HIDDEN TIES, REGIONAL THREATS: THE CLANS OF ALBANIA AND THEIR FOREIGN POLICY IMPACT

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the 'hidden' role of kinship-based clans as unique interest groups in foreign policy. These networks continue to exert influence in foreign policy, despite assumptions that modern state institutions exclude traditional structures. They operate beyond the formal state apparatus through patronage-based appointments, diaspora lobbying, and transnational criminal ties, shaping the country's foreign policy trajectory. The research uses Albania as a 'least likely' case study, employing a process-tracing methodology within a Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) framework. This integrates Joel Migdal's (2001) State-in-Society model via a pathway case approach. The findings demonstrate that clans function as informal interest groups, distinct from their typical depictions in IR, capable of influencing diplomatic credibility, foreign negotiations, and international cooperations. The persistence of these networks reveals how embedded social norms and informal power structures challenge the effectiveness of institutional reforms. By exposing these dynamics, this thesis contributes to broader discussions on non-state actors in foreign policy and urges reconsideration of the societal foundations of international relations.

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To my amazing parents, Marija and Nikoll, and my wonderful brother, Enea: thank you for everything you have done for me. It has not gone unnoticed. I hope I get to make you proud. You are my world.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, **Gjergj Loka**, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Hidden Ties, Regional Threats: The Clans of Albania and Their Foreign Policy Impact" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 23 May 2025

Gjergj Loka

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Introduction

Foreign policy continuously adapts to the shifting relationship between domestic and international influences. While globalization has led to the rise in significant international diplomatic, security, and trade corporations, smaller organized domestic groups—operating within and outside state institutions— continue to influence foreign policy decisions (Hudson 2005, 1; Baumann and Stengel 2017, 7). They take part in official government procedures; at other times, they indirectly exert influence through lobbying and advocacy. Although these organized actors often overlap with the state, mainstream IR theories—including neorealism and neoliberalism—have paid little attention to them (Cunningham and Pearlman 2011, 1).

States operate across two interconnected domains: the global arena, where they interact with other nations, multinational corporations, and international organizations; and the domestic arena, where they seek to govern their own societies (Migdal 2001, 62). Neorealists focus on the relative capabilities of the state and its position in the international system (Ripsman 2009, 170). In contrast, by examining the global impact of domestic forces like legislatures, privileged interest groups, and public opinion, Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) brings attention to the intersection of material factors–such as resources and institutional capacity—and ideational factors like beliefs, ideologies, and overall soft power (Hudson 2005, 3). FPA insists that foreign policy is ultimately driven by human decision-makers, not abstract state entities, making room for the analysis of organized non-state actors as influential participants in international affairs (Hudson 2005, 2).

Among such non-state actors, kinship-based clans—can play a significant but often overlooked role in political life. With this thesis, I argue that clans—through embedded patronage, diaspora lobbying, and transnational criminal networks—operate as informal foreign policy actors with real, measurable impacts on international agreements and diplomacy.

I will use a single-case study approach to investigate this hypothesis, focusing on clans in Albania. This is what is known as a 'least likely' case study (Lijphart 1975; Eckstein 1975).

Albania is currently undergoing EU accession procedures. Therefore, one would theoretically anticipate that modern institutional state frameworks (such as potential EU membership) would restrict the power of unofficial, family-based structures. Yet, this very context makes Albania a compelling instance where a predicted outcome – the diminishing effect of such structures – does not necessarily hold (Gerring 2007, 232), highlighting the potential influence of other factors.

Clans are unofficial organizations characterized by an "extensive network of kin and fictive kin ties, or perceived and imagined kinship relations" (Collins 2006, 26). This shared sense of kinship, as Schatz (2004, 26) argues, undermines broader communities like the state by reinforcing loyalty to parallel government systems, which affects a state's foreign policy. They have internal governments that disregard the state and by default, state foreign policy. My interest in such a project stems from this presumption. I argue that clans are more of a prevalent actor in foreign policy than academics depict it to be.

Rather than examining localized clan dynamics, or studying clans as isolated remote communities, my research examines how their traditional practices impact state foreign policy. As someone coming from Northern Albania, where clan relations and practices are still promoted by the *Kanun*– a traditional oral legal code dating back centuries– I bring context-specific insights to this study, which informs my analytical approach and enhances its interpretive depth.

I am not suggesting that all of Albania's foreign policy decisions are affected by clans. Rather, I am arguing that these networks shape how Albania presents itself and what it can credibly deliver on the international stage. For example, clan-driven corruption scandals—

where extended family ties protect their members from legal prosecution and channel state contracts into private hands— weakened Albania's negotiating position in EU accession talks, as Brussels repeatedly called out rule-of-law failures in its progress reports (Beshku 2025, 1). Such procedures have been readily dismissed as stochastic cases of personal self-enrichment. That is correct, and I will use data to back up this claim. However, I want to emphasize that this phenomenon is driven by a cultural motivation that transcends the use of illegal and legal mechanisms to more than self-interest. These kin organizations, bound by ties both real and imagined, pursue specific domestic objectives with potentially far-reaching consequences.

This is a pressing issue given that Albania is implementing judicial reforms and EU-mandated transparency initiatives as part of its EU accession talks, most notably the Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK). Although they have not had much of an impact, Albania's recent convictions of politicians show the country's efforts to fight corruption. According to the fourth SPAK assessment report, only 8.5% of suspected corruption cases were prosecuted in 2023, a decrease from 10.2% in 2022 (Hallunaj 2024). These low numbers suggest that there are deeper patronage systems that remain untouched, as well as social norms that pose a challenge to domestic affairs and foreign policy. Does the disregard for these social norms contribute to the struggle?

In this thesis, I trace the steps through which clan-based mechanisms affect foreign policy in Albania. I explore how opposing clan organizations use local networks to hold influence in Albanian politics and engage in international lobbying to shape foreign policy toward Albania. Using a Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) perspective, my research treats these clans as interest groups in foreign policy, while highlighting the ways that they differ from the traditional depictions of interest groups in IR literature. By using Migdal's (2001) State-In-Society model, I show how these informal kinship networks influence the government, and

consequently, influence foreign policy outcomes. I explore how clans have historically developed into powerful government players and examine the main causal mechanisms through which they influence foreign policy, including transnational networks, political mobilization, and networks of patronage and clientelism. Finally, I discuss possible ways that domestic institutions and international actors can address the entrenchment of clans as non-state actors that have a substantial impact on both domestic and foreign policy outcomes.

By investigating clans as important but overlooked foreign policy actors in traditional societies, my research challenges state-centric foreign policy assumptions. I also hope to contribute to broader conversations about how a state's foreign policy stance is influenced by its internal structures and identities.

Clans as Interest Groups

Early group theorists, like Truman (1951) and Bentley (1967), argued that shifts and disruptions in society – whether social, economic, or political – naturally trigger the awareness of shared interests among individuals (as cited in Halpin 2014, 20). Individuals with shared concerns come together when their interests get disrupted or new ones emerge, forming "interest groups" (Halpin 2014, 20). James Madison (1981, as cited in Iversen 2007, 17) warned of factions—groups of citizens, "whether amounting to a majority or a minority," driven by a shared passion or interest, often at odds with the rights of others or the common good. Although these groups have been defined in many ways based on their common interests, Beyers et al. (2008, 1103) offer a thorough definition of interest groups as "the organization, aggregation, articulation, and intermediation of societal interests that seek to shape public policies." In essence, Madison's faction is today's interest group—only now, they wear suits, lobby governments, and sometimes, operate in the shadows.

Interest groups frequently establish strong relationships with state governments (Dietrich 1999, 280). In the literature on foreign affairs, this complex relationship has been examined through a number of case studies and theoretical frameworks that emphasize the advocacy of human rights organizations, the lobbying efforts of non-state actors, and the policy influence of economic professional associations. Mainstream examples of such groups include refugee organizations, regional and cultural institutes, veteran and war victims' groups, student movements, and diaspora communities (Stefanidis 2001, 17; Prasad and Savatic 2021, 832). As Ciesielska-Klikowska (2023, 35) notes, these groups aim to influence how public authorities distribute resources, though they vary in how institutionalized or organized they are—which in turn produces a wide variety of interest group types and tactics.

Operating beyond official state or political parties (Alderman 1984, as cited in Ciesielska-Klikowska 2023, 35), these groups seek to influence those in authority rather than to seize power for themselves (Stefanidis 2001, 9). To effectively achieve influence, interest groups establish organizations with their own structure and set of norms (Ciesielska-Klikowska 2023, 35). They contribute to a pluralistic system that fosters 'checks and balances,' preventing any one actor—be it the state or a dominant interest group—from monopolizing power (Jankauskaitė et al. 2021, 5). In a balanced political system where no one interest or class predominates, pluralists see such organizations as legitimate competitors in the policy-making arena.

Trice (1978, 238) notes that interest groups serve as communication pathways between the public and the government, enabling the latter to make decisions based on the public's interests (Celis et. al. 2015, 2). Further illustrating their communicative power, Ross (2012, 6) argues that interest groups actively spread their views directly to state leaders, and indirectly to the general public through grassroots initiatives and the media. Interest groups are thus regarded as partners in the policy-making process, which contributes to their perceived openness and transparency, as Mahrenbach and Rozbicka (2023, 116) argue. Their capacity to form and function is frequently viewed as a prerequisite for successful democratization, given that it indicates a "healthy" degree of civic engagement within a political system.

There is an abundance of research on interest groups' involvement in policy making (Iversen 2007, 17). They can have a significant impact by fostering a domestic political environment that supports their preferred policies, even without direct pressure. While the government retains ultimate policy authority, its choices are nowadays often filtered through bureaucratic processes and influenced by diverse pressures and ideas generated by these groups, mirroring the complex dynamics of domestic policymaking (Dietrich 1999, 280). This

represents a significant indirect influence on foreign policy, especially when their narratives resonate with decision-makers (Trice 1978, 240). However, since not all groups are equally capable and willing to participate in internal decision-making processes, many face a lack of representation (Albareda and Fraussen 2023, 792). This makes it difficult for interest groups to translate their preferences into policy.

Interest groups should not be seen as representative of the public; their actions can result in corruption and unequal representation (Lisi 2023, 164). The heterogeneity of interest group populations can lead to clashing civil society interests or the subversion of wider public interests. For instance, some groups can leverage their political connections for personal gain (Cheng 2017, 64). Further, international actors' prioritization of stability can inadvertently empower informal groups capable of inciting political unrest if their parochial interests are overlooked. Consequently, capacity-building efforts that fail to account for these intricate relationships between formal and informal power structures risk unintentionally undermining the very state institutions they aim to support.

According to Williamson (1989), the state is merely an arena for such disputes to play out (quoted in Jankauskaitė et al. 2021, 5). This dynamic takes on new dimensions in our increasingly globalized world. The rise of 'intermestic' issues—like immigration and drug control—which inherently bridge domestic and foreign policy (Dietrich 1999, 282), means that disputes among interest groups now directly impact a state's international actions. Moreover, growing global consciousness around issues like the environment and human rights has further expanded the scope of state foreign policy. This evolution creates more avenues for a wider range of organized actors—including unconventional ones—to exert their influence on state foreign policy, as they seek to shape the state's position within this complex web of global interests.

The motivations for interest group activism extend beyond the traditional pursuit of tangible benefits — such as concrete policy concessions, financial benefits, and political access. Heaney (2004, as cited in Halpin 2014, 125) notes that they often prioritize the recognition of their identity. As academics Shain and Barth (2003, 455) state, "Identity does not always determine interests, sometimes identity is the interest." Identity is thus usually depicted as both the starting point and the end point of interest group lobbying (Shain and Barth 2003, 455).

Jankauskaitė et al. (2021, 116) define groups that recruit within their shared identities, such as cultural, ethnic, or social characteristics like gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, and, of course, ethnicity (Choudhury 2024, 49) as "identity groups". These groups lobby for policies that directly benefit their communities, calling for the redress of grievances rooted in 'structural inequality', as Jasper and Polletta (2001, 287) contend. These advocacy efforts serve as the foundation for what Choudhury (2024, 49) refers to as identity politics—political stances, movements, or acts that are centered on the needs, interests, or experiences of smaller social groups.

In contrast to a neo-realist approach that would overlook the significance of group identity in shaping state interests, Adler (2013. 127) provides a different perspective, arguing that identity is central to understanding both national and transnational interests. This identity, in turn, explains the international behavior of actors and, ultimately, the shifts in state foreign policy. Similarly, Ross (2012, 9) argues that identity shapes foreign policy lobbying by narrowing the range of expressible interests, establishing priorities and policy framing. In these cases, claiming a favored form of identity is the only interest of the group (Shain and Barth 2003, 455).

Despite the belief that a strong identity binds individuals together, Pearlman and Cunningham (2011, 2) argue that, given groups' heterogeneous nature, a single group can display a wide variety of political strategies and organizational forms. A shared identity can give people a sense of belonging ("we are all X"), but it does not automatically translate into a single movement or even an agreed upon way of pursuing coherent political change. This notion of a singular, unified identity overlooks the reality that individuals often hold multiple, intersecting identities, which introduces diverse perspectives and potential points of friction.

Kaya and Drhimeur (2000, 330-331) illustrate this clash, as they highlight how a seemingly unifying markers like religion or ethnicity, especially within diaspora communities, are actively shaped and utilized by individuals in various different ways to navigate the multifaceted challenges of migration and modernization. This perspective shows that identity is not always a straightforward commonality that automatically translates into unified action or a singular viewpoint. Instead, it is a deeply personal and often instrumentalized construct, influenced by individual experiences and strategic choices. Although these groups are fundamentally collective in nature, their manifestation in individual experiences and actions is not uniform in practice. Hence, clans represent a unique type of interest group with distinctive effects on foreign policy.

Chapter I: Theoretical Framework for Understanding Clan Influence in Foreign Policy

This chapter first explores kinship-based clans as influential domestic kinship groups with potential transnational impact. To analyze clans as foreign policy actors, I implement a theoretical framework drawing on Joel Migdal (2001)'s State-in-Society model. This framework helps explain why certain groups gain the leverage to influence a nation's priorities, highlighting the domestic power struggles that shape foreign policy outcomes. This established framework will be adapted to account for the causal mechanisms in foreign policy that stem from the unique capacities of kinship-based groups.

1.1 Clans, the State, and the Struggle for Influence

1. 1. 1 Clans Versus Interest Groups

Political scientists have used the term clan to describe "informal institutions," "social networks," "reciprocal relations," or "interdependence" (Minbaeva and Muratbekova-Touron 2013, 111). However, these definitions fail to capture the importance of identity and kinship that is central to these organized groups (Collins 2006, 16–17). As a result, academics often view clans as entities that entrench conflict and hinder progress toward modernism (Lewis 2015, 15). This view is especially common when discussing developing regions with unstable governance. In these states, Western scholars still seem unsure of how clans maintain their meticulous internal organization, which contrasts sharply with the weak infrastructure of the state they operate within (Lewis 2015, 16), at times even taking advantage of it.

While there may be a lack of diverse perspectives in the academic literature, the ambiguity around the term "clan" is not only due to cultural naïveté. Instead, the absence of a

clear-eyed account of such bonds is constrained by the domestic, national, and international complexity of the social environments in which these groups operate—a complexity shaped more by their familial ties than by their structure alone.

Collins (2006, 26) describes these ties as ‘fictive’ on top of being kin. The objective reality of blood relations is less important than the "subjective sense of identity and the use of the norms of kinship – such as in-group reciprocity and loyalty – to bind the group and protect its members" (Collins 2006, 17). According to Tsekov (2002, 6), regardless of the validity of the notion of shared lineage, it serves as justification for in-group loyalty. Their paramount interest is, therefore, to ensure their members' safety and well-being so they can "make strategic decisions on how to define themselves" (Bowen et al. 2015, 536) in a larger society that might not represent their views.

Theories of interest groups in foreign policy struggle to account for such informal, kin-based groups. Clans may even be considered distinct from interest groups due to their emphasis on kinship rather than shared political or economic interests. Most interest groups, by contrast, are neither kin-based nor perceived as organic entities.

Clan members engage in social (communal, marital, and camilial) as well as political and economic exchanges (Collins 2006, 28). Their ties are, therefore, more durable than the ones based on material interests, which are frequently ephemeral; after the common material objective is achieved, they tend to disintegrate. The inherent, and often ascriptive, nature of clan membership thus distinguishes them from the voluntary and interest-driven formation of typical political interest groups, suggesting a more deeply ingrained and less instrumental form of collective identification (Collins 2006, 26).

Like other interest groups, clan members possess a shared interest in policy decisions that protects both themselves and their kinship ties. Unlike conventional interest-identity

groups that may be rooted in ideology or policy, clan unity is built upon familial responsibilities – the very foundation that creates a strong, overarching 'family' identity where other differences become secondary (Collins 2003, 174; Gërxhani and Schram 2000, 7). This inherent drive to protect their 'family' can then translate into unified action in the foreign policy sphere. These invisible familial ties and mutual understandings make clan members more likely to identify with their clans than their states (Minbaeva and Muratbekova-Touron 2013, 113). They approximate the solidarity observed among kinsmen, regardless of their members not formally being tied by family connections. This reflects a level of trust and loyalty that is exceptionally intimate (Wedel 2001, 4).

According to Schatz (2004, 22), clans develop based on reaffirmed, daily social interaction based on ingrained sentiments of trust and loyalty rather than the need for common abstractions to bind their members together (Schatz 2004, 12). These bonds and frequent encounters foster reciprocity among members and promote long-term cooperation (Collins 2002, 142). Consequently, from a primordialist perspective, the explanation behind the nature of such organizations is rather direct: the profound emotional attachments within a group makes its members less inclined to question their clan identity or the authority of clan leaders (Schatz 2004, 12).

The enduring nature of clan divisions can be attributed to their role as the very emotional bedrock upon which individual identities are constructed. This inherent strength and visibility of clan identity can, paradoxically, both empower them and drive their activities into less visible spheres. This strong internal loyalty can also manifest in the members' political behavior; for instance, members of a clan act less strongly to unfavorable policies by their 'own' party than by some other party – this in-group bias is often absent from typical interest groups (Gërxhani and Schram 2000, 8).

1. 1. 2 Clan Networks and State Capture

When the state seeks to suppress non-state identities and behaviors, it unintentionally amplifies clan cohesion by forcing distinctions out of plain sight and beyond direct state control. As Bowen et. al. (2015, 538) argue, the degree to which clans have "captured" governmental institutions and capabilities determines how much clan networks can undermine state stability. Certain circumstances, like persistent economic shortages, make such capture easier. Some other clan-capture methods are clan-based voting, kin-based patronage, the theft of state resources by powerful clans, and the mobilization of clan members to join formal institutions like political parties, the media, or unions. Their ability to leverage their strong internal cohesion to navigate the political landscape often makes them a formidable actor in foreign policy.

Foreign policy is not simply dictated by state interests, but by the informal power structures behind political actors (Hudson 2005, 1). Given their access to patronage networks and cross-border ties—including diaspora influence and illicit flows—these clans are not confined to local power struggles but intersect meaningfully with their states' international positioning. This bond defies political science accounts of foreign policy processes. It is transactional (both clan lobbyists and politicians are benefiting from this bond), yet fundamentally familial (there is no immediate direct interest). Just as individuals care deeply about the success of their immediate families, so too do members of these clans prioritize the well-being and success of their kin.

These actors do not necessarily lobby in the formal sense, nor do they always pursue coherent or declared foreign policy agendas. Instead, they influence through embeddedness—by shaping who is in power, what decisions are viable within their networks, and how political resources are distributed. This very informality and embedded nature of clan influence can,

much like the capture of government by certain interest groups (Hönke and Lederer 2013, 781), create opaque systems that hinder transparent and inclusive development.

By creating a hidden system of authority and regulations, where specific groups of individuals control social and political life in a way that is invisible to those outside of the clan, this parallel governance structure challenges the traditional relationship between domestic and international affairs (Collins 2006, 3). As authors Hille and Gendron (2020, 39) argue, these clan allegiances threaten the stability of government and the long-term viability of reforms by contesting formal institutions and national law. They act as filters or gatekeepers for foreign policy action, not as transparent agents of policy formulation. This makes them more elusive, but not less important, as actors in foreign policy.

Wedel (2001, 2) states that clans usually use market and state resources, patronage, and sometimes pressure to influence foreign policies. All of these could be regarded as causal mechanisms that affect foreign policy outcomes. This influence stems from their capacity to link, circumvent, or reorganize political and economic institutions and authorities. In this way, domestic leverage serves as an entrance point for external influences.

Clans should not be confused with clientelism or corruption. While there is some overlap—especially when clans engage in elite-level politics—the terms should not be used interchangeably (Collins 2006, 40). Clientelism and corruption are informal practices, not identities or organizations (Collins 2006, 39). Clans are whole networks of relationships, both vertical and horizontal held together by family ties (Collins 2004, 231). It is difficult to reduce kinship networks to transactional relations, because those relationships—like exchanging public goods for political support—typically end when the political or economic benefit disappears. Kinship, by contrast, tends to persist regardless of the result of their lobbying efforts.

These bonds prompt a critical question: are these clans merely disruptive actors in domestic and foreign affairs, or do their interpersonal connections—what I refer to as "hidden ties"—actively shape the trajectory of state foreign policies? To answer this, I turn to a more robust theoretical framework and causal mechanisms of clan influence in foreign policy.

1.2 The State-In-Society Model

1. 2. 1 State and Non-State Dynamics

Migdal (2001, 23) argued that the state, like any other group or organization, is created and shaped by how it interacts with other entities and with its constituent elements. It is not a static organization. However, its image rests on the notion of stability between the state and the social actors – interest groups (Migdal 2001, 26). That said, the stratification between these actors, where certain groups hold more power and influence than others (Migdal 2001, 63), can have significant repercussions for a state's foreign policy and its place in the international order.

Migdal's theory (2001, 22) is that the state exists on two levels. One level acknowledges the corporate, unified dimension of the state, or its "idea", while the other reinforces the "practices" and alliances of its disparate parts, or interest groups. The theory focuses on this paradoxical nature, as it demands that the state must be thought of as both a single, centrally motivated actor performing in a clearly defined territory, and as the practices of fragments of the state. These non-state networks include clan and tribal ties, regional and secessionist movements, some types of religious solidarity, smuggling rings, and many other social formations (Migdal 2001, 26). They promote practices which often contradict those set out in the state's official laws and regulations (Migdal 2001, 20), causing a struggle over state domination and transformation.

The state-in-society model promotes various forms of behavior through official and informal rules, drawing attention to the continuous conflicts between groups within societies (Migdal 2001, 11). These groups, whether organized or more loosely structured, use subtle rewards and sanctions, leading to clashing interactions. At its heart, there is a struggle over who gets to make the rules and how people understand their place in the world. Furthermore, even when international standards or institutions are introduced into a country, they may not necessarily align with domestic realities. According to Migdal (2001, 141), they may even try to diminish the public's awareness of the subtle ways in which these global influences are undermining the state. As a result of this negligence, the public tends to place a greater amount of trust and reliance on local groups, networks, and communities. This gives them leverage and lobbying power.

The state's participation in coalitions that connect it with society not only reflects its actions but also challenges the traditional idea of what a state is (Migdal 2001, 49). When local group leaders can offer people ways to succeed, they create stability at the local level. Local stability is vitally important to the overall stability of the ruling power (Migdal 2001, 91). Group networks build this stability by teaming up with parts of the state, sometimes even top leaders. State officials look the other way rather than actively challenge group leaders' local control in exchange for the stability they provide (Migdal 2001, 49). This can lead to local figures gaining more influence within the state, giving them a say in important decisions like how money is distributed and how laws are enforced, which can even benefit the state bureaucracy (Migdal 2001, 91). These exchange relations defy standard accounts of state decision practices.

As Migdal (2001, 89) argues, "once a policy has been 'made' by a government, the policy will be implemented, and the desired results of the policy will be near those expected

by the policymakers." The state has become, then, a grand arena of accommodation (Migdal 2001, 92) between state actors and non-state groups, even in foreign affairs.

In a more transnational perspective, these networks include parallel governance systems that suggest borders that are very different from those portrayed by the state (Migdal 2001, 26). The state-in-society model tells us that these groups have publicly or covertly contested a fundamental aspect of the state's image: its assertion that it is the embodiment of the people who live inside its borders. This reality – that state governance is significantly dependent on localized communities which exert influence beyond state borders – provides a crucial yet hidden context for understanding the competitive arena of foreign policy decision making.

1. 2. 2 Clans in the State-in-Society

One might not expect foreign policy—typically understood as being supported by the national interest—to involve behind-the-scenes compromises between local groups and government representatives. While foreign policy is made at a grand, national level, I suggest that kinship-based interests and power dynamics are, in more traditional societies, also playing a significant role.

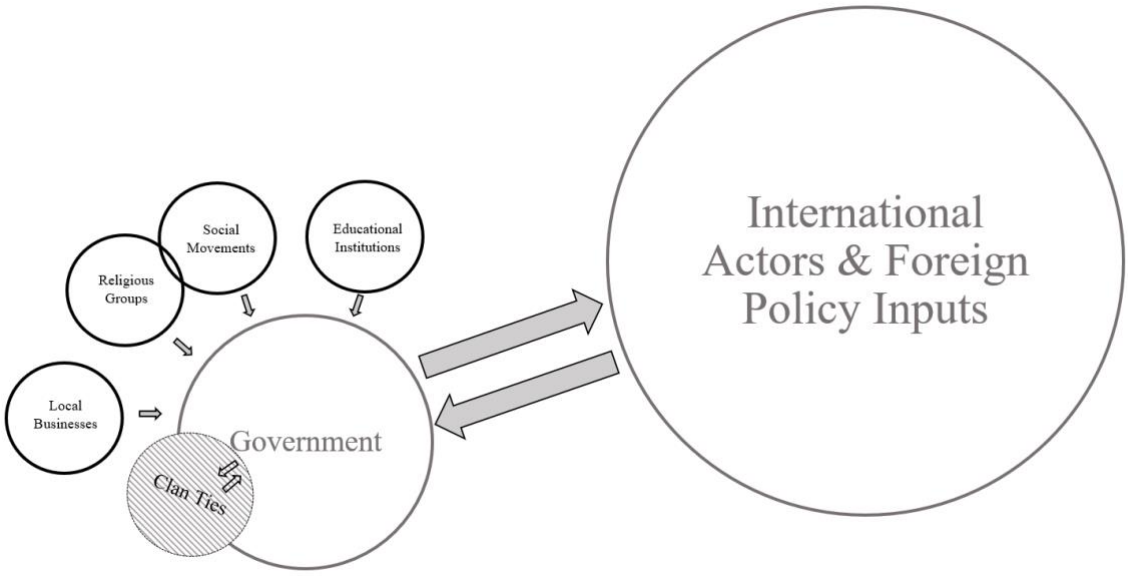

Figure 1: A State-in-Society Interpretation of Foreign Policy Decision Making[1]

Figure 1 illustrates a state-in-society model, in which several interest groups — including local businesses, religious groups, social movements, and educational institutions — influence the formal policy-making process by providing visible input to the government (indicated by solid arrows). Some of these interest groups may intersect given their shared interest; Figure 1 illustrates this pattern in the overlapping circles of religious groups and social movements. A real-world example of this overlap can be seen in faith-based NGOs that organize human rights campaigns.

Meanwhile, informal clan networks operate in the shadows of official institutions. Their hatched fill in the figure indicates their clandestine ties, which bypass formal procedures. Their arrows are oppositely directed, demonstrating how they exert influence on those in power to shape the political landscape in their favor. Their deep collective embeddedness overlaps with

[1] Migdal, Joel S. *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

the government, further illustrating their intertwined nature. Such connections are immeasurable, especially considering that kin extends beyond blood relations. Consequently, these clans function as influential domestic actors, pressuring political elites through vote mobilization, patronage appointments, and economic rewards.

The "International Actors and Foreign Policy Inputs" circle, on the right side, connected to the government by thick arrows showing influence flowing in both directions, illustrates how treaties, foreign aid, and diplomatic exchanges influence and are influenced by domestic politics. Together, the diagram portrays the government not as a unified decision-making body, but as a fractured arena where domestic interests, informal power structures, and transnational pressures continuously interact.

In the Albanian context, there is a tension between the nation's official commitment to EU accession, which necessitates adherence to rule of law and transparency, and the deeply entrenched practices of patronage and clientelism rooted within clan networks (Beshku 2025; Hallunaj 2024). State actors, potentially prioritizing local stability or personal benefits (Migdal 2001), might inadvertently accommodate clan-based practices that undermine the very reforms required for European integration – further highlighting Migdal's State-In-Society model. This creates a significant disconnect between Albania's projected international image and the underlying domestic realities that shape its capacity to meet international standards, a reality reflected in the voting behaviors of its citizens.

National politics are dominated by clan patronage networks, which are threatened by EU membership's requirements for judicial and anti-corruption reform, which the EU asserts are the most pressing issues to Albania's democracy (Bregu and Gjinko 2025, 428). This clashing dynamic leads to the following general hypotheses:

H1: Clan affiliations represent a key informal mechanism through which elite political actors pursue foreign policy objectives.

H2: Accommodating these actors reinforces clan power and social capital, potentially influencing decisions beyond individual material gain.

In order to test these hypotheses, I will examine a number of causal mechanisms by which clans exercise impact on foreign policy.

Chapter II: Case Selection, Methodology, and Data

Albania offers a particularly illustrative case study of clan influence. When examining Albania's integration challenges, scholars largely ignore clans (see Gërxhani and Schram 2000; Mavrikos-Adamou 2023). By focusing on Albanian clans, I delve below the state level of analysis to examine a specific 'hidden' type of group that influences the actions of those who act on behalf of the state, thus impacting foreign relations. I adopt a pathway case approach to trace the causal mechanisms through which they can affect foreign policy outcomes.

2.1 A Critical Case: Clans and Foreign Policy in Albania

Clan structure is not deemed a significant challenge to the Albanian state. It is seen as a domestic norms issue. These oral traditions are not expected to affect a country's foreign policies. This approach to examining the issue, however, may be deceptive because it blurs the boundaries between traditional customs and modernity (Tremayne 2017, 2). I aim to show how Albanian clans nowadays function as de facto interest groups, influencing foreign policy through patronage, informal diplomacy, and elite pressure.

Modern citizenship is nowadays deemed necessary for the establishment of the nation state, which assumes that pre-national and tribal ties must be transformed into channels of national identity and unity at the expense of alternative social structures and allegiances (Lewis 2015, 20). The principle of autonomy and freedom in liberal society, however, is compromised when the state is weak (Weiner 2013, 228-229). As Collins (2006, 43-44) writes, clans are still very modern in their ability to adapt and persist from earlier to later political systems. According to the author, they greatly influence and limit the choices and preferences of powerful actors. Understanding how clan rule evolves into foreign policy can help modern liberal nations grasp the consequences of overlooking these informal power networks.

The European Council granted Albania the start of EU accession talks in 2020, but called for increased efforts in several crucial areas, including the fight against organized crime, corruption, and judicial reform. The state has since shown commitment to battling these issues. I claim that the failures towards such reform in Albania occur because the country's traditional clan system continues to block democratic institutions, presenting a dual institutional and cultural challenge for EU membership and overall foreign policy acceptance. This challenge requires equal attention to international partnerships and clan-centered domestic relationships since these two influences continue to mold Albania's policy making.

Albania, therefore, is a particularly important case for this analysis: it illustrates how kinship systems act as parallel governance structures, thus shaping foreign policy not through formal institutional power, but through identity, loyalty, and strategic influence that cross state borders and challenge conventional IR assumptions about how foreign policy is made.

2.2 Pathway Case Approach and Mechanisms

This study follows a “pathway case” approach since it investigates the causal mechanisms through which clans can affect foreign policy (Gerring 2007, 241)— primarily by functioning as unofficial domestic interest groups. A mechanism, according to Beach and Pedersen (2013, cited in Punton 2015, 2), is the causal chain or narrative that connects event A to outcome B. A mechanism consists of several "parts," each of which is made up of entities that perform certain actions. With this project, I aim to discuss domestic events driven by clan interests (event A) that have had an effect on Albanian foreign policy (outcome B)

To uncover the causal mechanisms by which clans influence foreign policy, I will rely on a process-tracing method. Process-tracing allows for a detailed examination of sequences of political events and decisions to identify the specific mechanisms through which clans have

altered foreign policy directions (Bennett and Checkel 2010). Several foreign policy outcomes driven by clan interests will be analyzed— the consequences of nepotistic diplomatic appointments under Berisha (2005–2013) and Rama (2014 - present), bilateral law-enforcement agreements due to clan networks, and diaspora lobbying. These instances will serve as causal chains that highlight clans' impact on Albanian foreign policy.

My research identifies the following mechanisms at play: patronage and clientelism networks, which direct appointments and legislative support to safeguard clan interests (Jusufi 2018, 139), transnational crime linkages, as kinship-based smuggling and money-laundering networks necessitate bilateral security cooperation, and diaspora lobbying, which advances the interests of a domestic clan in foreign contexts. This research further establishes how individual actors shape Albania's foreign-policy exchanges by tracking their involvement at each stage.

In concluding the analysis, I will focus on identifying the specific sequence of events and actors involved at each stage of the causal paths I will describe. I will gather evidence that illustrates how clans move from being domestic identity organizations to influencing national-level foreign policy decisions in Albania. These decisions will be drawn from policy reports, scholarly accounts, election data, government documents, and media reports, and will be pieced together to form the "diagnostic" evidence that supports my argument.

Chapter III: Clans as Interest Groups in Albanian Foreign Policy

This chapter examines the origins and evolution of clans in Albania, tracing how they emerged and developed into influential interest groups over time. It then analyzes three key mechanisms through which clans influence foreign policy toward Albania: kinship-based diplomatic appointments, transnational clan networks driving bilateral law enforcement agreements, and diaspora lobbying rooted in clan structures.

3.1 Origins and Evolution of Clans in Albania

Albania's unique geographical landscape, characterized by its mountainous terrain, laid the groundwork for the development of autonomous clan structures (Doll 2003, 149). Notably, the dynamics of these clans evolved distinctively between the Gheg-dominated north and the Tosk south of Albania, shaped by differing linguistic, religious, and historical experiences, which added further complexity to traditional social organization.

Ghegs lived north of the Shkumbin River (King and Mai 2008, 62). Their social structure was based on a loose network of clan allegiances. The Ghegs were the most devoted followers of the values of the *Kanun*[2], such as hospitality, *besa* (Albanian for honor), and the pursuit of the "blood feud," particularly in the northeastern highlands (King and Mai 2008, 62; Elsie 2012). In contrast, the Tosks, who lived in southern Albania, chose a village-based social

[2]The northern Albanian customary law was known as the Kanun. It served as a governing social conduct and conflict resolution code. It was mostly used in the Dukagjin area, which includes the mountains inhabited by the Shala, Shoshi, Nikaj, and Mërturi tribes (Doll 2003; Elsie 2012).

structure consisting of landowners, peasants, and landless laborers over the tribal system at the time of the Ottoman invasion (King and Mai 2008, 62). Most of those who left the region before communism rose, and the Tosks have continuously been more receptive to foreign influences, particularly Greek and Italian ones. This has led to the emergence of more fluid and adaptable "diaspora clans" rather than strict, geographically bound "clans" in the traditional sense. These networks may be more economically or culturally integrated.

While the exact origins of Albanian clans remain a subject of scholarly debate—with some tracing their roots back to the tribal organization of the ancient Illyrians (Tarifa 2008, 5), and others suggesting an adaptation of the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini (Tarifa 2008, 5; Doll 2003, 148)—their enduring presence is evident. The influence of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires, coupled with periods of weak central governance, have further solidified the resilience of these localized power structures (Doll 2003, 148).

The persistence of clan structures is further highlighted by Andoni (2015, 227), who notes their presence even during Hoxha's authoritarian regime, familial connections and standing within the communist hierarchy influenced the advancement of young politicians. Expanding on this, Gërxhani and Schram (2020, 7) argue that clan-like bonds formed in Albania not only through kinship and shared culture but also around common political interests, with policies designed to benefit the group strengthening these ties.

In Albania, the process of democratization began in 1991 amid the fall of Hoxha's communist regime, which made it impossible to establish a civil society that was culturally democratic (Zúñiga 2020, 10). The country had been in complete isolation for about 45 years, deprived of any international cooperation, as Hoxha had severed ties with the rest of the world. Most of the former communist intelligence officers were reintegrated into the new state as

members of the military, police force, courts, politics, and public administration (Nako and Pilaca 2021, 252).

The post-communist era witnessed Sali Berisha, the leader of the Democratic Party, prioritizing the appointment of politicians from the historically anti-communist north, a practice that has continued across different democratic administrations and has been described as a "telltale characteristic of political elites" in the region (Andoni 2015, 227). Since then, the clans in the north have had strong ties with the Democratic Party, while the clans in the south share a close relationship with the Socialist Party (Gërxhani and Schram 2008, 5).

There was no immediate incentive for the country to engage in foreign policy, as there had been restrictions on the extent to which foreign powers could intervene in Albanian political affairs. Nevertheless, the post-communist era has signaled a shift in the direction of Albanian foreign policy. Albania's foreign policy is explicitly focused on cultivating positive relations with the United States, establishing an agenda for EU membership, and deepening relations and attracting further investment from countries such as Turkey and the United Arab Emirates (Lami and Xharo 2021, 49). Other foreign policy decisions include the distance from Russia (a recurring point in every EU forum attended by Albanian leaders, as referenced in Musabelliu 2024, 4), the implementation of controlled distancing measures with China, and the adoption of a hostile stance towards Iran. The objectives of these strategic alignments are the advancement of European security, NATO expansion, counterterrorism, and regional stability (Lami and Xharo 2021, 47).

More recent Albanian foreign policy decisions indicate that current Prime Minister Rama has been established as the "protagonist" of the strategy of Albanian foreign policy (Lami and Xharo 2021, 47). Face-to-face diplomacy has, therefore, become the foundation of Albania's foreign policy. Understanding Albanian foreign policy demands an examination of

the prominent government figures and their closest relations, which have formed an informal layer of governance and influence, leading to "state capture."

According to Arsovska (2019, 88), state capture occurs when widespread political corruption enables dishonest political actors to alter state structures and laws to suit their corrupt interests. Legally speaking, it can also be understood as follows: when the state is "captured," its legal institutions operate against the rule of law. A clear illustration of this capture can be seen in diplomatic appointments in Albania, where clan ties heavily influence who gets these positions. This practice of clientelism and nepotism is a direct result of the deeply rooted clan structures within Albanian society, to the extent that former U.S. Ambassador to Albania, Donald Lu once stated, "Twenty families of four clans have taken over Albania" (Mirel 2018, 4).

3.2 How Clan Ties Capture Albanian Diplomacy through Nepotistic Appointments

The first mechanism I discuss explores how clan ties extend into the realm of diplomacy. Legal provisions, such as the Albanian Parliament Law No. 31 on the Foreign Service of the Republic of Albania, allow the Minister of Foreign Affairs to appoint “experts outside the Foreign Service” to diplomatic positions (Albanian Parliament, Law No. 31 on the Foreign Service of the Republic of Albania, Article 31, paragraph 3, 2015). Such a procedure can be seen as a manifestation of clan mentality, as it aims to influence through embeddedness, by shaping who is in power and how political agendas are established (Hönke and Lederer 2013, 781).

3. 2. 1 Informal Control Over Diplomatic Roles

International actors lack the mechanisms to micro-analyze each proposal by state foreign policy officials. This makes it easier for the clan elite to take control of the country's foreign policy. The extent of this discretionary power is outlined in the law on the Foreign Service itself,

> "The Minister of Foreign Affairs may appoint, in special cases, experts outside the Foreign Service to diplomatic missions and consular posts, who possess knowledge and expertise according to the specifics of the appointed position. These employees enjoy the status of diplomat in the diplomatic missions for as long as they serve at these missions." (Albanian Parliament, Law No. 31 on the Foreign Service of the Republic of Albania, Article 31, paragraph 3, 2015).

The Minister of Foreign Affairs is granted absolute decision-making powers over matters related to the career progression of diplomats, the admission of 'specialists' from outside the system into the Foreign Service, and appointments within the Ministry and in foreign missions (Council of Albanian Ambassadors 2024). While seemingly intended to bring in specialized knowledge, this provision leaves room for exploitation and bureaucracy, enabling individuals with strong kin-like ties—but potentially limited diplomatic expertise—to enter key foreign policy roles, further illustrating how deeply rooted clan structures can shape Albania's engagement with the international community.

This law goes against the goals of reforming public administration and strengthening the independence and professionalism of career systems. A minister can appoint anyone they please (they need a test that requires evaluation, but it is not an open procedure). The exact special cases that would require a non-diplomat to perform such a duty are not explained. This has had negative consequences, as it has created an environment where diplomats have

personally benefited from their positions instead of engaging in the development of policies and relations that serve the national interest (Alia 2024, 12).

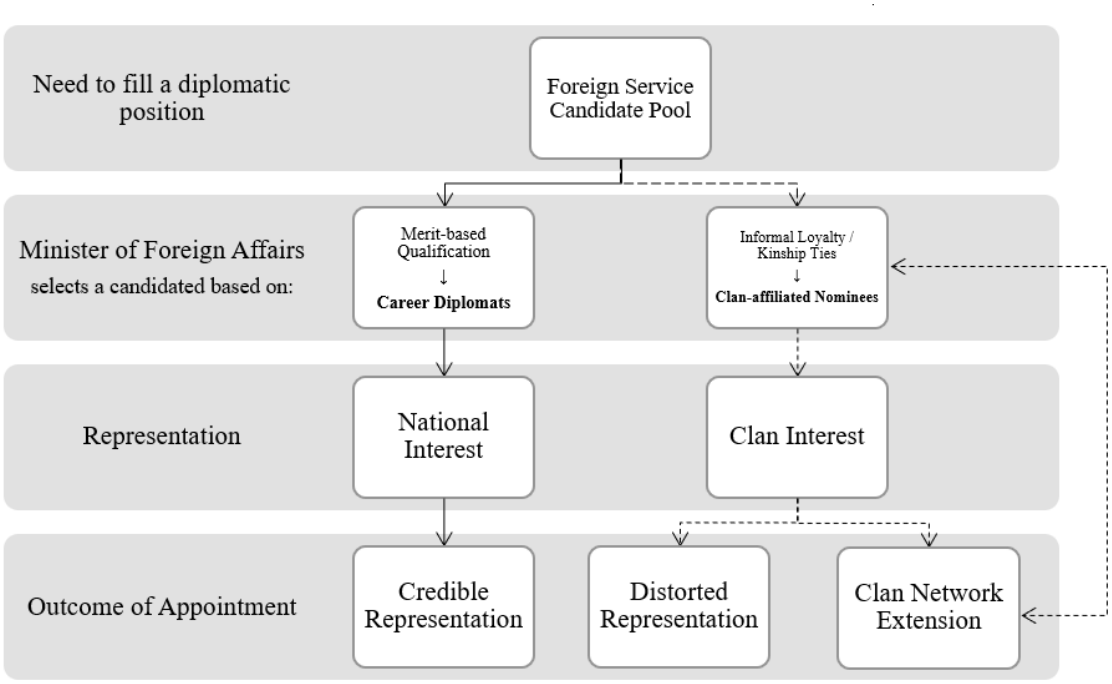

Figure 2: Competing Logics of Diplomatic Appointments in Albania

The diagram in Figure 2 illustrates the competing logics that shape foreign service appointments in Albania. While official channels emphasize meritocratic qualifications aimed at serving the national interest, an informal logic based on the minister's personal loyalty and kinship ties overrides formal criteria, resulting in appointments that serve elite or "clan" interests. The dashed arrows in the figure illustrate the extent to which such diplomatic appointments have become hidden in Albania. Career diplomats are sidelined in favor of kinship ties, which also extend the network on a broader scale.

Ambassadors are the highest-ranking diplomats, responsible for promoting trade, negotiating treaties, establishing strategic partnerships, exchanging information, fostering amicable international relations and advocating for and defending the interests of their home

state overseas (Jezierska and Niklasson 2024, 1656). They cultivate ties with local civil society, political elites and other diplomats. An ambassador is therefore expected to represent the interests of their nation, not their own family interests. The elites, however, are the ones that benefit most from these appointments.

According to Jezierska and Niklasson (2024, 1657), political leaders are inclined to influence foreign policy implementation by appointing loyal supporters as diplomats, since these officials operate far from home and face limited oversight. Consequently, elite actors can more easily pursue foreign policy objectives that align with their own interests, thereby supporting my first hypothesis. Regardless of whether these elite decision makers consider themselves part of a "clan," their familial and political ties enable them to function as unique kin-based interest groups, maintaining authority and influence within the diplomatic sphere. Those who represent Albania on a larger scale are therefore contributing to an interstate-society model of Albania, one that prioritizes traditional clan interests in the crafting of foreign policy.

3. 2. 2 Nepotism and Clan Consolidation in Albania's Foreign Service

Although this may seem too abrupt a conclusion; patronage and clientelism have been a recurring pattern within the Albanian diplomacy corp, all of whom are close to government officials by blood or marriage, leading to a deterioration of Albanian representation in international organizations. During Berisha's government (2004-2013), politicians, including former Speaker of Parliament Jozefina Topalli, former leader of the Republican Party Mediu, and former Deputy Minister Arjan Starova, among others, placed their relatives in embassies, in violation of the official rules of the Foreign Service (ResPublica 2013).

While Topalli placed her brother as Consul in Milan and Bucharest, the appointment of her son-in-law, Luis Ejlli, as First Secretary in Paris in 2010, starkly illustrates the disregard for official procedure (ResPublica 2013). The Foreign Service Law mandated ten years of

experience for this role, "The rank of First Secretary is granted to diplomats with nine years of integrated service and a generally satisfactory or higher performance evaluation in the most recent year." To fulfill this criteria, Ejlli would have had to begin his diplomatic career at the age of fifteen. Interestingly, Ejlli was laid off as soon as his marriage with Topalli's daughter ended – highlighting how family connections have become the backbone of Albanian diplomacy. Further examples of such nepotistic appointments during the Berisha government (2004-2013) are presented in Table 1.

Albanian Diplomats under Berisha's Government (2004-2013)	**Appointed as**	**Tied to**	**Relationship**
Luis Ejlli	First Secretary for Culture, Tourism, and Arts in the Albanian Embassy in Paris, France	Parliament Speaker, Jozefina Topalli	Son-In-Law
Gjon Çoba	the Consul in Milan	Parliament Speaker, Jozefina Topalli	Brother
Bashkim Bekteshi	The Consul General in Bari	Prime Minister, Sali Berisha	Son-In-Law's Uncle
Teuta Starova	Minister Counsellor in London	Deputy Minister of Defense, Arian Starova	Wife

Table 1: A Short List of Nepotistic Appointments in Albania's Diplomatic Corps under the Berisha Government (2004–2013)[3]

[3] Telegraf. "The Nepotistic Appointments of the Berisha Government." n.d. https://telegrafi.com/en/nepotistic-appointments-of-the-Berisha-government/

Granovetter (1973, as cited in Gál et al., 2022, 2) defines nepotism as kinship-based favoritism in the job market, whereby individuals leverage their social connections to obtain jobs. In Albania, however, this phenomenon extends beyond the practice of employing close friends and family. Migdal (2001, 54) argues that "how people are recruited into state jobs is an indication of whose rules of the game are being followed." Within the clan context, the recruitment process for such state employment offers insight into the adherence to established social norms and regulations. These transgressions are indicative of social control exerted by entities external to the state apparatus, thereby influencing the actions of the state or, at the very least, the actions of one of its constituent parts. Therefore, the repeated hiring of extended kin is not based on isolated favoritism. Rather, it is driven by clan consolidation. Thus, nepotism becomes the visible manifestation of the deeper clan mechanisms that influence Albania's foreign policy infrastructure.

As Collins (2006, 42) argues, kinship ties are used to reward not just loyalty, but also establish durable, cross-generational networks of influence. Although these elites support their kin for immediate interests, they also engage in a broader less direct collective strategy to maintain their dominance. This dynamic aligns closely with Migdal's State in Society model. This system was not primarily about historical regional distinctions like the Gheg and Tosk divide; rather, it was about deepening the split between the governing elite and the rest of society. The elite accommodated itself with positions of power, thus reinforcing its "clan", influencing decisions beyond simply individual material gain. This supports my second hypothesis. The elite engage in a perpetual struggle for social dominance, which ultimately feeds to the further fragmentation of the state.

During Rama's governance (2014 - present), there have been fewer family hires among foreign service officials. However, the affiliations among the political elite and these diplomats remain just as strong. The currency of influence changed from direct kinship to party/group allegiance. Therefore, underlying privileged clan connections continue to shape diplomatic appointments.

The proposed Foreign Service Law, allowing the Foreign Minister to hire "experts" from other fields, comes nine years after Prime Minister Edi Rama's government lifted the 20 percent cap on external hires in the foreign service ("Government's Draft Law," 2024). After this restriction was lifted, Socialist Party officials, with no prior foreign service experience, were able to pursue diplomatic careers, a decision that has further harmed the quality of Albanian diplomacy. Such patterns of appointment have had immense consequences for the structure and function of the Albanian foreign service.

For instance, a total of 20 ambassadors and consuls (37%) have completed their standard three-year mandates, as encouraged by Albanian law on foreign policy (Alia 2024, 12). However, a major concern is that some ambassadors—rather than rotating out after a single term—have served three to four consecutive mandates, moving from one embassy to another in violation of legal limits. Such actions represent a blatant breach of meritocratic hiring, treating the position of ambassador as a personal status, when in fact it should be in service of the country's interests and its citizens. These diplomats have maintained their hold over Albania’s foreign service due to their party affiliations. They have earned the trust of the system they support through constant interaction and are rewarded for it.

The composition of diplomatic appointments under Rama's government, as shown in Table 2, further illustrates this pattern.

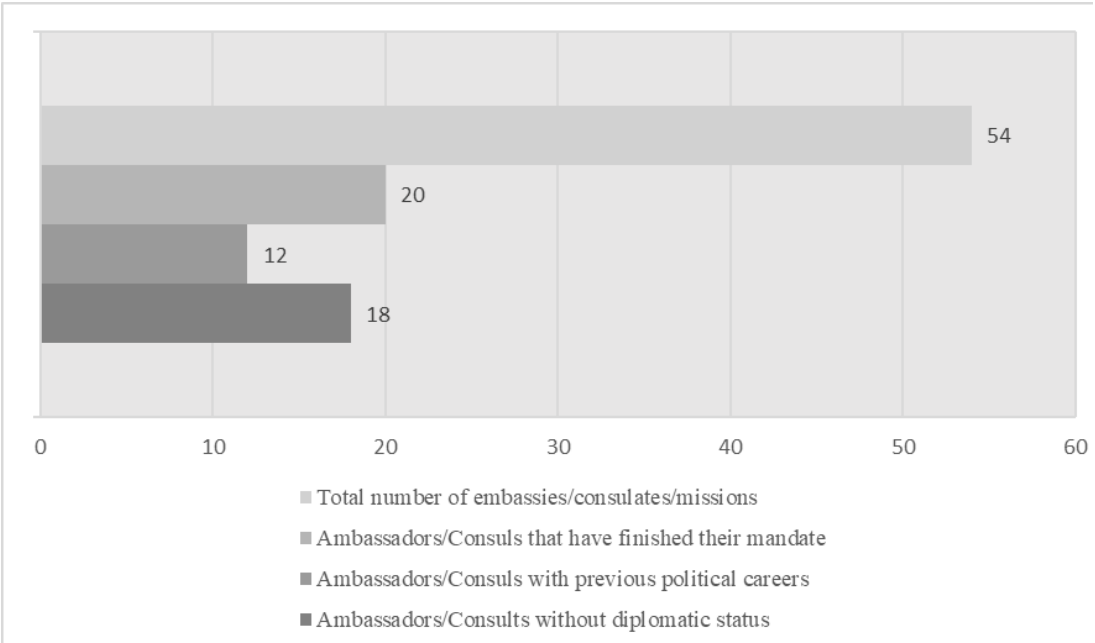

Table 2: Diplomatic Appointments under Rama's Government (2014-present)[4]

In response to these trends, Albert Rakipi, president of the Institute of International Studies, argues that such appointments foster a system of clan favoritism, "Clientelist appointments in the foreign service based primarily on clan, be it political, provincial, blood clan or even a clan based on transactional relationship, money and favors, which is already perhaps dominant, unfortunately end up creating a pattern I once called 'the tyranny of cousins'. And cousins, as I explained, are not cousins only by blood" (as quoted in "Government's Draft Law," 2024).

The presence of clan-based appointees in foreign policy poses a significant challenge to liberal reform and Albanian foreign policymaking, as these individuals may not always possess the requisite skills or experience to effectively carry out their duties (Cici 2024). Such shifts in diplomatic strategy have the potential to result in the disruption of effective bilateral

[4] Alia, Lorela. "Politika mes Demokracisë." Monitoring Report. Qëndresa Qytetare, September 2024. https://qeverisja.qq.com.al/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/diplomacia.pdf

or multilateral relationships. This, in turn, has the potential to strain relationships with other countries.

3.3 How Organized Crime Clan Networks Shape Foreign Policy Outcomes

In the second mechanism, I explain how organized criminal clans are actors in Albanian domestic politics, thus influencing Albanian foreign policy. I also discuss their increasing efficiency and prominent position within transnational criminal networks (Zhilla 2014, 44), which in turn has required international law-enforcement agreements – as exemplified by the operational and strategic cooperation between Albania and Eurojust (starting from 2018).

3.3.1 The Political Reach of Transnational Albanian Crime Networks

When discussing Albanian criminal groups, a key challenge lies in uncovering their hidden networks and activities. Little is known about these groups' migration patterns (Arsovska 2019, 202). Due to the widespread informality of Albanian migration (especially after the collapse of Hoxha's regime), there are no reliable estimates of Albanians living abroad. The large number of undocumented Albanian migrants makes their numbers impossible to determine (Musabelliu, 2024, 1). Nevertheless, it is estimated that 1.15 million Albanians currently live and work abroad. Around 90% of these migrants live in Europe, and the rest live in the U.S.

Within broader migration patterns, there are various subgroups with distinct experiences and motivations. Musabelliu (2024) points to Albanian crime figures who find themselves in new markets due to factors like 'forced migration' and the need to escape legal

consequences. Their migration reveals that even among those who have left Albania, established social structures and 'their own confined laws' often continue to hold sway.

The Global Organized Crime Index (2023, 4-5) shows that local criminal groups in Albania have extended beyond Albania's borders, with successful integration into local crime networks in other countries. This expansion is a growing concern acknowledged by the U.S. Department of State (2024, 46), which has documented that these groups have developed relationships with counterparts in South America and Europe. Their operations are often facilitated by collaborations with corrupt police and judicial officials, as well as established foreign criminal entities such as the Italian mafia and Turkish organized crime groups (Global Organized Crime Index 2023, 4-5). Furthermore, they are known to have links to Kosovar and Montenegrin criminal networks and maintain a strong presence in countries like Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. They are also responsible for a significant portion of the narcotics distribution in these regions.

Albania's legal framework on international judicial cooperation in criminal matters has been continuously battling such networks, with several partnerships with institutions at international and regional levels. However, the justice system's independence, efficiency, and professionalism often fall short when it comes to law enforcement (Global Organized Crime Index 2023, 5-6). Criminal groups have established legitimate businesses, becoming major players in sectors such as construction, real estate, retail, and tourism (Nako and Pilaca 2021, 256). Through procurement and concessions contracts, they have also gained access to public money and are active in funding political campaigns. Further, they are also appointed to political positions and therefore receive political protection (Global Organized Crime Index 2023, 4-5). They use intimidation of political opponents, disruption of opposition rallies, and interference in vote counting to ensure immunity from law enforcement (Lamallari and Zhilla

2016, 27). This has created fertile ground for building clan alliances within Albania and across state boundaries, highlighting an entrenched informal State-in-Society model.

Political parties in Albania have received funding from individuals convicted of illegal activities abroad. For example, an Albanian criminal network in Dendermonde, Belgium, had two members prosecuted for human trafficking and smuggling to the United Kingdom (Lamallari and Zhilla, 2016, 27). According to the Belgian Federal Prosecutor's Office, the accused with the initials G. and M., had previously worked in the Albanian secret services, and were living in Brussels with diplomatic visas. As organizers of several criminal activities in Belgium, they had contacts in Albania, transferring funds to a political party within the country. Such arrangements, in which criminal money fuels political campaigns, are crucial for forming the privileged, clan-based alliances that influence domestic politics in Albania. Thus, they can cause the state to pursue "suboptimal" foreign policies (Fearon 1998, 302). They can be causally relevant in explaining opposite foreign policy choices, illustrating my first hypothesis: that clan affiliations are a key mechanism among elite political actors to pursue their foreign policy objectives. This dynamic is illustrated in Figure 3 below.

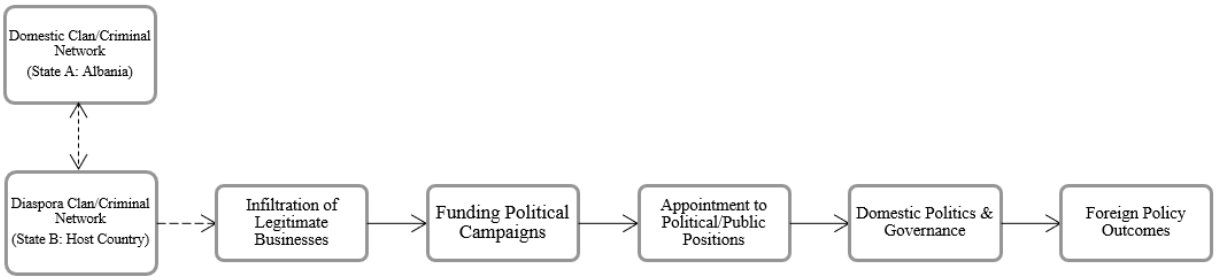

Figure 3: How Transnational Clan Networks Shape Albanian Governance and Foreign Policy

According to the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (2024, 23), these networks are organized like a family and bound together by a 'shared ancestry'. The Central Directorate for Antidrug Services (DCSA 2021, 43-44) claims that they are "structurally organized in gangs based on family ties which replicate the typical patterns adopted in their country of origin." This diagnosis is consistent across Europe: these teams regularly engage in continuous crime while remaining unnoticed (Raufer 2018, 65).

The Global Organized Crime Index (2023, 4-5) further highlights how the rise of these mafia-style groups is strongly linked to clan ties. A distinction must be made here: mafias can be dismantled, but the "family" ties among clans endure (Raufer 2018, 62). Therefore, to fully grasp their nature, it is insufficient to simply consider them a mainstream organized crime group; as Arsovska (2019, 202) claims, it is also too simple to describe these networks as kinship-based organizations with boundaries. Each core group, typically consisting of three to ten members of the same ethnic background, is a smaller criminal subunit within a larger, multiethnic criminal network.

As Lewis (2015, 30) argues, these tight-knit groups exert significant influence due to their clan-like foundation. Their lack of transparency makes it impossible for them to be prosecuted as regular members of society. Given that this clan mentality is deeply ingrained in their social fabric, they would also reject legislation that contradicts what they aim to achieve. These criminal networks along with insufficient transparency and outside accountability establish broader "structural secrecy" (Carlos et. al. 2022). An informal societal structure within the clan network strengthens secrecy because it creates challenges for non-clan members of the government or international organizations to monitor or oppose violations. This is because clans not only dominate the 'hidden' environment, but they also supply their clans with resources and goods by any means they can, regardless of whether those means are legal

or criminal in the eyes of “outsiders". Given the transnational reach of these clandestine networks and the challenges they pose to national legal frameworks, international cooperation has become essential, leading to the formation of bilateral law enforcement agreements.

3.3.2 Confronting Albania’s Transnational Criminal Clans

Former Eurojust President Hamran emphasizes, “"In our globalized world, criminals cross borders and so must our criminal justice systems” (as quoted in Eurojust 2018). Recognizing the transnational nature of organized crime and money laundering among such networks, Albania has signed multiple bilateral transnational legal agreements declaring their commitment to combating organized crime.

In November 2014, The Prosecution Office of Albania and the National Anti-Mafia Directorate of Italy signed a cooperation agreement (Republic of Albania General Prosecution Office 2015). The two structures established Joint Investigation Teams, which have a history of success in European Union countries. The cooperation features "spontaneous exchange of information," a technique that enables real-time information exchange. A similar agreement was also struck between Albania and Britain in 2022 to prevent illegal migration and penetrate criminal networks (Mortimer 2023). In order to better combat trans-border organized crime in Southeast Europe, Albania is also a member of the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center (SELEC). SELEC is an international law enforcement organization based on treaties that combines the resources and experience of customs and police authorities (SELEC n.d.). The U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Overseas Prosecutorial Development, Assistance and Training (OPDAT) also provides technical assistance through bilateral programs in Albania (OPDAT n.d.).

Most of the details of these operational collaborations have not been disclosed to the public. This has been the case with most of Albania's international law enforcement agreements. Despite positive results in the fight against drug trafficking and some criminal groups being dismantled, investigations and prosecutions have failed to target the upper echelons behind these criminal organizations (Global Organized Crime Index 2023, 5-6). Their limited success suggests that more comprehensive and effective strategies are needed in such cooperations (Global Organized Crime Index 2023, 5-6). For instance, the ongoing SPAK investigations funded by the EU and the U.S., have recently asserted that there are four criminal groups in Albania that have formed two strong alliances against each other (Musabelliu, 2024, 2). By decrypting conversations on Sky ECC, they revealed that these groups have significant national and international influence. The interceptions released on November 25, 2024, exposed crime, treachery, treason, dubious investments, and money laundering by focusing on some of Albania's most dangerous clans, as well as their significant involvement in Albanian politics and foreign policy. Despite such cooperation, the organized crime situation has not changed much. Shain and Barth (2003, 464; cited in Jamison and Shelef 2025, 20) offer a possible explanation, suggesting that weak states invite diasporic influence as a means of survival, often at the expense of their institutional integrity and long-term governance.

Albania's foreign policy faces a unique paradox due to its inability to eliminate strong criminal networks despite international cooperation. Although the systemic clan bonds seem to have weakened the country's domestic law enforcement efforts, this has also encouraged greater international cooperation, which ironically has given the government more opportunities to expand globally. The "irony" here is key to proving my second hypothesis: By engaging in international cooperation, the state's accommodation of its internal weakness (caused by clans) is reinforcing clan power and social capital. It is keeping the compromised state viable internationally, potentially allowing clan-linked actors to maintain access,

legitimacy, and channels that ultimately serve their power, even if it is not immediate material gain.

The Communication on EU Enlargement Policy (2023, 19), for example, illustrates this pattern as they highlight the continued good cooperation between Albania and the European Union, "Albania has contributed to the management of the mixed migration flows towards the EU by cooperating to implement the EU Action Plan on the Western Balkans." This willingness to cooperate on EU priorities, despite or even because of domestic capacity challenges, allows Albania to remain a valued partner, thereby maintaining avenues for broader international engagement.

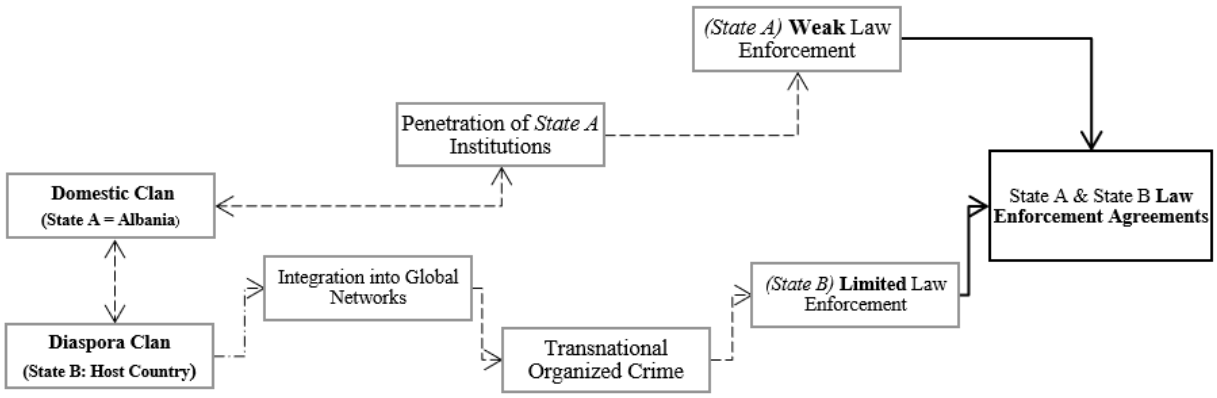

Figure 4: How Albanian Clan Organized Crime Drives Bilateral Agreements

Figure 4 illustrates the intersection between international and domestic decision-making processes in light of the cooperation between clans across the diaspora. Albanian clan structures evolve from localized social groups into transnational actors capable of undermining state authority in both their home (State A, Albania) and host (State B) countries.

As seen by their bidirectional dashed arrows, they reinforce each other. The diaspora clan subtly supplies its clan back home with resources (Lewis 2015, 30), while the domestic clan provides the diaspora with access to political or bureaucratic networks within Albania (Figure 3). Due to domestic clans seamlessly capturing the state, there is an increased demand for international legal cooperation in Albania, facilitating bilateral law agreement enforcements. This demand is reciprocal, given that diaspora clans and other organized criminal networks have led to host countries' limited law enforcement, particularly with regard to their prosecutions. These concrete and visible issues then become the foundation for the immediate need for such international legal negotiations.

3.4 How Albanian Diaspora Clans Lobby for International Engagement

In the last mechanism, I argue that the state-in-society model can be applied internationally as a clan-in-diaspora model, highlighting how these non-state actors leverage their lobbying capabilities across borders. Diaspora clans attempt to lobby multiple governments so they can solidify themselves as legitimate partners in policymaking in their host countries while simultaneously extending their influence over their home countries, thereby shaping foreign policy.

Diaspora is commonly defined as a group of people who live in a host country, acknowledge their separateness based on shared ethnicity or nationality, and maintain some sort of relationship with their home country (Lahneman 2005, 7). According to Prasad and Savati (2023, 839), problems in the country of origin motivate entrepreneurial individuals within diaspora communities to engage in lobbying—defined by Chari et al. (2010, 3, as cited in Sqapi 2019, 14) as "the act of individuals or groups, each with varying and specific interests, attempting to influence decisions taken at the political level"—and to mobilize other community members. The same can be said for diaspora clans.

Clan identity extends into the diaspora, deeply shaped by the shifting political and economic realities back home (Last and Seaboyer 2011, 7–8). When people flee conflict, as many Albanians have, they may pursue "radical" goals abroad in pursuit of homeland resolutions (Koinova 2013, as cited in Prasad and Savatic 2021, 833) — oftentimes resulting in lobbying efforts. An entrepreneurial role can be played by “rebels” in linking diaspora activists to homeland concerns (Adamson, 2013; Zarnett, 2017). The strength of such movements depends on the extent to which a diaspora is linked to elites in the country of origin. This means that even far from home, Albanian clan dynamics remain deeply connected to their origins.

These groups function both as kinship networks and as influential interest groups across several countries. What is significant is that by advocating and lobbying from a different country, they demonstrate how Albanian clans operate as interconnected entities in foreign policy.

The Albanian American diaspora, for example, being geographically concentrated in the Northeast U.S., has consistently voted for and made financial contributions to candidates for the U.S. Presidency, Senate, and Congress, who in turn have supported and promoted their ‘home’ issues and concerns (Mustafaj 2018). In D.C., this group has become known as the "Congressional Albanian Issues Caucus." Such groups have provided Albania with a unique ability to influence U.S. policy toward the country, exemplifying lobbying through the acquaintances they forged with diplomats, ambassadors, administration officials, academics, humanitarian organizations, human rights organizations, and think tanks.

January 1989 marked a turning point for this movement with the formation of the Albanian American Civic League (AACL) in New York by former Republican congressman Joe DioGuardi, who was of Albanian descent (Dymi and Ragaru, 2004, 14). This marked a

notable shift in Albanian-American advocacy, given that DioGuardi had been raising concerns about Milošević's rule in Kosovo since 1986. His efforts included attempting to pass a resolution condemning Yugoslavia for human rights violations. This movement, enacted by Albanian diaspora members, was driven by their concern for the well-being of their country and their people. In this instance, the strong solidarity among compatriots, echoing traditional kinship bonds, meant their connection transcended mere national belonging; a domestic issue within Albania became a transnational concern as they actively worked to bring it to the attention of the United States government.

The AACL helping American senators connect with Albanian politicians from Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania (Hockenos 2003, as cited in Koinova 2013) illustrates the mechanism by which diaspora clan groups can actively work to gain the attention of policymakers. This instance directly reflects my first hypothesis: DioGuardi, one among many elite political lobbyists, and the AACL—a formalized extension of clan/diaspora power—demonstrate the key informal mechanism through which foreign policy objectives in the U.S. regarding Kosovo were pursued.

As Green-Pedersen and Walgrave (2014, as cited in Bursens et al. 2024, 3) note, governments are constrained in their ability to handle every possible problem because of "limited attention spans and finite carrying capacities." The AACL's efforts can thus be seen as a strategy to ensure that issues relevant to the Albanian diaspora were being prioritized by the US government by creating direct channels of communication and influence with American senators, thereby overcoming the inherent constraints on governmental focus.

The 1998–1999 mobilization of the Albanian diaspora in the United States helped push the insurgency (Koinova 2013, 12–13). The escalation of the 1997–1998 crisis in Kosovo transformed it into an internationalized struggle, drawing in fundraising and illegal activity.

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the dominant separatist group, gained military and political influence in Kosovo, promoting a violent resolution to the dispute over statehood. The organization boosted its level of mobilization by increasing donations, redefining its ideology, and utilizing the military capabilities of the diaspora. It played a significant role in radicalizing U.S. diaspora politics by spreading mobilization messaging, exploiting internal conflicts in Kosovo, and maintaining close ties with the U.S.-based diaspora. This required a meticulous approach, especially given how diverse the Albanian diaspora had been. Its members came not only from Kosovo and Albania, but also from other countries in the region.

Despite internal divisions within the homeland, the shared experience of the Albanian diaspora has elevated national identity to a unifying identity—transcending their differences. This shared origin provides a powerful basis for collective action and identity formation in the host country, thus taking on the significance of clan ties. The shared experience of displacement and the unifying power of national and familial ties have allowed for such broad mobilizations among Albanians despite their regional differences. In a migrant setting, they were not seeing themselves as either Gheg or Tosk. They were bound together by their shared collective identity — their Albanian-ness. Thus, their lobbying becomes a direct manifestation of kin protection, mirroring the traditional role of clan leaders who stand at the forefront for their kin.

The graph in Figure 5 illustrates the pathways within these Albanian diaspora structures. While distinct from traditional kinship-based clans, these structures are fundamentally tied by common origin, linguistics, and culture, enabling them to operate cohesively even in host environments that may not fully embrace them—thus illustrating a clan-in-diaspora model. Their transnational existence intensifies their demand for homeland security. When concerns arise in the homeland, these established networks are incentivized to form and intensify their lobbying efforts for further influence and eventually, response.

The host country's response, along with that of its international partners, largely depends on its political priorities or prevailing international commitments. In the context of the Kosovo War, for example, Albanian diaspora lobbying activities began long before Yugoslavia's disintegration, emphasizing the prolonged nature of such influence campaigns. The outcomes generated in the host country, influenced by international legal requirements and other partnerships, lay the groundwork for that country's subsequent foreign policy decisions. Such reactions by host nations serve not only to address immediate concerns but also significantly reinforces the power and social capital of these diaspora networks, aligning with my second hypothesis.

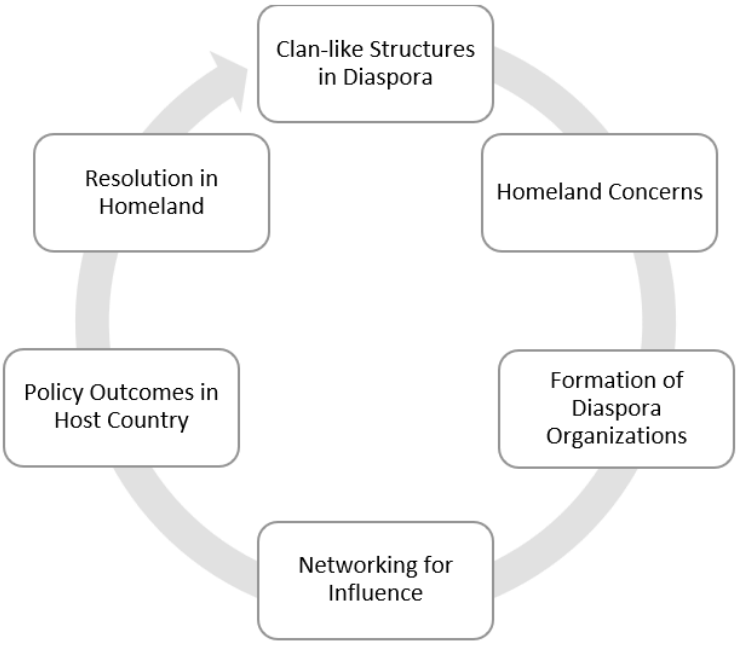

Figure 5: Diaspora Clan Dynamics and Transnational Influence Cycle

Conclusion

Clans function as unique, yet often unacknowledged, interest groups in foreign policy. By drawing on Migdal's (2001) State-in-Society model, I argue that elite structures have clan-like characteristics that significantly influence the results of foreign policy. I point to particular mechanisms—organized crime networks, diaspora lobbying, and nepotistic diplomatic appointments—as crucial proof of the negotiations behind foreign policy outcomes.

I present Albanian clans as a compelling case study to illustrate how domestic groups intersect with foreign policy. Albania serves as a 'least-likely' case, illustrating how clan-based governance can persist in parallel with liberal-institutional reforms. Regardless of Albania's current institutional reforms, its foreign policy outcomes also stem from more 'intimate' relations where loyalty, kin, and leverage overlap.

Clans encompass more than just traditional groups that share the same ancestor. They can also manifest in modern, multifaceted ways, which may explain why they are overlooked as relevant actors in foreign policy. Unlike conventional IR paradigms focused on state-to-state interactions, this analysis builds on the premise that human decision-makers, whether individual or collective, are the foundation of IR (Hudson 2005, 21). Their frequently disregarded micro-level relationships form its social bedrock, urging a re-evaluation of foreign policy's conventional boundaries.

Through process tracing, the empirical analysis indicates that clans likely function as an interest group, albeit in a highly subtle and concealed manner. This leads to the limitations of my research, as concrete manifestations of such kin-like connections are only briefly

discussed in government documents, international reports, and media analyses. The inherent hidden nature of these clandestine ties, however, may be the very result of their influence.

This research aimed to demonstrate that the elite's pursuit of foreign policy objectives, often appearing self-serving, is primarily driven by a broader aim: maintaining and extending their kin influence, rather than simply personal material gain. As evidenced by the nuanced causal mechanisms driven by clan ties, the findings consistently support this hypothesis. The analysis has also illustrated how deeply embedded clan structures provide a unique, kin-like framework for achieving these objectives, transcending conventional understandings of self-interest in international relations.

These findings call for a broader re-evaluation of how non-state actors, particularly ethnic or kinship groups, shape international engagement. In contexts where state authority is fragmented or personalized, clans are not regressive—they are adaptive, strategic, and increasingly becoming transnational. Recognizing this may help policymakers to better understand the real dynamics behind international agreements, migration diplomacy, and regional power shifts.

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