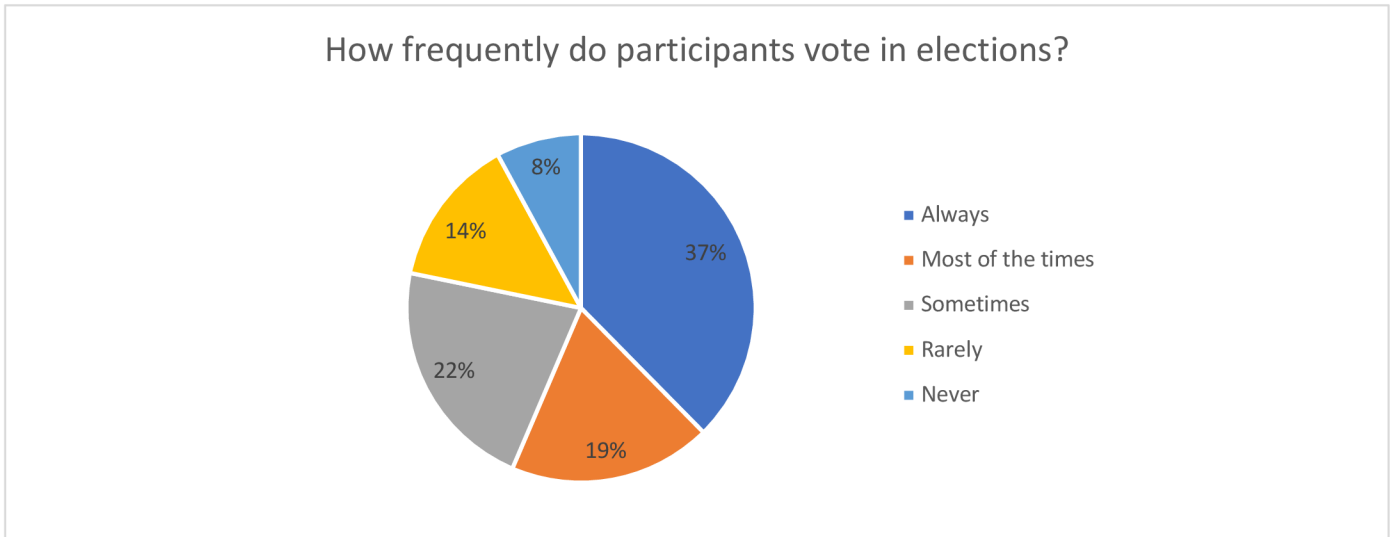
As voting processes is one of the main points of this thesis topic, participants were asked whether they have participated in any of the elections as voters in the last five years and in the same time, how frequently do they vote in general. The results below show:



Graph 7- Participation in elections in the last five years

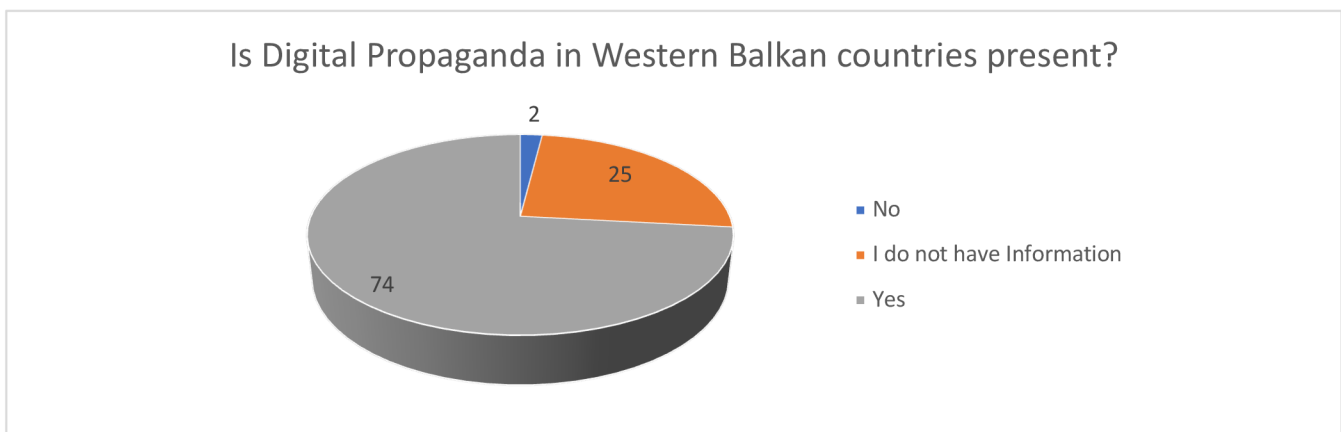
It can be seen that the majority of participants have voted in the last five years with a percentage of 86,85 in total, only 15 people or 15,15% of the participants have not voted at all in the last 5 years.

Looking at the second pie chart, most of the people participate in the voting processes “Always”, with 37% of the total. Only 8% of the respondents chose “Never” as their frequency of voting.



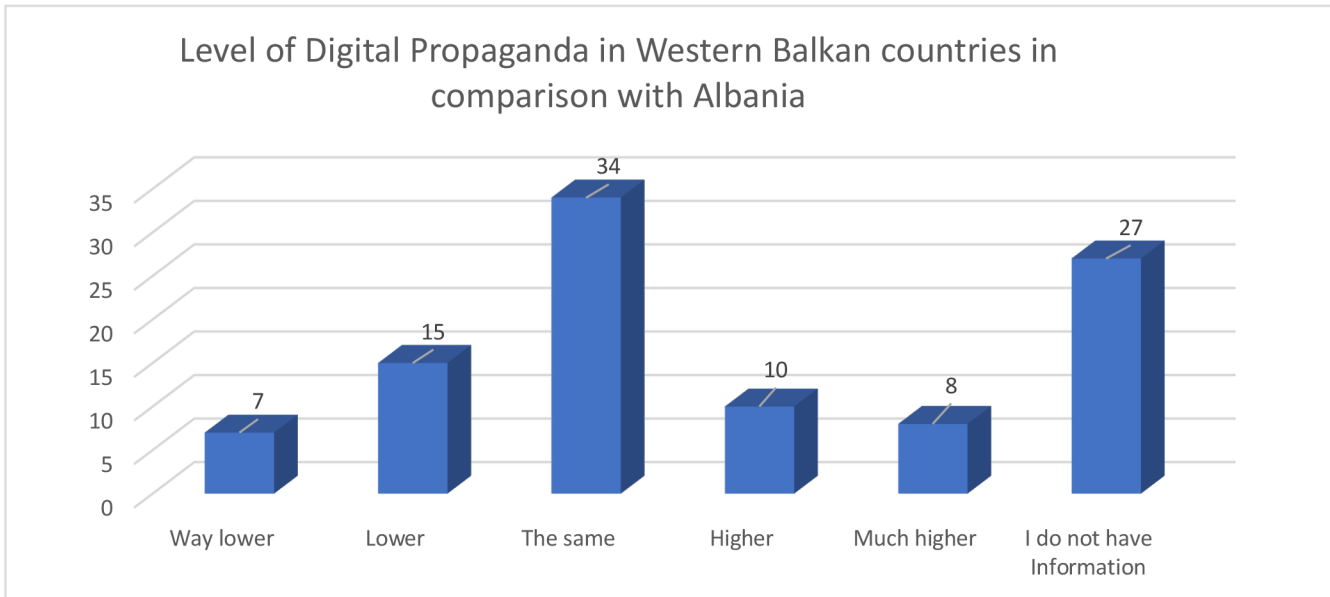
Graph 8 - How frequently do participants vote in elections?

One of the very important questions in the survey, which was also treated in the Literature Review part of this thesis is the comparison of digital propaganda in Albania with the countries in Western Balkan, such Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia being the countries analyzed. Participants of the survey had to answer 2 questions concerning this topic. The first one concerned the idea whether the digital propaganda is present in these countries or not, according to the opinion of the respondents. From the results below, 74 people out of 101 think that the digital propaganda is present there, only 2 people out of the grand total think there is no digital propaganda at all, and 25 participants do not have information at all for this topic.



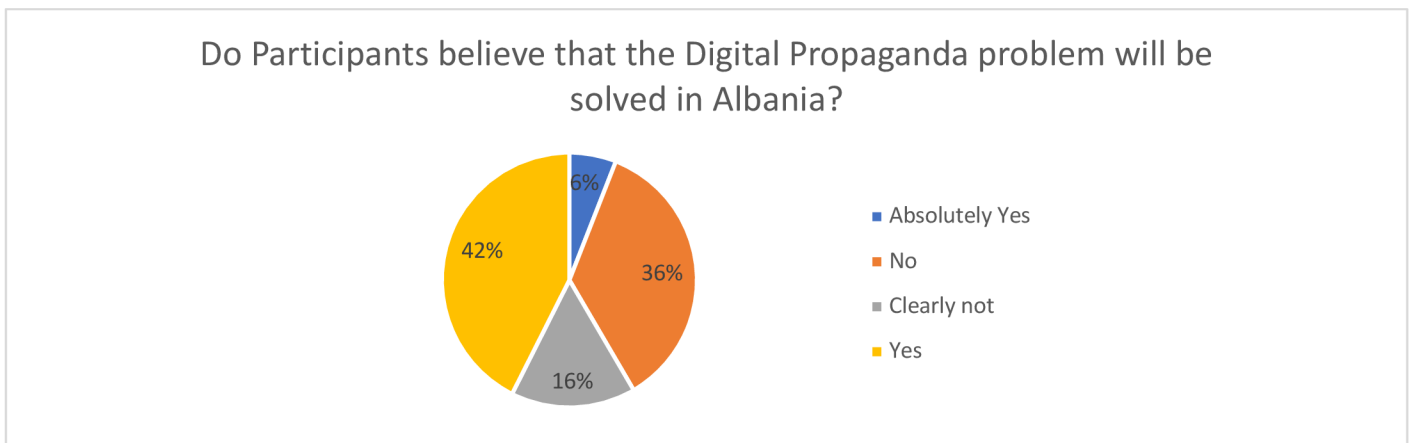
Graph 9- Is Digital Propaganda in Western Balkan Countries present?

The other question treated in the 3D Clustered Bar chart below, concerns the level of digital propaganda in the Western Balkan countries mentioned above based on the perception and awareness of the participants. The results show that 34 people think that the level of digital propaganda in those countries is the same in Albania; 27 people do not have information at all; 15 people think that the propaganda is lower in those countries than in Albania and 10 people think that the digital propaganda is higher in these Western Balkan countries than in their nation. More details in the below:



Graph 10 - Level of Digital Propaganda in Western Balkan Countries

Lastly, but most importantly the last question of the survey was whether the participants think that the digital propaganda problem will be solved in Albania or not. As it can be seen from the pie chart below, there are mixed reactions from the answers. 42% of the participants think that the problem will be solved in the future. 6% of them are absolutely confident that it will be solved so, we have in total 48% of the answers being in positive outcome. On the other hand, 36% of people think that this digital propaganda problem will not be solved in Albania in its near future and 16% of them are absolutely sure that this problem will never be resolved at all, with 52% of people in total having a negative outcome to the question.



Graph 11 - Do Participants believe that the Digital Propaganda problem will be solved in Albania?

The second part of the Statistical Analysis approach was the formulation of several hypothesis based on the data from the survey which was prepared and edited. The aim of this part was to understand in a deeper way, while combining several data factors the idea Albanian citizens have for topics such as computational propaganda in day-to-day political events and voting behavior. This was achieved conducting several hypotheses, while using different types of statistical methods.

4.1.2 Data Retrieval I

The data used for this part of the thesis is from the Google Forms Survey. Google Forms has a built-in function that converts the answers and the questions to an Excel file sheet, which can be instantly downloaded. Then the Excel file can be converted into any type of file based in the software used.

4.1.3 Data Preparation I

The data from the survey was prepared in some important steps in order to conduct properly the hypotheses. The software used is *SPSS for Statistics*. The steps followed as below:

- a) Converting the Excel file of the answers with all the questions of the survey to a SPSS (.sav) file.
- b) Once the file was converted, since it was a survey, in the Variable View tab, the *name*, and the *labels* of the columns (the questions of the survey) had to be changed, because they are automatically added. They are converted as the whole question in one string without spaces, so it is usually not the best output for the reader.
- c) The *measure* of each column/input was adjusted based on the questions into *Nominal*, *Ordinal* or *Scale*, based on the type of question.
- d) In order for the SPSS Software to conduct the surveys, the answers of the respondents which were exported as *String* responses, they were needed to be converted to numeric ones. The process behind is as it follows:
 - From the Transform tab, option “Recode into the same variable” was chosen. What this does is that based on each of the options of all the questions, they were given a numeral value.
 - The old value was typed i.e. Yes and the new variable is added 0, so the answers will be changed like this: Yes ~ 0 and No ~ 1.
 - Based on the logic above, all the options of every question were converted to numeric variables.
- e) After all the variables were converted, it was also needed to change in the Variable View tab, the type of the variable, subsequently from *String* to *Numeric*.
- f) After that, what was left to prepare in terms of the data, was the *Values* column in the Variable View tab. By default, they are always blank when you export an excel file. Ideally, they must represent the options of the question.
- g) After each cell in the Values column is selected, it is necessary to fill 2 inputs there:

- For *Value* – the numeric value of each option is selected i.e., 0 or 1 or 2...
 - For *Label* – the option name of the question is written i.e. Yes, No etc so it is known that 0 is accompanied with the Yes.
- h) In case the *Width*, *Decimals* and *Missing* (for the values) in the ribbon of the tabs were needed to be edited, they could be, but in the scope of the survey they served no purpose.
- i) After these changes were made it could be seen in the Data View tab that each question's answers in each column were represented as numeric values and statistical hypothesis could be conducted.

	Name	Type	Width	De...	Label	Values	Missing	Columns	Align	Measure	Role
1	age_group	Numeric	5	0	Age group:	{0, 18-24}...	None	19	Right	Nominal	Input
2	gender	Numeric	8	0	Gender:	{0, Femër}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
3	education_level	Numeric	39	0	Level of education:	{0, Më pak s...	None	39	Right	Ordinal	Input
4	residence	Numeric	6	0	Rural or Urban (location of living):	{0, Rurale}...	None	6	Right	Nominal	Input
5	employment	Numeric	16	0	Are you employed:	{0, Po}...	None	16	Right	Nominal	Input
6	average_monthly_income	Numeric	23	0	Monthly income (average in Albania per Instat is 64.706 L):	{0, Nën mes...	None	23	Right	Scale	Input
7	social_media_usage	Numeric	33	0	How often do you use social media:	{0, Kurrë}...	None	33	Right	Ordinal	Input
8	election_participation	Numeric	2	0	Have you participated in any elections as a voter in Albania in the past five years:	{0, Po}...	None	2	Right	Nominal	Input
9	how_often_election_participation	Numeric	33	0	How frequently do you vote in elections:	{0, Kurrë}...	None	33	Right	Ordinal	Input
10	heard_about_digital_propaganda	Numeric	2	0	Have you heard of the term "digital propaganda":	{0, Po}...	None	2	Right	Nominal	Input
11	digital_propaganda_present	Numeric	2	0	Do you believe that the digital propaganda is part of Albania's voting process and political events:	{0, Po}...	None	2	Right	Nominal	Input
12	ways_digital_propaganda_spreads	String	65	0	Which are the ways/social apps that you think that digital propaganda is being spread in Albania:	None	None	50	Left	Nominal	Input
13	false_info_influence_your_choices	Numeric	2	0	Did exposure to misleading or false information on social media influence your voting decisions:	{0, Po}...	None	21	Right	Nominal	Input
14	confidence_level_voting_process	Numeric	19	0	How confident are you in the fairness and integrity of the voting process in Albania:	{0, Disi i pasi...	None	19	Right	Scale	Input
15	satisfaction_level_voting_process	Numeric	19	0	How satisfied are you with the transparency of the voting process in Albania:	{0, Shumë i ...	None	19	Right	Nominal	Input
16	digital_propaganda_present_western_balkan	Numeric	19	0	Do you think that in the Balkan Western countries the digital propaganda is present:	{0, Nuk kam i...	None	19	Right	Nominal	Input
17	level_digital_propaganda_western_countries	Numeric	19	0	For the countries mentioned above, what do you think is the level of digital propaganda compared to ...	{0, Nuk kam i...	None	19	Right	Nominal	Input
18	will_digital_propaganda_problem_beSolved	Numeric	18	0	Do you believe that in the future, this problem will be solved in Albania:	{0, Pa dyshl...	None	18	Right	Nominal	Input
19											
20											

Figure 9 - Dataset View of the Survey in SPSS

4.1.4 Cross-Data Analysis

In the scope of this thesis, 4 separate hypotheses were conducted. Three of them were linked directly with the main objective of the thesis:

To investigate the perception and awareness of computational propaganda among the general public and voter behaviour in Albania.

The other hypothesis was linked with the partial objective of this thesis which aims:

To compare the experiences of Albania with other countries in terms of electoral manipulations and computational propaganda.

1- Hypothesis for Confidence level of participants in Voting Process:

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** The average confidence in the fairness and integrity of voting process of the age group 18-24 is equal to or above the neutral point.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** The average confidence in the fairness and integrity of voting process of the age group 18-24 is below the neutral point.

Notes: Test value = 2 in the survey corresponds to the option “Neutral” in the confidence of respondents in the fairness and integrity of the voting process in Albania.

For the scope of this hypothesis, **One Sample t-test** was used.

Based on the output of the SPSS, found in the tables below, the following results are interpreted:

ONE-SAMPLE STATISTICS				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
How confident are you in the fairness and integrity of the voting process in Albania:	40	2,70	1,067	0,169

Table 2 - Hypothesis 1a

ONE-SAMPLE TEST							
	Test Value = 2						
	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p		Lower	Upper
How confident...	4,149	39	0,0000874	0,0001748	0,700	0,36	1,04

Table 3 - Hypothesis 1b

ONE-SAMPLE EFFECT SIZES					
	Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval		
			Lower	Upper	
How confident are you in the fairness and integrity of the voting process in Albania:	Cohen's d	1,067	0,656	0,310	0,995
	Hedges' correction	1,088	0,643	0,304	0,976

a. The denominator used in estimating the effect sizes.
Cohen's d uses the sample standard deviation.
Hedges' correction uses the sample standard deviation, plus a correction factor.

Table 4 - Hypothesis 1c

2- Hypothesis for the relationship between the residence of living and the belief of computational propaganda as part of voting behaviour and political events in Albania

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** There is no significant relationship between residence of the participants (rural or urban) and whether participants believe that digital propaganda is part of the voting behaviour and political events in Albania.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** There is a significant relationship between residence of the participants (rural or urban) and whether participants believe that digital propaganda is part of the voting behaviour and political events in Albania.

Notes: A Chi-Square test was conducted.

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE DIGITAL PROPAGANDA IS PART OF ALBANIA'S VOTING PROCESS AND POLITICAL EVENTS: * RURAL OR URBAN (LOCATION OF LIVING):				
		Rural or Urban (location of living):		Total
		Rural	Urban	
Do you believe that the digital propaganda is part of Albania's voting process and political events:	Yes	15	75	90
	No	3	8	11
Total		18	83	101

Table 5 - Hypothesis 2b

CHI-SQUARE TESTS					
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.753 ^a	1	0,386		
Continuity Correction ^b	0,203	1	0,652		
Likelihood Ratio	0,681	1	0,409		
Fisher's Exact Test				0,408	0,307
Linear-by-Linear Association	0,745	1	0,388		
N of Valid Cases	101				
a. 1 cell (25.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.96.					
b. Computed only for a 2x2 table					

Table 6 - Hypothesis 2c

SYMMETRIC MEASURES			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-0,086	0,386
	Cramer's V	0,086	0,386
	Contingency Coefficient	0,086	0,386
N of Valid Cases		101	

Table 7 - Hypothesis 2d

3- Hypothesis related to the education level and the fact if respondents of the survey have heard about the digital propaganda or not.

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** There is no significant association between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** There is a significant association between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda.

Notes: A Chi-Square test was conducted.

LEVEL OF EDUCATION: * HAVE YOU HEARD OF THE TERM "DIGITAL PROPAGANDA": CROSSTABULATION				
		Have you heard of the term "digital propaganda":		Total
		Yes	No	
Level of education:	Less than High School	1	1	2
	High School	17	8	25
	Bachelor's degree	44	5	49
	Master degree or more	23	2	25
Total		85	16	101

Table 8 - Hypothesis 3a

CHI-SQUARE TESTS

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8,968 ^a	3	0,030
Likelihood Ratio	7,931	3	0,047
Linear-by-Linear Association	6,967	1	0,008
N of Valid Cases	101		

a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .32.

Table 9- Hypothesis 3b

SYMMETRIC MEASURES

	Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	0,298
	Cramer's V	0,298
	Contingency Coefficient	0,286
N of Valid Cases	101	

Table 10 - Hypothesis 3c

4- Hypothesis about the level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender of the respondents.

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** There is not a significant difference in level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender (male and female) of the respondents.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** There is a significant difference in level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender (male and female) of the respondents.

Notes: An Independent Sample t-test was used for the scope of this hypothesis.

GROUP STATISTICS

Gender :		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
For the Western Balkan countries , what do you think is the level of digital propaganda compared to Albania:	Female	49	2,86	1,683	0,240
	Male	52	2,69	1,603	0,222

Table 11 - Hypothesis 4a

INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST										
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
For the Western Balkan countries	0,453	0,503	0,504	99	0,308	0,615	0,165	0,327	-0,484	0,814
...			0,503	97,845	0,308	0,616	0,165	0,327	-0,485	0,815

Table 12 - Hypothesis 4b

INDEPENDENT SAMPLES EFFECT SIZES					
		Standardizer ^a	Point Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
Hypotheses 4	Cohen's d	1,642	0,100	-0,290	0,491
	Hedges' correction	1,655	0,100	-0,288	0,487
	Glass's delta	1,603	0,103	-0,288	0,493

Table 13 - Hypothesis 4c

4.2 Sentiment Analysis Approach

Chapter 2 of Practical Part is solely focused on another method of analyzing the sentiment or the opinion of people in a certain topic. In the scope of this work, for the digital propaganda and voting behavior in the case of Albania, a sentiment analysis was conducted. Due to some reasons, stated below, this analysis will not be as detailed as the statistical approach was, but still will be very important in order to understand people's perception and awareness of their surroundings and the political environment they engage everyday with.

4.2.1 Data Retrieval II

Before stating the data retrieval steps, a little background is needed for this chapter's data. More often than usual, the easiest and most efficient way to retrieve data for sentiment analysis is gathering tweets/comments/replies in certain posts/forums/videos/reels whatever the port of communication between the app and the user is.

For the scope of this bachelor thesis and its topic, the application where the data will be retrieved from is Instagram. The reason is because the comments will not be randomly

gathered using different functions and applying certain filters. This is due to the fact that, based on the objectives of the thesis, it is needed to be known the awareness and perception of Albanian citizens only in such topics, in order for the analysis to be coherent and correct. For the reason above, a single specific Instagram profile is chosen from where a bunch of comments will be retrieved and then after the data will be prepared, the analysis will be conducted.

The Instagram profile is not a normal single user profile, obviously, but a certified page from Instagram, which represents the only Anti-Propaganda and Free Voice profile in Albania, called “*joqAlbania*”, which initially was an anonymous website and Instagram page, where everything was posted in real time, every propaganda attempted from the state was posted there immediately after happening.

Nowadays, as stated above, the page is verified from Instagram, the administrators of the page are real journalists who have established their offices and work 24/7 in both terrain and online in order to destroy any censorship in the country from the country officials themselves.

Such explanation is needed, because the sentiment analysis should be based in verified pages with a huge participation of the public, in order to have the best outcome of the analysis.

Comments were gathered from different posts of this page, concerning big and controversial events in the past 1/2 years, such as elections; controversial moments such as leaked conversations of ministers; politicians, but also events occurring after natural disasters such as earthquakes, flood etc where the response of the country to people in need was atrocious. Comments were gathered in a **manual** way, for the reasons below:

- API access of Facebook (META) company is way more restrictive than the Twitter API, which is usually used for scraping data.
- For accessing user-generated content like comments, explicit permissions are needed and in most cases these permissions are really slim or do not comply with Meta’s Platform Policies and User Data Policies.
- The reason why Twitter was not used as the app where the data would be scraped from is the fact that the page used to get the comments from has such a low audience of people from Albania, compared to the one in Instagram. The reason for this, is the fact that Twitter is not so popular in Albania as a social media app and Instagram is nowadays the most used one, followed by Meta (Facebook), which back in the days, was the most-used app in the country.

After some excessive manual work, around 400 comments were gathered in total and placed into a .csv file. Important to mention is that in the csv file only the comments are scraped, but not any other information such as the usernames of the commentors, because of anonymous reasons.

4.2.2 Data Preparation II

4.2.2.1 Data Cleaning

After the manual scraping of the comments, now the data was prepared and modified, in order to get the best, result out of the analysis. The comments were put in a .csv file, which later will be used to comply the sentiment.

Note. All the comments were translated from Albanian language to English, because nowadays every NLP is based either in English only or in 5 core languages and it was not possible to conduct the sentiment in Albanian. In terms of the technical part, it would be possible, but the results would be misleading, because Albanian language is not recognized in any data library, therefore translation was necessary.

- Data in the csv file needs to be cleaned too, but since the data was manually added, the cleaning will be minimal, in this case the duplicated comments will be deleted so, only unique comments will be analyzed.

```
df.drop_duplicates(subset=['comment'], keep='first', inplace=True)
```

- Also, part of the data cleaning is to also remove unnecessary columns from the data. For the same reason as the duplication step, since the scraping was manual, only the timestamp of the comments was removed.

```
df = df.drop(['timestamp'], axis=1)
```

- For the data cleaning part, the special characters of the comments were also removed, because using the VADER, while having special characters, it may change the way the comments are perceived. The code below was used in python, and it replaces special characters with a space and checks all comments with the aim to have only letters from a-z and capital and number from 0-9. *str(x)* was also used to make sure the lambda function handles properly non-string data types so there was no error caused.

```
df['comment'] = df['comment'].apply(lambda x: re.sub(r'^A-Za-z0-9]+', ' ', str(x)))
```

- An important part of data cleaning is also tokenization, which means breaking the whole text of a comment into single words.

```
df['comment'] = df['comment'].apply(lambda x: nltk.word_tokenize(str(x)))
```

- After the tokenization, it was the part of lemmatization. The whole idea from this process is, that when the sentiment analysis is processed, the words from the same lemma, are not run through the sentiment each time, but only once (for example walk, walking, walks, walked). Lemmatization is done only to individual words (tokens), therefore tokenization is the first step to be done.

```

lemmatizer = WordNetLemmatizer()
df['Comment'] = df['Comment'].apply(lambda x: [lemmatizer.lemmatize(word) for word in
x])

```

- The final step of the data cleaning part is to join the tokens back together and save the cleaned dataset (.csv file), in order to run the sentiment analysis.

```

df['Comment'] = df['Comment'].apply(lambda x: ''.join(word for word in x))
df.to_csv('cleaned_instagram_comments.csv', index=False)

```

4.2.2.2 Analyzing the data

The next steps contained the code which was needed to be run in python:

- Importing data analysis libraries:

```

import pandas as pd
import re
import nltk
from nltk.sentiment.vader import SentimentIntensityAnalyzer

```

- Pandas are data analysis libraries that are helpful to analyze the data, in our case, will help analyze the .csv file with the comments. Also, nltk library is imported, which is a natural language processing library. Lastly the VADER is imported too from the nltk.sentiment.vader module.

- Next step was to load the .csv file with the comments to the data frame of Pandas.

```

data = pd.read_csv('cleaned_instagram_comments.csv')

```

- Next part is to initialize the VADER sentiment analyzer.

```

sia = SentimentIntensityAnalyzer()

```

- Then it was needed to create 2 empty lists to be used for the sentiment score and sentiment value label, based on the score.

```

sentiment_scores = []
sentiment_labels = []

```

- After that, a for loop is created, in order to run the analysis for each joint comment that it was done before during the data cleaning part. Also the conditions are set based on the sentiment of each comment, into labels/value.

```

for index, row in df.iterrows():
    comment = row['comment']
    score = sia.polarity_scores(comment)['compound']
    if score > 0:
        label = 'Positive'

```

```

        elif score < 0:
            label = 'Negative'
        elif score > 1:
            label = 'Super Positive'
        elif score < -1:
            label = 'Super Negative'
        else:
            label = 'Neutral'
    sentiment_scores.append(score)
    sentiment_labels.append(label)

```

- The next thing was to add the scores and labels generated from the step above to the empty lists created in the first step.

```

df['Sentiment Score'] = sentiment_scores
df['Sentiment Label'] = sentiment_labels

```

- Final part is to add the newly dataFrame to a new CSV file and save it, so later the results can be interpreted.

```

df.to_csv(cleaned_instagram_comments_with_sentiment_analysis.csv, index=False)

```

4.2.3 Data Interpretation

For the data interpretation part, it can be either done through python scripts or exporting the .csv file into an excel file and then data interpretation is possible.

In the scope of this analysis, we will use Microsoft Excel to visualize the results and the data.

- Firstly, a bar chart with the percentages of the sentiment scores was created.

This is quite important, because it is needed to be known, what is the percentage of comments with negative sentiment compared to the total, what is the positive sentiment, their relationship and so on.

- Secondly, a world cloud was used to visualize the data.

This is a very interesting method to represent the data, because we can understand which were the most used words in all of the comments of the users. The output of this type of analysis can help determine the actual problems/concerns of the Albanian citizens which is linked with their awareness of the scope of the topic.

When the world cloud is generated, the text with the bigger size is the text/word most used from the users when they commented and based on the size it can be understood the opinion of the strata.

- For the word cloud, a Microsoft excel add-in called Bjorn's Word Clouds was used.
- Firstly the .csv file with the cleaned comments from the sentiment analysis is imported as data (the data after tokenization and lemmatization)
- Then the built-in functions of the add-in create the word cloud and we can choose from the options to export the image.

- Thirdly and finally a word frequency analysis was prepared.

It is an important output, because it is understood, which are the most used words, from the comments, even though we can get an idea from the word cloud, from the word frequency analysis we get exact numbers.

- Firstly, we ensure the data that will be analyzed is one column only. In our case we have it in one column from the sentiment analysis result. If it would be different, function “*Concatenate*” would be useful.
- Next, the text needs to be split into individual words. Function “*Text to columns*” can be used, using a delimiter of a choice, usually a comma.
- After that we *transpose* the individual words in single column once again, function COUNTIF can be used to register the frequency of each word.

4.3 Interview Analysis Approach

For the third and final part of the Practical part of the thesis, the focus was relied on the interview approach.

As it is known having numerous statistical and sentiment analysis, has proven to be very helpful across the years to understand what the general population thinks about a certain topic in general; how they perceive the environment around the case and the results of it. Nonetheless a considerable amount of people tends to be way more sincere and open-minded when face-to-face interactions are made, especially when the interaction is made and published in an anonymous manner.

For this reason, in this chapter, the interview approach was conducted. Several Albanian citizens were interviewed, but the interviews are not like normal interviews with a set of questions who do not change from one interviewee to another.

The interviews contained dynamic questions and approach, meaning that the questions would depend based on the story the interviewees would tell.

The topic of the interviews was cases in the lives of these certain citizens, where occasions of digital propaganda; corruption or manipulation of their free will during voting processes was made. The aim of these interviews was to prove the point that digital propaganda and manipulation in political campaigns and voting processes does exist in Albania, and there is nothing better to be believed from an audience than real-life cases of people who had experiences with this phenomenon.

Since the interviews would be anonymous and the interviewee’s real names/addresses would not be mentioned, the output was expected to be really authentic.

However, even though the interviews had dynamic approach, they still also had a basic set of questions, which concerned the normal questions at the beginning of the interview.

The interviews were recorded only via audio using simple built-in software of smartphones (for some interviewees) and by using Microsoft Teams video call and their corresponding premium function “**Record and Transcript**”. Due to the anonymity of the interviewees, the video recordings were converted from .mp4 to .mp3 files containing only the audio, also not including any personal information. At the same time while recording the interviews, for some of them, the built-in function of Microsoft Word “*Dictate*” was used in order to prepare the transcription of the interviews, that along with the audio files, will serve as a proof of this part of the thesis work.

The Interviews questions and timeline was as it follows:

- a) Firstly, the interviewer, in the scope of this thesis, who is the author of the thesis, asked the first introductory questions, asking the city the interviewee is from and the story they have to confess.
- b) Secondly, after the interviewee slightly introduced themselves (due to anonymity), they started to tell their story, which could be different, based on their experience, for example: some representative of the parties tried to buy their vote for the elections, or they witnessed some corruption in the workplace or even in different institutions like universities, hospitals etc.
- c) The following questions from the interviewer then could turn into dynamic, depending on the story told from the interviewee, with the aim to learn more about it, basically including follow-up questions, in order to get as much proof as possible.
- d) The interview would proceed in the same way with all the interviewees, with the aim to get as many unique real-life experiences as possible.
- e) At the end the interviewees were asked about the actual state of their country and their thoughts on the near future, with questions like:
 - Do you think Albania will become a better place in the future?
 - Are you optimistic that the digital propaganda as a problem will be solved in your homeland?
 - Do you even plan to go back in your home-country and live there again?
Note. Supposing the interviewee is not living in Albania anymore, otherwise:
 - Do you plan to leave your country and go abroad in different European country?
 - Tell us one thing you would improve concerning our topic in Albania.
- f) After the interviews were finished, the output was saved and then the results were interpreted in the *Results* chapter.

5 Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the findings, or the results of the techniques used in the Practical Part of the Thesis.

As it is emphasized in the Practical part, there were 3 techniques used to reach the objectives of the Thesis, where the main objective was to investigate the awareness and perception of computational propaganda across the general public concerning topics like voting behavior and corruption in politics.

While comparing the findings from the Literature review and the methods used in the Practical part, we can come into an agreement, that following the results which will be discussed below, indeed there is a correlation of the digital propaganda and the voting processes in the political background in Albania. Very important to mention is that the general public is mostly aware of the actual situation in their country.

5.1 Results from Statistical Analysis Approach

In the scope of this part, 4 separate hypotheses were conducted. Three of them were linked directly with the main objective of the thesis:

To investigate the perception and awareness of computational propaganda among the general public and voter behaviour in Albania.

The other hypothesis was linked with the partial objective of this thesis which aims:

To compare the experiences of Albania with other countries in terms of electoral manipulations and computational propaganda.

1. Hypothesis for Confidence level of participants in Voting Process:

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** The average confidence in the fairness and integrity of voting process of the age group 18-24 is equal to or above the neutral point.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** The average confidence in the fairness and integrity of voting process of the age group 18-24 is below the neutral point.

Notes: Test value = 2 in the survey corresponds to the option “Neutral” in the confidence of respondents in the fairness and integrity of the voting process in Albania.

For the scope of this hypothesis, **One Sample t-test** was used.

The results of the first hypothesis are as it follows:

- **Statistical Significance:**

The p-value (0.0000874) was less than the significance level (which was as usual set at 0.05), indicating that the observed difference in confidence in the fairness and integrity of the voting process is statistically significant.

- **Direction of the Difference:**

The positive mean difference (0.0001748) suggested that the average confidence in the fairness and integrity of the voting process for the age groups 18-24 was slightly above the neutral point.

- **Confidence Interval:**

The 95% confidence interval (0.36 to 1.04) didn't include the test value (2), providing further evidence against the null hypothesis.

- **Effect Sizes:**

Both *Cohen's d* (1.067) and *Hedges' correction* (1.088) indicated a very large effect size, suggesting that the observed difference was practically significant. For further information Cohen's d value is based in some categories:

- small ($d \leq 0.2$)
- medium ($d = 0.5$)
- large ($d \geq 0.8$).

- **Conclusion:**

Based on the results of the One Sample t-test, due to the low p-value, the very large effect size, plus the other factors influencing too (confidence interval), the null hypothesis could be rejected. The evidence suggests that the average confidence in the fairness and integrity of the voting process for the age groups 18-24 is statistically significantly below the neutral point.

2. Hypothesis for the relationship between the residence of living and the belief of computational propaganda as part of voting behaviour and political events in Albania

- **Null Hypothesis (H₀):** There is no significant relationship between residence of the participants (rural or urban) and whether participants believe that digital propaganda is part of the voting behaviour and political events in Albania.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H₁):** There is a significant relationship between residence of the participants (rural or urban) and whether participants believe that digital propaganda is part of the voting behaviour and political events in Albania.

Notes: A Chi-Square test was conducted.

The results of the second hypothesis are as it follows:

- **Chi-Square Test Statistic:**

The test statistic from Chi-square was 0.753 with 1 df (degree of freedom) along with the p-value scored 0.386.

- **Significance Levels:**

From the score of p-value above, it can be said that p-value was greater than the common significance level (0.05).

This result showed that there was no significant relationship between the 2 entities studied in this case (the residence of participants (rural or urban) and their belief that digital propaganda is part of the voting process and political events in Albania).

- **Effect Size Measures:**

Phi (Symmetric Measures = -0.086) , Cramer's V (0.086), and Contingency Coefficient (0.086). In this case, all three measures suggested a very weak association between residence and belief in digital propaganda, because the values were close to 0.

- **Conclusions**

From all the results above, we failed to reject Ho (null hypothesis).

The results did not support a significant relationship between the residence of participants (rural or urban) and their belief that digital propaganda is part of the voting process and political events in Albania. Moreover, the weak effect size measures indicated that any of the observed association was minimal.

3. **Hypothesis related to the education level and the fact if respondents of the survey have heard about the digital propaganda or not.**

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** There is no significant association between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** There is a significant association between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda.

Notes: A Chi-Square test was conducted for hypothesis 3 too

Results from the Chi-Square test are as it follows:

- **Chi-Square Test Statistic:**

The Pearson chi-square test statistic was 8.968 with 3 degrees of freedom.

The p-value associated with the chi-square test was 0.030 (Asymptotic Significance).

- **Significance Levels:**

The p-value (0.030) was smaller than 0.05 (significance level at usual rate)

The p-value showed that between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda, there is statistical significance.

- **Effect Size Measures:**

Phi (Symmetric Measures = 0.298), Cramer's V (0.298), and Contingency Coefficient (0.286) are measures of the strength of association. In this case, all three measures suggested a moderate association between education level and hearing about digital propaganda.

▪ **Conclusions**

Based on the results of the Chi-Square test and its associated p-value, the null hypothesis (Ho) could be rejected.

The results supported a significant association/relationship between the education level of respondents and whether they have heard about digital propaganda.

The effect size measures indicated a moderate association, suggesting that the relationship was not only statistically significant but also had some practical importance.

The 4th and final hypothesis of the Statistical analysis concerns the partial objective of the thesis, as it follows:

4. **Hypothesis about the level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender of the respondents.**

- **Null Hypothesis (Ho):** There is not a significant difference in level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender (male and female) of the respondents.
- **Alternative Hypothesis (H1):** There is a significant difference in level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender (male and female) of the respondents.

Notes: An Independent Sample t-test was used for the scope of this hypothesis.

- **Levene's Test for Equality of Variances:**

Levene's test shows if the variances of the two samples are equal in value. The Levene's test result was not statistically significant, because of the p-value ($p = 0.503$)

- **t-test for Equality of Means:**

The t-test result, according to the value was not statistically significant ($p = 0.308$). The t-value was 0.504 with 99 degrees of freedom.

- **Confidence Interval for Mean Difference:**

The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference ranged from -0.484 to 0.814.

Since this interval contains zero, it suggests that there is no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between male and female respondents.

- **Effect Size Measures:**

Cohen's $d = 1.642$, Hedges' correction = 1.655, Glass's delta = 1.603.

These effect size measures indicated a large effect size, but it's important to note that the statistical significance (p-value) was not reached. And most of the times in these kinds of tests, when the p-value is not reached, but on the same time the effect size is large, what it means is that this difference is not reliably observed in the current sample, for reasons such as the sample size.

▪ **Conclusions**

Based on the results of the independent sample t-test, with the higher p-value; with the Confidence Interval for Mean difference not containing 0 and even though the effect sizes were large, we fail to reject the Null Hypothesis. According to the results, there is not a significant difference in level of digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries scores based on the gender (male and female) of the respondents.

Moreover, we can also compare the findings from the “Literature Review” in comparison with the hypothesis 4 along with the responses of the questions affecting this part of the topic in the survey, to compare what the selected sample thinks about the digital propaganda in Western Balkan countries and if it aligns with the actual state in these specific countries.

From the “Literature review”, indeed digital propaganda is present in the western Balkan countries, where it is mainly focused through the censorship of media and TV channels and shows which serve as nests of propaganda infestation, especially during the voting elections and even before and after such events. The most powerful parties “have bought” these channels and use them as a free advertisement of their ideology.

On the other hand, respondents of the survey were thinking quite similarly, whose results were interpreted in the practical part of the study, but for reference 74 people out of 101 respondents think that the digital propaganda is present there, only 2 people out of the grand total think there is no digital propaganda at all, and 25 participants do not have information for this topic.

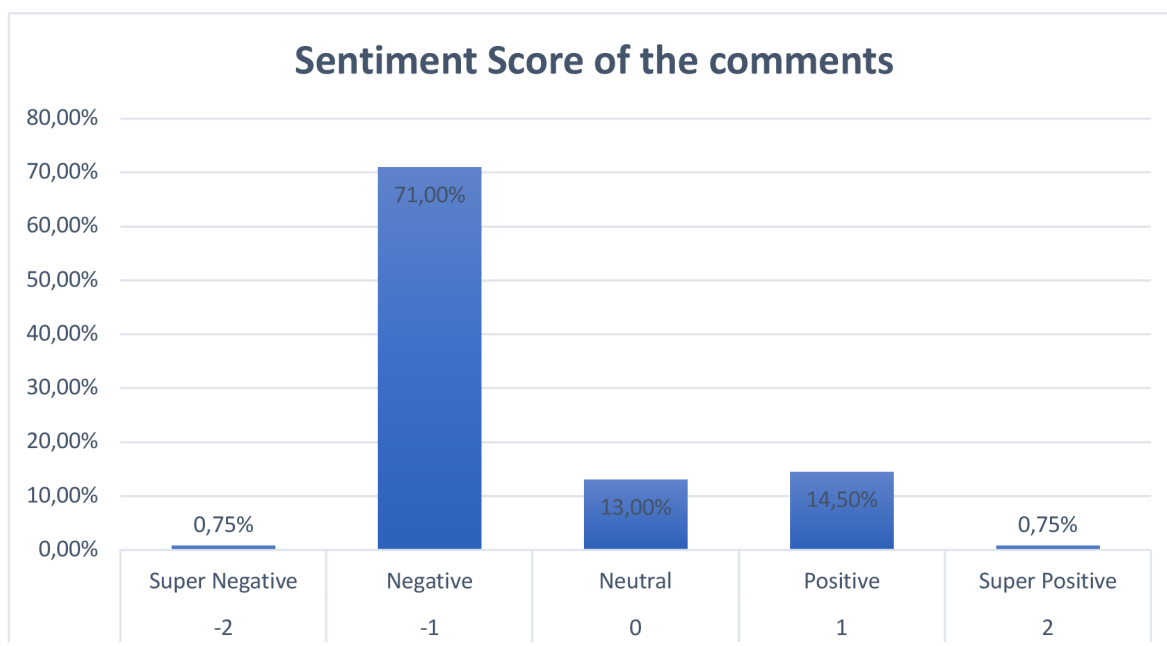
5.2 Results from the Sentiment Analysis Approach

As stated in the practical part, since the statistical analysis approach was the main and most detailed part of the practical work, on the other hand meaning that the sentiment analysis is not as much detailed as the first approach.

But on the same time, the findings are really interesting and valuable in order to understand in a deeper way, the way the general public of Albania is aware of the political events and their close relationship with computational propaganda.

After securing the comments from Instagram and running the scripts for the sentiment analysis, the following interpretations of results are given:

- a) Bar Chart of Sentiment Scores and their labels from the processed data of the analysis:



Graph 12 - Sentiment Scores

- Country (the most common comments were with the intention of leaving the country)
- People
- Rama (the actual Prime-Minister of Albania)
- Communism
- Leave
- Corruption
- Disgrace
- RIOT

The list goes on, but based on the output, it is very visible that most of the words have a negative approach, while at the same time supports the first bar chart with its results.

c) Word Frequency Analysis

Similar to the word cloud, with the word frequency analysis, explained in the practical part, we can determine exactly the count of the most frequent words. It is a simple, yet important output, which can reinforce the results of the previous parts. The table below shows the results, while keeping in mind, showing the most common word and not every word frequency.

Word	Frequency
Country	69
Propaganda	57
Rama (including Edi Rama)	36
Albania	24
People	24
Corruption	20
Leave	16
Disgrace	13
Digital	12
Elections	12
Rigged	11
Media	10
Unbelievable	10
Media	10
Democracy	9

Table 14 - Word Frequency Analysis

As it can be seen from the results of the table, now we can see the proper number, in difference to the word cloud that is based in the frequency but doesn't show the proper numbers. The sentiment, based on the words used leans towards negativity and desperation.

5.3 Results from the Interview Analysis Approach

While the interviews do not have a proper number as a result, their analysis can bring some important insights concerning the topic. As mentioned in the Practical Part, the interviews were conducted in an anonymous approach, with the aim of the interviewees to be as much honest as possible. The following table will contain important information from the interviewees and their experiences in Albania concerning the topics of the thesis.

Interviewee	Residence	City*	Experience	Option to return to/leave Albania	Suggested Improvements
1	Not in Albania	Tirana	Bribery in social media/by phone call promising monetary rewards	Never	Improve technology and security during voting elections
2	Not in Albania	Lezhe	They were registered as a voter, even though being abroad during elections	Never	Security of data in voting areas
3	Not in Albania	Kukes	Bribery in social media/by phone call promising monetary rewards	Never	Educational Systems
4	Not in Albania	Kukes	Double standards in universities, students who were bribed for their votes, got rewarded better grades	Yes, but in 5-10 years	Nothing, according to them, propaganda will be more structured in the future
5	Not in Albania	Durres	Violence of the personal information & voting history of the individual	No	Data Security improvement & the elimination of corruption
6	Not in Albania	Tirana	Attempt of monetary rewards and bribery via email/phone call & Facebook group chats	No	Improve the communication of the parties with the voters and be respectful of your personal data
7	Not in Albania	Lezhe	Propagandistic conference/meeting with students	No	Improve transparency in digital communication platforms
8	In Albania	Lezhe	Unfair firing from work & Bribe	Yes	Improve security, add more scholarships, help the youth

Table 15- Interview Results

The table above contains the general information from all the interviews in total. All the information containing the transcript and the audio files can be found in the Appendix. From the table above it can be seen that out of 8 interviewees, seven of them are not living in Albania anymore, but used to live there before, in the recent years. Only one of them is currently residing in Albania.

Before jumping in any deep investigation of the results, when from an interview, 87.5% of the selected sample leave their home country, necessarily something must be wrong with the country itself. Each interviewee shared their story concerning the topic of the thesis with experiences in the latest years. It should be kept in mind that the number of the interviewees can be seen as low for the reason because the topic itself is intimidating and dangerous enough for the citizens of Albania. This is due to the fact of the existing propaganda in Albania and of all the people who were asked for an interviewee, only a handful of people accepted the request, even though it was communicated that everything would be anonymous. This tells a lot about the current state of Albania and its current digital propaganda and corruption.

The results show that interviewees encountered different real-life experiences in Albania such as:

- Bribery in workplace/through social media
- Monetary rewards as a reward for the vote
- Threats to be fired if not following orders. (voting the party which gave the orders)
- Double Standards in Universities
- Violence of the personal information
- False Participation in voting sessions etc.

Due to the presence of the above entities and other personal reasons as well, the interviewees explained the reason why they left their country, and based on their response from the questions in the interviews they were not planning to come back anytime soon, except of one of them, who indicated that they would return in 5-10 years.

On the other hand, only 1 interviewee was still living in Albania and even though they were the only person still in the country, they were planning to leave as soon as possible. Among supportive questions during their story, the interviewees were asked of one thing they could fix in their country, based on the topic it was discussed, if given the power. The Suggested improvements contained:

- Improvement of data security and technology
- Improvement of educational systems
- Improvement of the digital communication between the parties and the voter
- Elimination of corruption and double standards etc.

Worth to note from the interviews is that despite the small number of the interviewees, the results were close to 100% negative, meaning that the interviewees were not satisfied with the current situation of their country in terms of the digital propaganda during the voting elections. They have a tendency to leave the country for their own personal benefits due to the serious condition and not fight back for their rights.

6 Conclusion

The conclusion part will mainly focus on the main and partial objectives as well as on the main findings that have been discovered in the scope of this thesis.

To begin with, the main objective of the thesis was to investigate the perception and awareness of computational propaganda among the general public and voter behavior in Albania.

Being the main objective of the thesis, its completion was concentrated in all the parts of the practical part, where firstly a survey was conducted addressing Albanian people only, where everything was anonymous. From the results of the survey, which firstly they were interpreted, then its data was modified and edited and used for the formulation of the hypothesis, 4 in total, where 3 of them were in relation with the main objective.

Furthermore, the second part of the practical part was concentrated in the sentiment analysis of the Instagram comments of Albanian community/commentors in a verified anti-propaganda page, where comments were scraped from different posts talking about the digital propaganda; corruption; voting elections etc., and after the data was prepared the sentiment analysis was conducted.

The third and final part of the practical part was the individual interviews with Albanian citizens, where they witnessed real-life experiences of the thesis topic, expressing their opinion and perception of the current situation and their life-choices based on that.

The partial objectives of the thesis were to investigate the historical context and background of electoral irregularities in Albania, which was tackled in the *Literature Review* of the thesis, where an investigation of the Albanian's history was made in respect of its political scope associated with the irregularities of the country during different periods of time.

The other partial objective was to compare the experiences of Albania with other countries in terms of electoral manipulations and computational propaganda. This objective was also covered in the Literature Review, where a deep dive of each Western Balkan countries was made, exploring their digital propaganda in different aspect and also in the same time, during the practical part of the statistical analysis approach, the fourth hypothesis conducted was concerning the opinion of Albanian citizens (which is important to note that whether they lived or not in the Western Balkan countries, the association between Albania and these countries is really high in terms of economical, open-market, industrial, cultural etc., and the opinion of Albanian respondents is crucial too) where respondents were asked about the digital propaganda scores in these specific countries, based in their opinion and interaction.

Keeping in mind the limitations of the study such as the fact that the topic of the thesis has not been thoroughly investigated before, but rather in specific single scientific papers, and because of the limited sample size obtained in every analysis conducted in the practical part, the results in every methodology used, showed that the majority of the selected sample understands what the digital propaganda is, they believe that it is a crucial part of their political and governmental organization of the country and at the moment, they are really dissatisfied with the current level of digital propaganda in their country. Most of the studied sample does not believe anymore that the country will improve, but rather they are fleeing the country in serious numbers towards Europe and the World. At the same time, their opinion about the neighboring countries in Balkan are close to similar of what they think about their homeland. The percentage of the selected sample thinking that the situation is improving in their country is really slim and having a decreasing trend.

Overall, this study served as a starting point and provided valuable insights into how the Albanian citizens perceive and understand the digital propaganda around them and what is their opinion of this certain topic when asked about it anonymously. As mentioned before, this is an ongoing issue in the country and an open topic for the future researchers concerning the same phenomena.

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8 List of pictures, tables, graphs and abbreviations

8.1 List of pictures

Figure 1- Political Transformation of Albania.....	14
Figure 2- Hunger strike in the Albanian Parliament from LSI party (VOTE IS SACRED).....	16
Figure 3 - Actual Monitoring Infrastructure	17
Figure 4 - CPI rank of Albania.....	21
Figure 5 - Score changes in CPI through the years.....	21
Figure 6 - V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index 2012-2018	25
Figure 7 - Change in V-Dem Electoral Democracy Index 2012–2018.....	25
Figure 8 - Survey in Google Forms	34
Figure 9 - Dataset View of the Survey in SPSS.....	44
Figure 10 - Word Cloud.....	61

8.2 List of Graphs

Graph 1 - Have you ever heard the term Digital Propaganda?	36
Graph 2- Average Monthly Income according to the state of employment (Instat, 2023).....	37
Graph 3- Ways Digital Propaganda is spread	38
Graph 4 - Level of Confidence in voting processes in Albania.....	39
Graph 5 - Level of Satisfaction with transparency of voting process in Albania	39
Graph 6 - Social media usage based on believing whether digital propaganda is part of voting processes in Albania	40
Graph 7- Participation in elections in the last five years	40
Graph 8 - How frequently do participants vote in elections?	41
Graph 9- Is Digital Propaganda in Western Balkan Countries present?.....	41
Graph 10 - Level of Digital Propaganda in Western Balkan Countries.....	42
Graph 11 - Do Participants believe that the Digital Propaganda problem will be solved in Albania?	42
Graph 12 - Sentiment Scores	60

8.3 List of Tables

Table 1 - Demographic data of the survey.....	35
Table 2 - Hypothesis 1a	45
Table 3 - Hypothesis 1b	45
Table 4 - Hypothesis 1c	45
Table 5 - Hypothesis 2b	46
Table 6 - Hypothesis 2c	46
Table 7 - Hypothesis 2d	47
Table 8 - Hypothesis 3a	47
Table 9- Hypothesis 3b	48
Table 10 - Hypothesis 3c	48
Table 11 - Hypothesis 4a	48
Table 12 - Hypothesis 4b	49
Table 13 - Hypothesis 4c	49

Table 14 - Word Frequency Analysis.....	62
Table 15- Interview Results.....	63

8.4 List of abbreviations

- **PD** - Democratic Party
- **PS** – Socialist Party
- **LSI** – Levizja Socialiste per Integrim (Social Movement for Integration)
- **EU**- European Union
- **NATO** - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- **CEC** - Central Executive Committee
- **BIRN** - Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
- **CPI** - Corruption Perceptions Index
- **V-DEM** – Varieties of Democracy Index
- **VMRO-DPMNE** - Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity.
- **SNS** - Serbian Progressive Party.
- **SNSD** - Alliance of Independent Social Democrats.
- **DPS** - Democratic Party of Socialists
- **NDI** - National Democratic Institute
- **EEAS** - European External Action Service
- **DPS** - Democratic Party of Socialists (In Montenegro)
- **OMS** - Organization Management Service
- **NLP** – Natural Language Processing
- **VADER** - Valence Aware Dictionary for Sentiment Reasoning

Appendix

- Supplement 1: Survey Summary in Google Forms.pdf
- Supplement 2: Survey Results and Charts.xlsx
- Supplement 3: Audio Files of Interviews
- Supplement 4: Transcript of the interviews.docx
- Supplement 5: Statistical Approach Charts.docx
- Supplement 6: Dataset of Statistical Approach-Survey.sav
- Supplement 7: Hypothesis