



## Education Policy Between Discourse and Budgetary Reality: Evidence from Albania in Comparison with the European Union

By

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### Abstract

*Education occupies a relevant place in discussions of European integration, where alignment with European Union norms is often presented as a key policy objective. In candidate countries such as Albania, education reforms are frequently associated with converging toward European standards. Yet it is not always evident whether these policy commitments are accompanied by sustained fiscal support.*

*This article examines the relationship between European integration discourse and budgetary outcomes by comparing trends in education expenditure in Albania with those observed in the European Union over the period 2010–2023. The analysis also considers developments in education-sector wages in Albania as an additional indicator of fiscal commitment. The empirical evidence is presented through descriptive comparisons based on one table and three figures.*

*The results indicate that although Albania repeatedly refers to EU priorities in education policy discussions, public spending on education remains below the EU benchmark and shows limited signs of convergence over time. Wage developments in the education sector follow a delayed adjustment pattern, with noticeable increases concentrated only in recent years and little immediate response to the granting of EU candidate status.*

*Taken together, these patterns point to a persistent gap between integration-oriented discourse and observable fiscal outcomes. European integration may shape policy narratives and reform agendas, but sustained convergence appears to depend largely on long-term budgetary commitment.*

**Keywords:** Education policy, European integration, education expenditure, teacher wages, Albania, fiscal commitment

### 1. Introduction

Education plays a relevant role in discussions of European integration, where it is often described as a foundation for social cohesion, economic competitiveness, and democratic development. Within the European Union, education is widely regarded not only as a sectoral policy area but also as a long-term investment in human capital and institutional development. Education systems are also frequently viewed as key instruments for promoting social mobility and addressing long-term inequality within modern economies (Atkinson, 2015). In broader debates on the welfare state, education is often considered a central component of social policy aimed at reducing inequality and strengthening social cohesion

(Esping-Andersen, 1990). From a development perspective, access to quality education is also closely linked to the expansion of individual capabilities and opportunities (Sen, 1999), while persistent inequalities in education and income can undermine both economic and social progress (Stiglitz, 2012).

One significant dimension of this gap between discourse and implementation concerns public-sector wages in the education system. Salaries for teachers and other education professionals represent a substantial share of public education expenditure and provide a direct indication of how governments prioritise education within broader budgetary frameworks. Adequate remuneration is widely recognised as

necessary for attracting and retaining qualified teachers, supporting professional motivation, and ensuring the effective implementation of education reforms. Conversely, long periods of wage stagnation may weaken reform capacity, regardless of how prominently education appears in policy narratives.

These issues become particularly relevant in contexts characterised by fiscal constraints. Albania, like many countries involved in the EU enlargement process, operates within relatively tight budgetary conditions shaped by limited revenue capacity, competing expenditure priorities, and exposure to macroeconomic shocks. Although European integration encourages policy alignment and normative convergence, decisions regarding public spending remain largely influenced by domestic political and institutional considerations. This tension between external integration discourse and internal fiscal realities raises relevant questions about the material foundations of education policy reform.

Against this background, the present study investigates the relationship between European integration discourse and budgetary outcomes by focusing on education expenditure and education-sector wage dynamics in Albania during the period 2010–2023. Rather than estimating causal relationships, the analysis adopts a descriptive empirical approach that combines a benchmark comparison between Albania and the European Union with a country-level examination of wage developments in the education sector. This strategy makes it possible to assess whether integration-related commitments are reflected in observable fiscal patterns.

The article contributes to the literature on European integration and education policy in several ways. First, it draws attention to the fiscal dimension of education reform, an aspect that often receives less emphasis than regulatory or institutional analyses. Second, by comparing policy discourse with expenditure and wage trends, the study illustrates the limits of normative convergence when it is not accompanied by sustained budgetary alignment. Finally, the analysis offers policy-relevant insights into the challenges faced by candidate countries in translating European integration aspirations into tangible improvements in the working conditions of education professionals.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework linking European integration discourse to fiscal commitment in education policy. Section 3 describes the data sources and the descriptive empirical strategy. Section 4 reports the main empirical evidence through one table and three figures. Section 5 discusses the implications of the findings for education policy and European integration, and the final section concludes with reflections on policy coherence and possible directions for future research.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Education and European Integration

Education has occupied a visible, though institutionally indirect, position within the European integration project. Despite the European Union's limited formal competences in education policy, the sector has been consistently promoted as a strategic investment in human capital, social cohesion, and long-term economic competitiveness. In broader welfare state debates, education is often viewed as a key component of social policy aimed at reducing inequality and strengthening social cohesion (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Rather than relying on binding regulation, the EU has shaped education policy primarily through soft governance instruments, including policy coordination, benchmarking, and the diffusion of norms and best practices (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Alexiadou, 2014).

In enlargement contexts, education also acquires an additional symbolic dimension. Alignment with European education priorities is often interpreted as evidence of broader convergence with EU standards and values. European policy frameworks emphasise quality assurance, inclusiveness, lifelong learning, and the professionalisation of teaching staff as central elements of education reform (European Commission, 2020). Nevertheless, empirical research indicates that although these priorities are frequently adopted at the level of policy discourse, their translation into concrete national outcomes is uneven, particularly in countries facing institutional limitations and fiscal constraints (Grek & Ozga, 2010).

### 2.2 Europeanisation, Policy Convergence, and the Discourse–Implementation Gap

The concept of Europeanisation offers an analytical lens for examining the relationship between European integration and domestic education policy. Europeanisation is commonly defined as the process through which European-level norms, ideas, and policy expectations are created, diffused, and selectively incorporated into national policy contexts (Radaelli, 2003). Importantly, this process does not necessarily lead to automatic or uniform convergence, particularly in policy areas where European influence relies primarily on persuasion rather than binding enforcement.

Within the education sector, convergence often appears more visible in policy rhetoric and strategic documents than in measurable policy outcomes. Several studies highlight the distinction between symbolic compliance and substantive implementation, suggesting that governments may adopt European policy language while postponing deeper reforms that require sustained financial commitment (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005; Börzel & Risse, 2012). This pattern is especially evident in enlargement countries, where alignment with European discourse carries strong political value but where fiscal and administrative capacities may remain constrained.

In Southeast Europe, European integration has served as a powerful external reference point shaping education strategies

and reform agendas. However, empirical research appears to show that Europeanisation effects in the region are frequently partial and selective. Legislative alignment with European frameworks often progresses faster than structural or fiscal reforms that require long-term financial resources (Noutcheva, 2009; Vukasović, 2017). As a result, education policy may appear closely aligned with European norms at the discursive level, while material commitments develop more slowly.

**2.3 Public Sector Wages and Education Policy**

Public sector wages represent a significant yet relatively underexplored dimension of education policy implementation. In most education systems, the remuneration of teachers and education staff constitutes one of the largest components of total education expenditure and plays a substantial role in shaping recruitment, retention, and professional motivation (OECD, 2019). Wage levels thus provide a concrete indicator of how governments prioritise education professionals within broader fiscal frameworks.

Adequate remuneration is widely considered necessary for improving education quality and sustaining reform efforts. Conversely, extended periods of wage stagnation may undermine reform capacity, regardless of how prominently education appears in policy narratives. From this perspective, education-sector wages offer insight into whether policy commitments are accompanied by tangible budgetary support.

At the same time, wage developments in education are rarely determined solely by sector-specific priorities. In many transition and post-socialist economies, wage-setting in the public sector is strongly influenced by macroeconomic stabilisation objectives, fiscal consolidation strategies, and political considerations that extend beyond education policy (Campos & Jolliffe, 2007). As a result, wage dynamics may reflect broader fiscal constraints more strongly than integration-related commitments.

**2.4 Fiscal Constraints and Education Reform in Enlargement Contexts**

Fiscal conditions play a substantial role in shaping the relationship between European integration discourse and education policy outcomes. Enlargement countries typically operate within relatively narrow fiscal margins characterised by limited revenue capacity, competing public expenditure priorities, and vulnerability to external economic shocks. Following the global financial crisis, several countries in the region adopted fiscal consolidation strategies that directly affected public sector employment and wages, including those in the education sector (IMF, 2018).

Research on European integration repeatedly shows that external incentives associated with the enlargement process are rarely sufficient on their own to override domestic fiscal institutions and budgetary constraints (Bohle & Greskovits, 2012). Instead, education policy outcomes tend to emerge from the interaction between European policy expectations and national fiscal governance structures. This interaction helps explain why countries following similar integration

trajectories may still display different education policy outcomes.

**2.5 Research Gap and Contribution**

Although a growing body of research examines education reform within the context of European integration, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the fiscal dimension of education policy implementation, particularly with regard to education-sector wages. Many existing studies focus either on governance reforms and policy discourse or on aggregate education expenditure without explicitly linking integration narratives to observable budgetary outcomes.

This study addresses that gap by examining education-sector wages as an indicator of fiscal commitment. By combining a benchmark comparison between Albania and the European Union with a country-level examination of wage developments, the analysis connects qualitative insights from the Europeanisation literature with descriptive fiscal evidence. In doing so, the article contributes to a clearer understanding of the limits of normative convergence and shows the conditions under which integration discourse does—or does not—translate into measurable change in education policy.

**3. Data and Methodology**

**3.1 Data Sources and Empirical Scope**

The empirical analysis uses a combination of internationally harmonised datasets and national administrative sources in order to examine the relationship between European integration discourse and fiscal outcomes in the education sector. The study covers the period 2010–2023, a timeframe that includes important stages in Albania’s European integration process as well as several macroeconomic and fiscal developments.

Information on public education expenditure and key macroeconomic indicators is drawn from the World Bank’s *World Development Indicators* and from Eurostat, which ensures comparability with the European Union benchmark. These sources provide consistent data on education expenditure as a percentage of GDP, GDP per capita, and inflation for both Albania and the EU aggregate. Data on education-sector wages are available only at the national level for Albania and are compiled from official government decisions, budget laws, and administrative reports issued by relevant national institutions.

Differences in data availability define the empirical scope of the analysis. Education expenditure trends are examined through a benchmark comparison between Albania and the European Union, whereas wage developments are analysed as a country-specific case study. Table 1 summarises the availability of the main indicators and clarifies the structure of the empirical analysis.

**Table 1. Data coverage and empirical scope**

Indicator	Albania	European Union
Education expenditure (% GDP)	✓	✓

GDP per capita	✓	✓
Inflation	✓	✓
Education sector wage index	✓	–

Notes: ✓ indicates data availability; – indicates lack of harmonised or comparable data.

Table 1 presents the availability of the key indicators used in the empirical analysis. While macroeconomic and expenditure data are available for both Albania and the European Union, harmonised information on education-sector wages exists only for Albania. For this reason, wage developments are examined through a country-specific descriptive analysis.

### 3.2 Variables and Measurement

Public education expenditure is measured as a percentage of GDP and is used as the main indicator of fiscal commitment to education. This measure is widely employed in comparative education and public finance research because it reflects the share of national resources allocated to the education sector and allows comparison with European Union reference levels (OECD, 2019).

In the empirical analysis, education expenditure also represents the central outcome variable used to examine how fiscal support for education evolves over time. Expressing expenditure as a share of GDP makes it possible to evaluate governments’ budgetary prioritisation of education while accounting for differences in overall economic size.

Education-sector wages are analysed through an index constructed for Albania, with 2014 used as the base year (2014 = 100). The index is based on documented annual salary adjustments in the education sector derived from official government decisions and administrative sources. Where appropriate, wage changes are considered alongside inflation in order to reflect changes in the material conditions of education professionals over time. This index provides a consistent representation of wage dynamics in the absence of harmonised cross-country data.

European integration is treated not as a quantitative explanatory variable but as a contextual reference point guiding the interpretation of fiscal trends. Key integration milestones—most in particular Albania’s recognition as an EU candidate country in 2014—are used to organise the descriptive analysis and to examine whether observable fiscal patterns coincide with periods of intensified integration discourse.

### 3.3 Descriptive Empirical Strategy

Instead of estimating causal relationships, the analysis relies on a descriptive empirical strategy aimed at documenting and interpreting observable fiscal patterns. This approach follows recent discussions in the Europeanisation literature that emphasise the importance of distinguishing between normative convergence and material implementation, particularly in policy areas characterised by limited data availability and strong contextual dependence (Börzel & Risse, 2012; Vukasović, 2017).

The empirical evidence is presented through one descriptive table and three figures. Table 1 summarises data coverage and defines the empirical scope of the analysis. Figure 1 presents the evolution of education-sector wages in Albania, highlighting the timing and concentration of wage adjustments. Figure 2 compares public education expenditure in Albania with the European Union benchmark and provides a reference point for assessing convergence. Figure 3 places education expenditure trends alongside a key integration milestone in order to illustrate the relationship between integration discourse and fiscal developments.

This figure-based approach makes it possible to examine patterns over time without imposing strong parametric assumptions. The analysis focuses primarily on the timing, direction, and relative positioning of fiscal indicators rather than on statistical inference. In this way, the empirical strategy remains consistent with the broader conceptual emphasis on the gap between discourse and implementation in European integration.

### 3.4 Methodological Limitations

A number of limitations need to be recognised. First, the absence of harmonised education-sector wage data across countries prevents a systematic cross-country comparison of wage developments. Second, the use of integration milestones as reference points cannot fully capture the complexity of the European integration process. Third, because the analysis is descriptive in nature, it does not permit causal inference regarding the factors that influence education expenditure or wage adjustments.

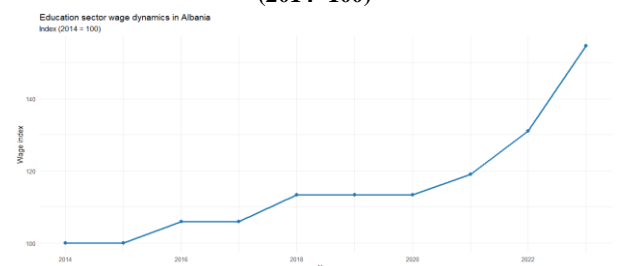
These limitations are taken into account through methodological transparency and cautious interpretation of the results. By concentrating on descriptive patterns and benchmark comparisons, the analysis avoids making strong causal claims while still offering useful insight into the fiscal dimensions of education policy in an integration context.

## 4. Empirical Results

### 4.1 Descriptive Patterns in Education-Sector Wages: The Albanian Case

Figure 1 presents the evolution of education-sector wages in Albania using a wage index with 2014 as the base year (2014 = 100). The figure shows an uneven adjustment pattern over the period 2010–2023. For several years after Albania obtained EU candidate status, education-sector wages remained largely unchanged, which indicates a limited immediate fiscal response to integration-related commitments.

Figure 1. Education sector wage index in Albania (2014=100)

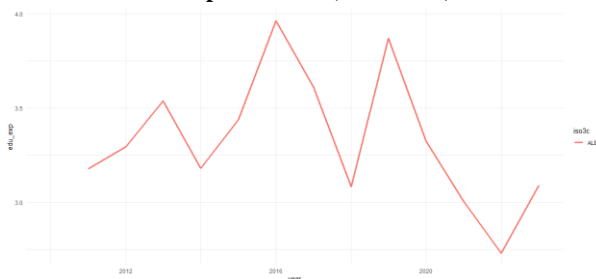


Substantial wage increases appear mainly in the later years of the period under consideration. Rather than following a gradual path, wage adjustments occur after extended periods of relative stability. The timing of these increases may indicate that changes in education-sector remuneration are more closely associated with domestic fiscal and political conditions than with specific European integration milestones.

#### 4.2 Education Expenditure in Albania and the European Union

Figure 2 compares public education expenditure in Albania with the European Union benchmark, expressed as a share of GDP. The comparison shows a persistent gap between Albania and the EU average throughout the period considered. Although education occupies an important place in integration-related policy discussions, Albania's education expenditure remains consistently below the EU reference level and shows limited signs of convergence over time.

**Figure 2. Public education expenditure: Albania vs European Union (% of GDP)**



The trajectories also indicate that changes in education spending in Albania are relatively modest and gradual. Periods of intensified integration discourse are not followed by sharp increases in education expenditure, suggesting that fiscal prioritisation of education remains constrained. By comparison, the EU benchmark maintains a higher and more stable level of education spending, which is consistent with the stronger institutionalisation of education financing within member states.

#### 4.3 European Integration Discourse and Budgetary Reality

Figure 3 places Albania's education expenditure trend alongside a key European integration milestone: the granting of EU candidate status in 2014. The absence of a clear structural change following this milestone offers a visual indication of the gap between integration discourse and fiscal outcomes.

**Figure 3. European integration discourse and education spending in Albania**



Despite the symbolic and political significance of candidate status, education expenditure as a share of GDP remains largely unchanged in the following years. This pattern indicates that European integration operates mainly as a normative and discursive framework rather than as an immediate driver of budgetary reallocation. The figure therefore supports the interpretation that integration-related commitments do not necessarily translate into observable fiscal change.

#### 4.4 Interpreting Wage and Expenditure Dynamics Together

Figures 1–3 point to a similar in general pattern. Although education is frequently presented as a strategic priority within Albania's European integration narrative, observable fiscal support—both in terms of expenditure levels and wage developments—remains limited and delayed. Education-sector wages increase only after extended periods of stagnation, while education expenditure shows little evidence of convergence toward EU benchmarks.

The combination of delayed wage adjustments and relatively stable expenditure levels indicates that increases in education-sector remuneration are more closely associated with domestic political considerations and episodic fiscal decisions than with sustained integration-oriented strategies. In this context, European integration discourse appears to influence policy narratives more strongly than actual budgetary practice.

#### 4.5 Summary of Empirical Evidence

The descriptive evidence presented in this section points to a persistent gap between European integration discourse and budgetary outcomes in the education sector. The case of Albania indicates that strong rhetorical commitment to education does not necessarily lead to continuous or timely fiscal support. Instead, education policy outcomes appear to reflect the interaction between integration aspirations, domestic fiscal constraints, and political priorities.

These observations emphasise the importance of examining education reform from both a discursive and a fiscal perspective. Without sustained budgetary commitment, integration-oriented education strategies may remain largely symbolic and have limited impact on the material conditions of education professionals.

### 5. Discussion

The empirical evidence presented in this article points to a persistent gap between European integration discourse and fiscal outcomes in the education sector. Although education is frequently described as a strategic priority within integration-oriented policy narratives, the descriptive patterns observed in expenditure trends and wage dynamics indicate that rhetorical commitment has not been accompanied by sustained budgetary support.

The comparison between Albania and the European Union benchmark shows a clear and enduring disparity in education expenditure levels. Despite repeated references to European standards and convergence objectives, Albania's education spending remains consistently below the EU average, with

little indication of upward convergence over time. This pattern suggests that integration discourse alone is insufficient to generate substantial fiscal reallocation, particularly in policy areas that require long-term and politically demanding investment.

The case of education-sector wages further illustrates this gap. As shown in Figure 1, wage adjustments in Albania are characterised by extended periods of stagnation followed by relatively abrupt increases concentrated in recent years. Importantly, these wage increases do not correspond closely with key European integration milestones, such as the granting of EU candidate status. Instead, they appear more closely linked to episodic domestic decisions shaped by fiscal capacity and political considerations rather than to a continuous integration-driven strategy.

Figures 1–3 together point to a broader pattern in which European integration operates mainly as a normative and discursive framework rather than as a direct fiscal driver in the education sector. While integration narratives influence policy language and reform agendas, actual budgetary outcomes continue to be shaped by domestic fiscal institutions, macroeconomic constraints, and political trade-offs. In this sense, Europeanisation in education policy appears selective, influencing how priorities are articulated more strongly than how resources are allocated.

This interpretation is consistent with debates in the Europeanisation literature that distinguish between symbolic compliance and substantive implementation. Education reforms in enlargement contexts may progress through strategies and legislative alignment, while deeper fiscal commitments are introduced more gradually or unevenly. The education sector, and particularly education-sector wages, for this reason provides an informative perspective for assessing the material limits of normative convergence.

From a policy perspective, the results point to the need for greater coherence between policy discourse, governance structures, and budgetary practice. In development debates, education has long been recognised as a key mechanism for expanding individual capabilities and opportunities (Sen, 1999). At the same time, sustained public investment in education is widely viewed as a relevant instrument for reducing structural inequality and promoting social mobility (Atkinson, 2015). Without such commitment, persistent disparities in access to resources and opportunities may reinforce broader patterns of economic and social inequality (Stiglitz, 2012).

## 6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study analysed the relationship between European integration discourse and fiscal outcomes in the education sector, focusing on education expenditure and education-sector wage dynamics in Albania during the period 2010–2023. Instead of estimating causal effects, the analysis followed a descriptive and benchmark-oriented approach, using the European Union as a reference point and education-sector wages as an indicator of material policy commitment.

The empirical evidence indicates a persistent gap between rhetorical prioritisation of education and observable budgetary outcomes. Although education occupies a central place in European integration narratives, Albania's education expenditure remains consistently below the European Union benchmark and shows limited signs of convergence over time. In addition, education-sector wage developments display a delayed and uneven adjustment pattern, with substantial increases concentrated in recent years and little immediate response to key integration milestones such as the granting of EU candidate status.

These patterns indicate that European integration operates more strongly as a normative and discursive framework than as a direct driver of fiscal reallocation in the education sector. While integration discourse influences policy language and reform agendas, actual budgetary decisions continue to be shaped largely by domestic fiscal constraints, institutional arrangements, and political priorities. In this context, normative convergence does not automatically lead to material convergence.

From a policy perspective, the results point to the need to align education discourse with predictable and sustained fiscal commitment. If education is to function as a genuine pillar of European convergence, integration-related objectives need to be supported by long-term financing strategies rather than episodic or reactive budgetary measures. In particular, education-sector wages require stable and transparent adjustment mechanisms in order to support the retention and motivation of qualified professionals.

The analysis also demonstrates the usefulness of focusing on fiscal indicators when assessing education reform in enlargement contexts. Education expenditure levels and wage dynamics provide tangible evidence of policy implementation that complements analyses of strategies, legislation, and reform narratives. Without such fiscal alignment, education may remain largely a symbolic priority rather than a materially supported one.

Finally, the study contributes to discussions on European integration and education policy by illustrating the limits of discourse-driven convergence when sustained budgetary support is absent. Future research could extend this descriptive framework to additional candidate countries or examine more closely the political and institutional mechanisms that influence the translation of integration aspirations into fiscal outcomes. Such work would help deepen understanding of how European integration shapes education policy not only in discourse but also in practice.

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