

INSTITUTE FOR DEMOCRACY AND MEDIATION

CENTER FOR EUROPEAN & SECURITY AFFAIRS

SURVEY REPORT

“Interest groups and EU accession”

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INTRODUCTION

EU accession is one of the major priorities and a significant challenge not only for state institutions but also for the various interest groups and non-state actors. Their involvement remains crucial for the quality of the process and more specifically in the context of the successive stages – candidate country status and accession negotiations. While most of the communication instruments and activities of various stakeholders operating in Albania have focussed mainly on the priority to “bring EU accession closer to the citizens”, encouraging the involvement of interest groups and informing them on this process has been somehow underestimated. To this fact indicate not only the level of awareness and information on the process of EU integration but also existing data as regards the involvement of interest groups in the frames of alignment with the EU’s policy and legal framework.

Acknowledging the importance of this dimension of Albania’s EU accession process and also with the aim to generate critical thinking and concrete measures to involve interest groups, IDM’s Center for European & Security Affairs (CESA) has conducted an assessment of their perceptions and experience in the context of EU integration process. With this purpose, in the period February – March 2011 IDM has interviewed 75 (public and private) interest groups and other non-state actors, selected out of target “population” that may be considered as a societal segment which is impacted or may impact the process.

The report presents the main findings of the survey which does not pretend to be exhaustive from the perspective of thematic coverage, processes or actors involved in the context of Albania’s EU accession. The main purpose of the survey analysis is to generate informed debate and concrete alternatives to encourage the involvement of interest groups and to absorb their contribution in the framework of the country’s EU accession.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The identified trends as regards interest groups' expectations, capacities and priorities in the frames of Albania's EU accession demonstrate the level of a relatively well-informed societal actor that is open to contribute in the reforming processes. The role and position of interest groups, their priorities, capacities and interest imply also the existence of a more consistent concept of the means and instruments that lead to their fulfilment. Yet, given the complexity of the EU accession process and its multi-dimensional impact on almost all societal sectors, Albanian interest groups are faced with a number of challenges vis a vis their involvement in and inputs to the process.

Despite the challenges or doubts, **95% of interest groups fully support EU accession. 47%** of them believe that Albania will join EU in the period 2014 – 2017 and another **31%** believe that this will take place between **2018 – 2020**.

More than 80% of interest groups are confident that **EU accession will improve the activity of the sector where they operate** – of which, 45% say that it will “significantly improve it” and 36% say that it will “improve it somehow”.

Differently from the trends of public perception analysis on sources of information, Albanian interest groups use diversified sources in order to get information on EU or EU integration process. Media (32%) and EU institutions (31%) are the top two sources of information they use, while for another 1/3 of interviewees state institutions and non-governmental think tanks appear as source of information.

The majority of interest groups declare they are **informed to a certain extent on the EU integration process (41%)** and on **developments within EU (47%)**. More than half of them (52%) dedicate continuous attention to EU integration while 35% say they do that dependent on the sectorial issues at stake.

Roughly 79% respondents have **complete information as regards the impact of EU accession on the sector where they operate**, while 61% of them say they have the same level of information as regards their own potential to shape EU accession reforms.

More than half of respondents (52%) believe that capacities of their respective sector must be further strengthened in order to employ the advantages of being an EU member state. **The two major challenges** in the respective sectors, before and after EU accession, are connected to “**fiscal policy & capacities for competitiveness**” and to the “**alignment with EU legislation and standards**”.

The vast majority of interest groups (83%) consider as “important” (46%) or “very important” (37%) their involvement in the EU integration reforms. In the context of EU accession negotiations, a considerable majority (**84%**) **ask from state actors to consider them as “integral part of the negotiations process”**.

Respondents' expectations from Albanian institutions in the frames of EU accession process are predominantly linked with two interconnected aspects – the need for **“fair balance between national priorities and accession conditions”** according to **34%** of them and a **“more inclusive policymaking in the context of EU accession”** for another **32%**.

In relation to the means and instruments for greater involvement of interest groups in the frames of EU accession process, **42.7%** of respondents consider as more efficient the **“consultative sector-based forums under the lead of line ministries (Government)”**. Another instrument that would enable such involvement is deemed to be the **“national accession council with sectorial working groups under the lead of the Parliament and with the involvement of the Government”** according to **29.3%** of respondents.

I. METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted with 75 senior representatives of various interest groups, selected from a database of about 180 peer actors. In consideration of level of the respondents involved in the survey (leaders and their senior representatives), the polling process was inevitably lengthy in time due to the availability of the interviewees.

Aware of this challenge, the experts of the Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) developed a questionnaire, which was easily manageable even in the absence of the interviewer. They conducted about 2/3 of the 75 interviews, while the rest was self-administered by the respondents who sent the completed questionnaire via email.

The questionnaire used for this survey consisted of 29 questions divided in 5 separate sections as follows:

1. General information
2. Level of awareness of and attitude to membership in EU
3. Participation in the process of integration into EU
4. Expectations from the membership process and EU membership
5. A special section called “What Would Work”, which solicits respondents’ opinions on various solutions and options for the involvement of the interest groups

Out of the 29 questions of the questionnaire, only two of them were open-ended, while the other close-ended questions sought to solicit options or assessment on them.

The survey was focused in the actors that operate in the capital city and in a limited number of interest groups operating in other urban areas (such as Kukes or Durrës) taking into consideration the real capacities and capabilities of the majority of interest groups for essential involvement in the policymaking process related with the country’s membership in EU.

II. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

As the definition on the interest group states that it is *an organized form of members who share common (social, economic, political, etc.) goals and work together to influence policymaking for the accomplishment of these goals*, the survey conducted by the Center for European and Security Affairs of IDM included 75 interest groups, which met one or more of the following conditions:

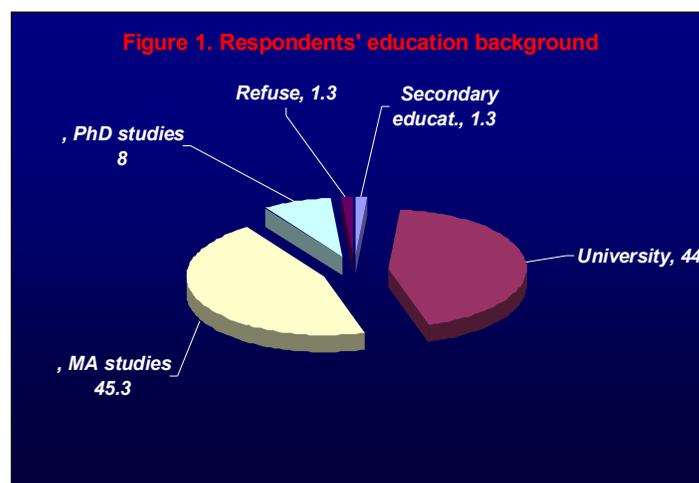
- a. Are well-informed on the process and/or promote information on it;
- b. Are certain categories that have (potential) influence on this process and eventually on the country's membership in EU

In this sense, the sample selected from the viewpoint of categorization of interest groups constitutes of these categories:

Table 1. Interest groups involved in the survey

CATEGORIZATION OF "INTEREST GROUPS"	% TOTAL OF SAMPLE
Economic interest groups (professional associations, syndicates, private enterprises) ¹	45%
Public interest groups (such as local government units, prosecutors, etc.)	4%
Academic circles	7%
Media	11%
Civil society (think tanks) organization	25%
Other ²	8%

The survey ensured an almost equal representation in terms of the **gender** of the respondents –females (49%) and males (51%); while in regard to the **age groups**, most of the respondents (54%) belonged to the 26-35 year-old group; second to this group came the age group of 36-45 year-old respondents with 16% followed by the 46-55 and 18-25 year-old respondents' age group with 13% respectively. Only 3% of the respondents belonged to the age group of above 56 year-old, while 1% of the respondents refused to provide this data.



¹ The survey included a considerable number of large and medium-sized businesses.

² This category includes respondents who declared themselves in this subdivision, because they thought that the institution they represent does not constitute an interest group. Such respondents include Roma associations, attorneys-at-law, small businesses, or association of the local government units. While processing the general data and categories of the respondents, the analysis of the survey was based on this self-declaration.

The majority of the respondents belong to a generation that during the last 20 years have had opportunities to choose quality education (over 80% of the respondents are 1-45 years old); therefore the data on education indicate a sample of well-educated respondents. Some 53.3% of the respondents have attended post university studies of master degree or PHD (8%) and 44% of the respondents are university graduates. Only 1.3% of the interviewees have high education. See Figure 1.

III. SURVEY FINDINGS

The following sections of the report present the main findings of the survey based on the structure of the survey. Since the involvement of the economic interest groups (including the economic operators) is deemed important in the overall discussions, an analysis of the perceptions, attitudes, or expectations of this interest group is conducted for specific data.

III.1. LEVEL OF AWARENESS AND ATTITUDE TO MEMBERSHIP IN EU

It is important to point out that unlike the general tendency of the common citizens, who use media as the main source of information, the various groups of interest utilize diversified sources for information on issues of integration or EU in general.³ When asked about the main source of information, the interest groups identify media (32%) and EU institutions (31%) as secondary sources, while about 1/3 of them consult state institutions (19%) and non-governmental research/think-tank organizations (11%). Only 3 of the respondents use academic circles and 4% of them identify “other” sources.

The survey asked respondents to assess the impact of the various non-state domestic actors as an instrument to improve the integration process and to promote information of the interest groups with regard to it.

Question: How do you see the role of these structures in the improvement of the integration process and information of the interest groups?

Table 2. Non-state actors: Impact on the process of integration and information of the interest group

	Great impact	Some Impact	No Impact	Don't know/do not answer
Media	81%	19%	-	-
Civil society think-tank organizations	40%	54%	5%	1%
Universities	31%	55%	7%	7%

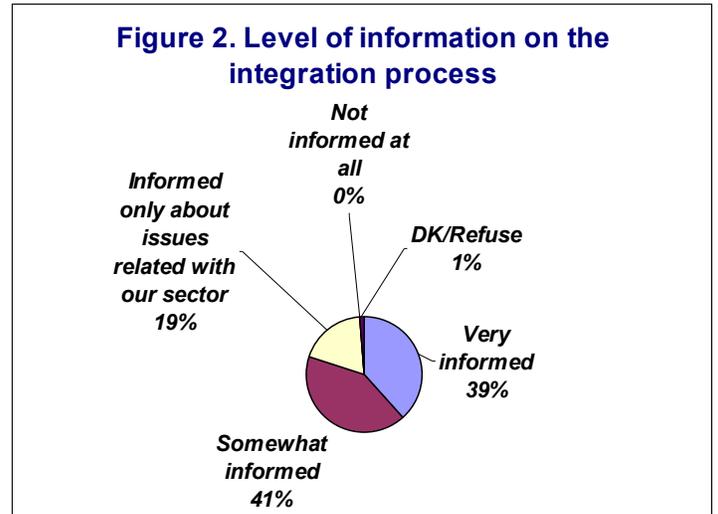
Some 81% of the respondents consider the role of the media as an instrument with “great impact”, while 40% and 31% of the respondents articulate the same opinion for the think-tank organizations and academic circles respectively. As seen in Table 2, more than half of the respondents think that both categories have “some impact”.

³ Many studies of the public opinion in Albania underline that in most cases more than half of the respondents (citizens) obtain the information on EU and integration process mainly from the media and only a small part of the respondents utilize other means of information, such as think-tanks, state institutions, academic entities, etc.

Furthermore, the respondents were asked about their perception on the level of information on the European integration process of the interest groups they represent. Some 41% of the respondents state that the institution they represent cannot be considered “somewhat informed”, while 19% of the respondents state that their institution is “informed only for issues related with the interest of its respective sector”.

On the other hand, a considerable majority of 39% of the respondents think that their institution is “very informed”. See Figure 2.

In terms of the answers from the economic interest groups (economic operators, business associations, etc.), about 15% of the respondents think that they are “very informed” on the process of European integration. Most of them (58%) state that they are “somewhat informed” and some 27% admit that they are “informed only about issues related with their sector”.

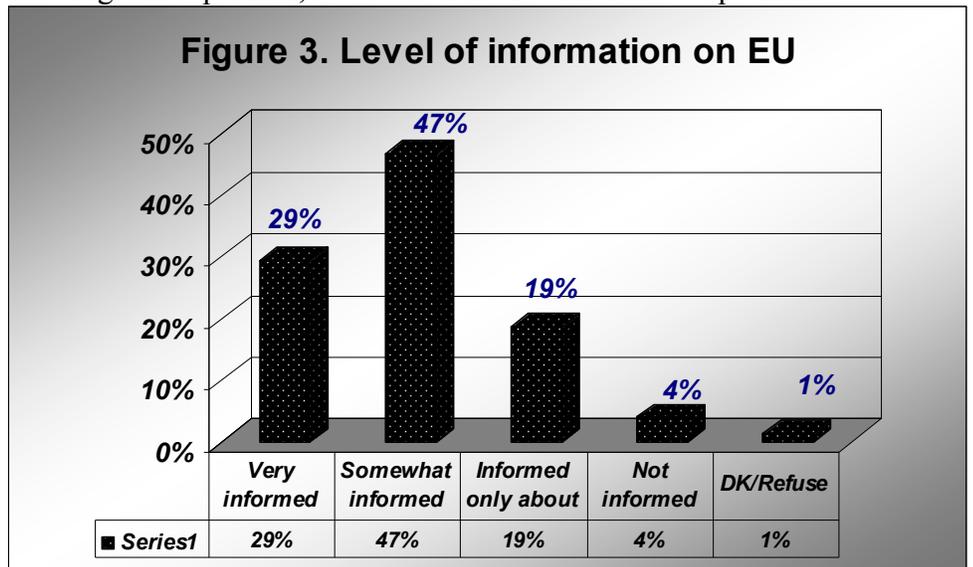


Respondents were also asked about the level of information of their institution on the general development within European Union (EU). While their answers seem to reiterate the trends of the previous question on the European integration process, it is clear that the “very informed” level decreases. Thus, while about 39% of the respondents were “very informed” on the European integration process, when asked about the developments within EU only 29% of the respondents state that they are “very informed”.

Most of the interviewees (47%) say that they are “somewhat informed”, and only 4% declare that they are not informed at all. See Figure 3.

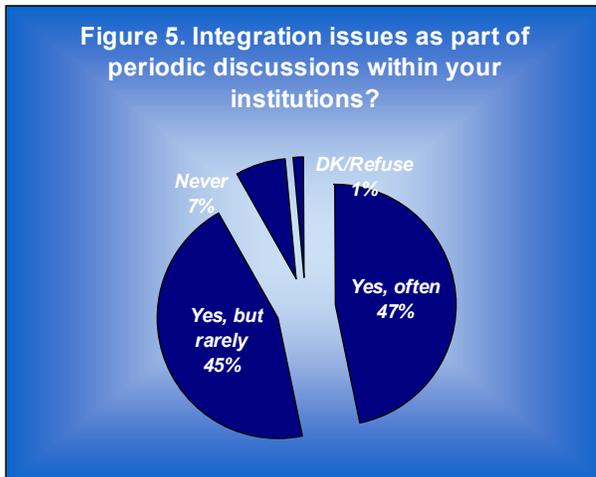
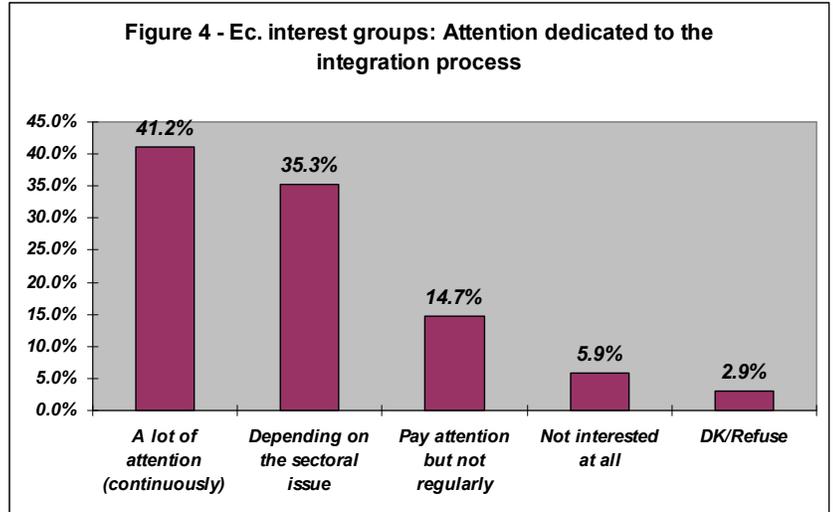
When asked about the attention paid by their institution to the European integration process in general, more than half of the respondents (52%) declare that this process gets “a lot of attention continuously”.

Some 35% of the respondents admit that attention is paid to the integration process “depending on sectoral issue” under question, while 9% of them state



that their institution “pays attention but not regularly”. A small group of 3% declare that they are “not interested at all” in the process, and about 1% refused to answer.

Figure 4 presents the answers given on the same question by the economic interest groups. Similar to the general sample, this category reflects the same tendencies in its responses, where the majority of answers are divided between the two options – “a lot of attention (continuously)” and “depending on the sectoral issue”. The main difference between this category and the trend of the general sample consists in the fact that most of the respondents (56%) restrict their attention to the integration process for one reason or another “depending on the sectoral issue” (35.3%) or declare that they are “not interested at all” (5.9%), or



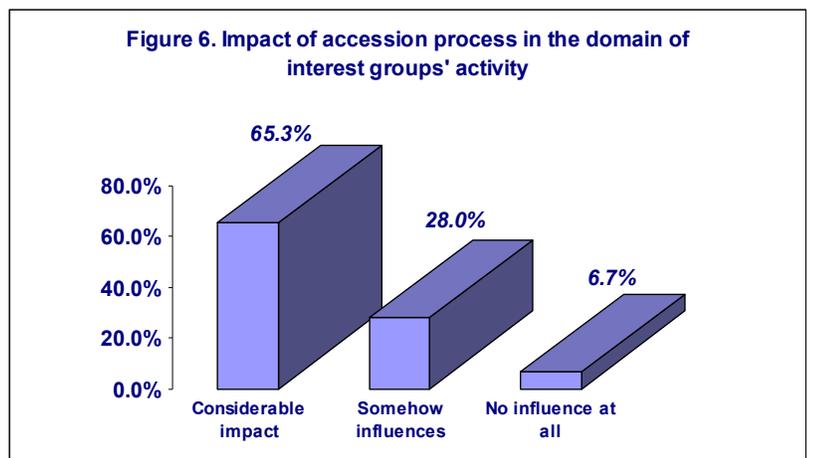
simply “do not pay attention regularly” (14.7%). A split among respondents seems to crystallize in the subsequent question.

Question: Are the issues of integration (reforms, policies, legislation, and institution) part of the periodic discussions in the framework of the activity of your institution?

Almost half of the respondents (47%) declare that these issues are “frequently” part of the periodic discussions in the framework of the activity of their institution, while some 45% of the respondents admit

that this happens “rarely”. See Figure 5.

Regardless of the current status of information or engagement of the relevant interest groups involved in the survey, a considerable majority of the respondents acknowledge and estimate as important the European integration process in the activity or domain of the interest they represent, advocate, or promote. See Figure 6.



Seeking to completely identify the level of information on certain

aspects of the process of the country's membership to EU, the survey asked respondents, representatives of various interest groups, to evaluate their level of information on three key issues.

Question: How would you evaluate your level of information on the following issues?

Table 3: Level of information on specific issues

	Very comprehensive	Comprehensive	Deficient	Not informed
Impact of membership to EU in the activity of your sector	21%	58%	20%	1%
Potential of your sector to shape reforms in the frame of integration	9%	52%	32%	7%
Instruments and manner of impact of your sector's actors in the decision-making/policymaking of EU	4%	39%	48%	9%

Table 3 provides meaningful data on the current position of the various interest groups and their potential for contextual involvement in the reformation processes in the framework of the country's membership in EU. About 79% of the respondents have comprehensive (58%) or very comprehensive (21%) information on the impact of the membership on their sector. A smaller but yet considerable majority (61%) of the respondents have the same level of information with regard to their potential to shape the integration reforms. However, some 39% have either little or no information at all about this issue.

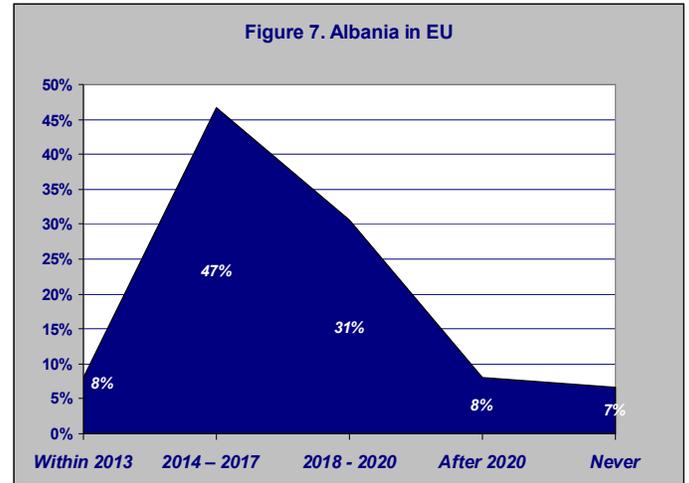
Finally, the interest groups were less informed about how the actors of their sectors impact the decision-making or policymaking of EU. This information would considerably improve the experience and level of involvement of the Albanian interest groups in the policymaking processes. Approximately half of respondents have little information about this issue and 9% declare that they have no information at all.

When asked about the three main aspects of the integration process for which respondents are most interested in, the analyzed answers reveal an inclination to economic aspects and democratization (political criterion) mainly as issues for which they show great interest. Thus, out of a total of 68 responses⁴ with specific issues, 51.5% of the issues of great interest relate to aspects of economic integration, joint market, and economic development. Some 26.5% of the respondents point out other aspects that relate to democratization, political criterion, and approximation with EU standards and legislation. Less 'clicked' were the issues dealing with the free movement of the people (7.3%), collaboration with partner organizations in EU and financial assistance for projects (8.8%) or opportunities for the education and development of the human capital (5.9%).

⁴ Not all respondents answered this open-ended question. Those who did, provided only one or two specific issues.

Irrespective of challenges, ambiguities or doubts, 95% of the interviewed respondents of the interest groups fully supported the country’s membership to EU, while 4% of the respondents are “not sure”, and 1% refuse to answer. None of the respondents is against or indifferent to Albania’s membership to EU.

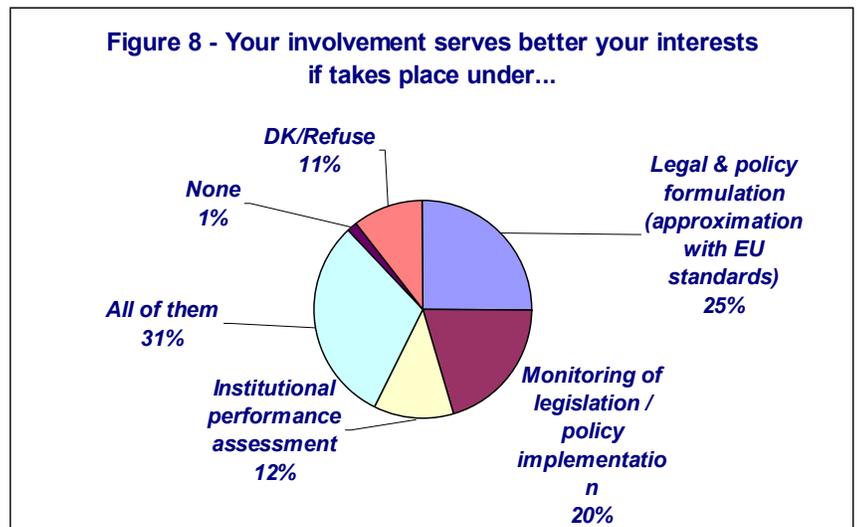
Some 47% of the respondents think that Albania will join EU during 2014-2017, while 31% believe that this will happen somewhere during 2018-2020, and 7% of the respondents think that the country will never join EU. The “within year 2013” and “after year 2020” options have each earned 8% of the expectations of the respondents. See Figure 7.



III.2. PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF INTEGRATION INTO EU

The majority of interest groups (83%) consider “important” (46%) or “very important” (37%) their involvement in the process of reforms in the framework of membership in EU. Only 9% see this involvement as “little important” and 5% see it as “not important at all”. About 3%, however, refused to answer.

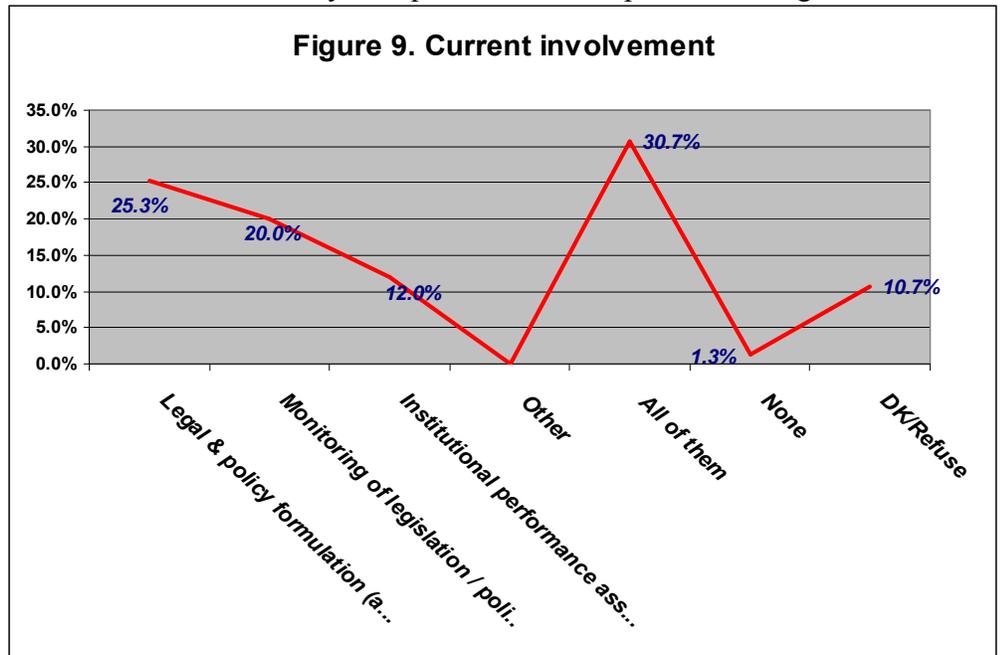
Taking into consideration the various structures, interests, and priorities of each category of (private, public, and civil) interest groups, the respondents had different answers to the question “In which phases of reforms of integration process would your involvement serve best the interests of the groups they represent?”. About 1/3 of them think their involvement in all policymaking process is better favored. Some 25% believe that their involvement in the initial phases of policymaking offers more advantages, whereas 20% of respondents select the monitoring of the implementation of policies and legislation. Performance evaluation of institution is favored by 12% of the respondents. See Figure 8.



Classification of the above options on the involvement in various phases of the reform process is diametrically opposite when respondents are asked on their present experience.

Thus, while “involvement in all phases” (see above) is considered favorable for their interests, many respondents (31%) have not, in their experience to date, been involved in any phases, while 8% declare that they have been involved in the entire cycle of the policymaking. Similar percentage (8%) of respondents declare that they have been involved in “the monitoring of the implementation of the policies/legislation” or in the “evaluation of performance of institution”. The only exception to the compliance among priorities given to the experience to date deals with the initial phases of the policymaking – drafting of policies and legislation– in which 25% of respondents admit that they have been involved in this phase. See Figure 9.

When focused only in the answers given by the respondents – representatives of economic interest groups– we notice that the trends of the general



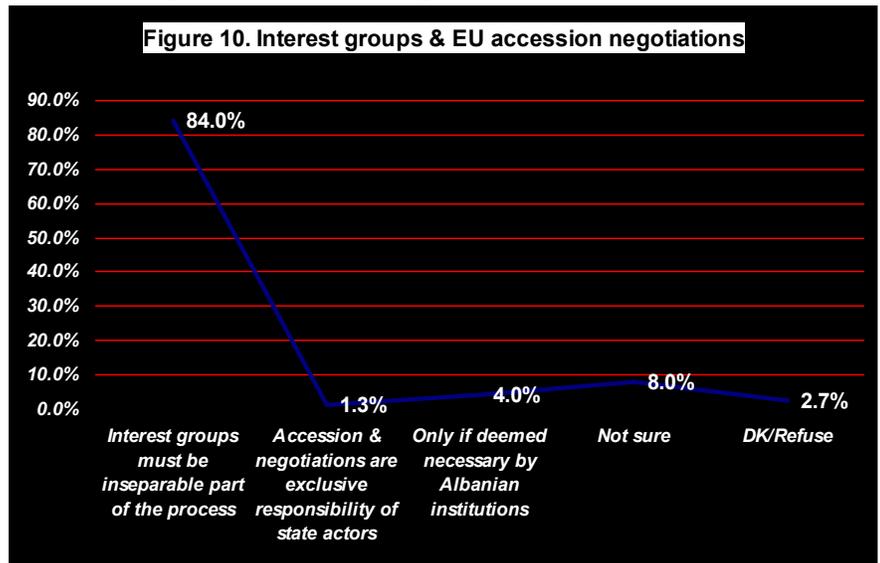
sample seem to be similar with the trends of the economic interest groups. Thus, 40% of interviewees affirm that they have not been involved in any of the phases. Some 21% of the respondents declare that they have been in the initial phase (drafting of policies and legislation). Involvement in “evaluation of performance of institutions” has been true for 9% of the respondents and the same percentage has been involved in “all phases”, while only 3% declare that they have been incorporated in the “evaluation of the performance of institutions”. About 15% refused to answer and 3% declared that they have been in any other phase/process.

One of the many reasons for the situation of the involvement of the interest groups in the reform process in the framework of EU membership is the deficient information possessed by the interest groups on the experience of similar interests groups in EU countries. When asked about the information they have on the involvement of peer institutions in the European countries in the decision-making and policymaking of EU, about 55% of the respondents declare that they have partial information and about 19% have no information at all. Only 15% of the respondents express that they have complete information and 11% refused to answer.

However, it seems that many interest groups have shown interest in learning from the experience of their partners in the EU countries by undertaking initiatives on the establishment of collaboration with them. About 41% of the respondents declared that the institution they represent has undertaken such initiatives even though not regularly

(sometime) and 17% affirmed that they have undertaken “frequently” steps to establish collaboration with them. About 17% of the respondents have not placed efforts in this direction, whereas 25% have no information or refused to answer.

Finally, in the context of the subsequent phase of the European integration process –negotiation on membership– 84% of the representatives of the interest groups demand to state actors to involve them as “indispensable part of the negotiation process”. See Figure 10.

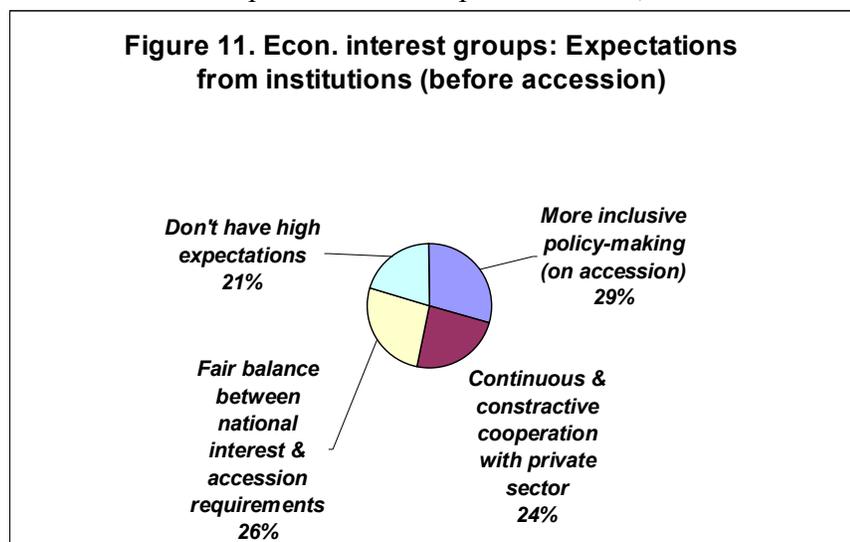


III.3. EXPECTATIONS FROM EU INTEGRATION PROCESS AND ADHERENCE

Only 4% of the respondents consider the process of European integration as an engagement that should be brought closer to and involve citizens. Some 23% deem that the process in its entirety should be presented to and incorporate the interest groups. A consolidated percentage (72%) of respondents affirms that the process should involve both the citizens and interest groups together as compared with the previous two groupings and with 1% of the respondents who refused to answer.

Expectations of most respondents (66%) to Albanian institutions in the framework of the integration process until the membership are linked with two intertwined factors –need for a “fair balance between national priorities and conditions of membership” for 34% of the respondents and “a more comprehensive policymaking in the membership framework” for 32%. About 17% of the respondents directly expressed their expectation for a “continuous and constructive collaboration with the private sector representatives”, while 15% of the representatives of the interest groups “did not have high expectations to Albanian institutions in this process”. One percent did not answer.

An analysis of only the answers of the economic interest groups on this question reveals an inconsiderable division among the four options related with the expectations of the respondents to the Albanian institutions. As seen in Figure 11, the

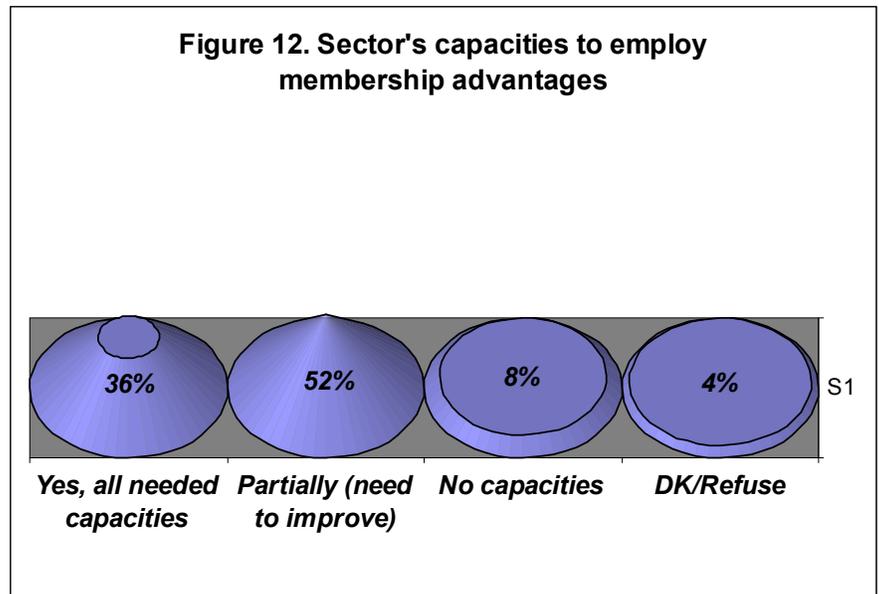


differences vary from 2% to 8%, which makes it difficult to identify a category of expectations with broadest support from the interviewees. It is important to emphasize that the percentage of the respondents of the category with “no high expectations” is bigger (21%) than the trend of the general sample.

Over 80% of the respondents were confident that EU membership would generally improve the activity of their sector of operation – 45% say that it “will improve considerably” and 36% declare that it “will improve to a certain extent”. A limited number of respondents were skeptic about the membership stating that membership would hamper their activity “considerably” (3%) or “to a certain extent” (4%), or judging (7%) that it “will not affect” the activity of their sector. Some 5% of the respondents did not answer.

More than half of the respondents (52%) believe that the sector of their operation should improve its capacities to benefit from the advantages of being an EU member country in the future. More than 1/3 of the respondents believe that they possess all the required capacities and 8% admit that they lack the capacities in this direction. See Figure 12.

If we analyze the responses given by the economic interest groups on the same question, we see that this category is split in two options: their sector possesses “fully” the required capacities (44%) and “partly, needs improvement” (41%).



Finally, respondents were asked about the main challenge to their sector of operation before and after membership in EU. An analysis of 17 answers (17 respondents) on the challenges identified before membership indicates that “fiscal policies and capacities for competition” is the greatest challenge for 8 respondents (47%). About 30% consider “approximation with EU standards and legislation” to be the main challenge, and the rest (23%) identify “other aspects”, such as information and consultation of the interest groups or collaboration with European partners.

Same structure and variety of challenges have been identified by the respondents when asked about the post-membership phase. The only change consists in the categorization of challenges identified by the respondents who were equally split for each category: “fiscal policies and capacity to competition” (6 respondents); “approximation with EU standards and legislation” (6 respondents); and, “other aspects” (6 respondents).

III.4. WHAT WOULD WORK?

By bringing to the respondents' attention the current experience, instruments and potential modalities for promoting their involvement and collaboration with the responsible institutions, the final section of the survey sought to identify the attitudes of the interest groups to these issues as viewed in the current and subsequent stages of the process of country's membership in EU.

In general, the respondents were skeptic about the approach of the institutions to incorporate the contribution of the interest groups in the integration process agenda.

Question: Do you believe that the contribution of the interest groups in the integration process will be incorporated in the integration process agenda by the Albanian institutions?

Some 67% of the respondents think that this contribution will be incorporated to "a certain extent" and 9% think "not at all". Only 16% showed their optimism that their contribution will be incorporated "fully" in the integration agenda. No opinion on this question was expressed by 8%.

Similar tendency is noticed in the next question: "*According to your opinion, do you think Albanian institutions will be open to consultations with the interest groups on the membership negotiations?*" Some 65% think that this will happen to "a certain extent"; 13% "not at all"; 15% "fully"; and, 7% refused to answer.

With regard to various instruments and modalities to be used for promoting the involvement of the interest groups in shaping reforms and legal measures in the integration process, the respondents demonstrated their support to the agencies run by the government or to those in which at minimum the government is involved.

Question: What would be the most efficient option for collaboration among state and non-state institutions for the incorporation of the interest groups' contribution in the integration process?

As seen in Figure 13, many of the respondents (42.7%) think that "sector-based consultation forums under the leadership of relevant ministries (Government) would be the most efficient way. The second option in terms of support demonstrated by the interest groups (29.3%) is the "national council of membership with sectoral workgroups under the leadership of the Parliament and with the involvement of the Government". It is interesting to note that interest groups are more supportive of comprehensive and involving structures (forums or councils) convening regularly rather than other options, such as "periodic meetings with the Prime Minister and Minister of Integration". The latter option gets the support 4% of the respondents and the option of other existing

instruments –participation in discussions of the relevant parliamentary committees– has the support of the 9.3% of the respondents.

