

Albanian Firms in the Digital Era: Navigating the European Digital Single Market

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Abstract

Albanian businesses aiming to expand and appeal to new clients in the European digital market must understand the market dynamics and factors impacting their path to create effective strategies and policies. This study uses various approaches to highlight the key opportunities and major challenges for Albanian businesses in the European Digital Single Market. Albanian enterprises have many prospects in the European online market, including tapping into a vast customer pool, broadening business activities, and connecting different customer groups and areas. Albanian companies encounter difficulties including fierce competition from well-known European companies, barriers related to language and culture, restricted digital infrastructure, and financial limitations. This study addresses the limited information on digital integration in Albania and offers theoretical and practical suggestions for businesses, governments, and other stakeholders. The European Digital Single Market provides benefits and hurdles for Albanian companies as they undergo digitalization and enter the e-commerce industry.

Keywords: European Digital Single Market, Albanian firms, digital transformation, e-commerce

INTRODUCTION

The worldwide increase in digital markets, fueled by technology and data, offers opportunities to reach global customers, save costs, and implement new ideas (Godel Moritz, et al. 2016). However, it also brings challenges like regulations and a lack of skills. The EU has acknowledged the significance of digital progress and has implemented initiatives such as the Digital Single Market (DSM) to establish a single digital market that emphasizes accessibility, competitiveness, and potential for growth (European Parliament and Council of EU 2014). Important steps involve aligning VAT regulations and enhancing package delivery services with a focus on matters such as privacy and equal market competition. The creation of an unified connectivity market seeks to offer dependable and cost-effective connectivity services to all member states to boost competition and narrow the digital gap (European Parliament 2016). The European Single Market offers benefits such as enhanced competition and economic expansion (Marcus, Petropoulos, and Yeung 2018), but its drawbacks may include disparities in economic advantages and a decrease in national autonomy (EPC 2010).

Continuing efforts in DSM prioritize services that involve government administration in digital public services, even in the face of possible resistance to change. Albanian firms benefit from their geographical position for global expansion, particularly in Europe, which can decrease their dependence on domestic markets and

promote long-term viability and development. Nevertheless, European firms encounter hurdles such as varying data protection, consumer rights, product standards, and business practices in comparison to their counterparts. Furthermore, Albanian businesses face challenges such as competition from established firms, language barriers, limited digital infrastructure and talent pools, financing constraints for SMEs, and difficulties in protecting intellectual property rights (European Digital SME Alliance 2023). Important measures involve standardizing VAT regulations and enhancing package delivery services, along with handling concerns such as data privacy and equal competition. The creation of an unified connectivity market seeks to offer dependable and cost-effective connectivity services throughout member states to boost competition and narrow the digital gap. The European Single Market brings benefits such as higher competition and economic growth, but drawbacks can include uneven economic gains and reduced national autonomy. Continuing efforts in DSM target aspects such as providing services to involve government administrations in digital public services even in the face of possible reluctance to change.

The structure of the paper is outlined as follows: The subsequent section offers information on the evolution, key features, and benefits of the digital single market. The section below offers a general overview of the business environment in Albania concerning digital transformation and e-commerce. The next section explores the difficulties and opportunities faced by Albanian businesses in the European Digital Market. Finally, conclusions are presented in the last section.

THE EUROPEAN DIGITAL SINGLE MARKET

A single digital market aims to eliminate cross-border barriers to accessing and providing digital infrastructure, content, and services, thereby creating a competitive regional digital ecosystem with vast economic potential. Accelerating Europe's digital growth through an unified market could boost economic growth by trillions of euros (IBRD and World Bank 2018). The digital economy relies heavily on cross-border data flows, which have contributed significantly to global GDP growth. A harmonized Single Data Market allows for secure data flow across borders, benefiting from critical services such as the Internet of Things (Maciejewski, et al. 2014). Implementing laws and safeguards is crucial for data protection and privacy while fostering innovation and growth. The Digital Single Market in Europe removes barriers between member states and promotes online trade, investment, and digital infrastructure development (European Parliament 2016). By providing access to a large consumer base, an unified digital market encourages investment in innovative services and applications, driving growth and innovation in the region (Pinsent Masons 2022). Cooperation between technology and legal systems is crucial for guaranteeing safe transactions and safeguarding consumer interests, ultimately enabling the smooth international provision of online products and services. The DSM was created to address the needs of the digital age by eliminating regulatory obstacles and facilitating the smooth flow of products, services, and information (Godel Moritz, et al. 2016). It guarantees equal and safe entry into online activities for both citizens and businesses, supporting national growth and international blending by creating a unified connectivity market, data market, and online market (Migliaccio and Dancourt 2016).

Key initiatives include geo-blocking reduction, copyright law updates, and e-commerce regulation standardization to enhance access to digital content and promote fair competition (European Commission 2021). The DSM aligns data protection rules,

fosters growth in data-driven industries, and provides equal opportunities for businesses by making regulations consistent. It strengthens consumer protection, promotes principles such as freedom of choice and citizen involvement in democratic processes, and safeguards individuals' rights in the digital space (Brynjolfsson and Smith 2000). The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles guides EU digital strategies, emphasizing values such as sustainability, privacy, and fundamental rights while empowering citizens to benefit from the digital revolution and fostering cohesion across the union. DSM promotes digital innovation by investing in infrastructure, skills, and research to benefit the EU's digital economy. The European Commission predicts economic benefits and job creation based on DSM, stressing the need for citizens to acquire essential digital skills. Melisande, et al. (2015) discussed the potential benefits and impacts of online sales on EU consumers using a multi-country multi-sector model. Although the transition to online shopping benefits real household consumption and GDP growth, it diminishes the retail sector. The goal of a Digital Single Market is to increase digital opportunities for citizens and businesses, improve consumer access to digital products, and promote innovation, and economic growth. Issues such as data protection, copyright regulations, and digital taxation must be addressed, in addition to market entry obstacles and enforcement concerns.

Despite some divergences in national rules, DSM has led to increased online consumer activities within the EU, influencing market accessibility and consumer behavior. The EU is taking steps to improve digitalization and online procedures through regulations such as the Single Digital Gateway Regulation. The Digital Single Market strives to ensure equal access to online services and data protection for all citizens and businesses, regardless of nationality or location. However, challenges such as the lack of open systems and uncertainty about digital standards impede digitalization for many SMEs (Godel Moritz, et al. 2016). There is also a trust deficit between data consumers and providers. To address these issues, the Digital Market Strategy proposes the establishment of a common data portability infrastructure through a Single Digital Gateway, that integrates various platforms and networks. The Single Digital Gateway Regulation, implemented in 2018, mandates the adoption of cross-border services and the once-only principle by 2023 to uphold the rights of data subjects and align them with the GDPR. Despite these efforts, the full implementation of the Digital Single Market across the EU and Member States is still in progress (European Parliament and Council of EU 2016).

The Digital Market Strategy aims to create a unified Single Digital Gateway for common data portability infrastructures, promoting cross-border services and compliance with data subjects' rights. Despite the anticipated economic growth from digitalization, the absence of a Digital Single Market (DSM) hampers progress, with fragmented digital markets limiting online trade and the emergence of global EU digital firms. Establishing a DSM could boost the EU's GDP and benefit consumers through increased competition and choice, fostering innovation and efficiency in various sectors (European Commission 2015). However, barriers such as data security concerns, high investment costs, lack of expertise in handling data, absence of common data standards, and uncertain regulatory frameworks hinder SMEs' adoption of digitalization. Challenges remain in increasing internet and digital technology accessibility, cybersecurity collaboration, cross-border expansion of online services, digital literacy, workforce skills, logistics, energy access, and taxation policies. Despite improvements in digital financial services and support for innovation and entrepreneurship, scalability and access to capital remain challenges for start-ups.

Addressing these barriers and promoting digital transformation is crucial for driving growth and productivity across all industries in the region.

The EU Digital Market Act (DMA) aims to promote competition by regulating giants' market dominance through specific gatekeeper rules. The impact of the DMA and Digital Services Act (DSA) on the digital market will be monitored regularly to ensure fair competition and increased European integration, despite challenges such as consumer concerns, regulatory divergences, and delivery costs (Globakhloo, et al. 2012). Legislation seeks to harmonize regulations, facilitate non-personal data usage, and support SME digitalization to enhance the Digital Single Market. By addressing these hurdles, the EU aims to bridge geographical differences, foster cross-border commerce, and unlock the full potential of the market. Consumer hesitation regarding online rights and legal protection (Floridi, et al. 2018; Kaplan and Haenlein 2010), differences in views between consumers and businesses (Burr and Floridi 2020; Eisenmann, Parker, and Van Alstyne 2006), and obstacles such as delivery costs (Raguseo 2018; Ong and Chen 2013) and local shopping preferences present hurdles to e-commerce growth (Dholakia and Nir 2004). The EU's Digital Agenda for Europe seeks to extend the Single Market principles to digital transactions and enhance European integration and sovereignty in the Digital Market, ultimately promoting fair competition and ensuring a level playing field for all market players (European Digital SME Alliance 2021).

ALBANIA BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT: AN OVERVIEW

Albania has enhanced competitiveness through energy market reforms, improved transport infrastructure, digitalization promotion, and education strengthening, but falls short of regional and European standards due to obstacles such as a lack of entrepreneurial and technological knowledge, inadequate funding, minimal research spending, and skilled workforce shortage. Trade openness has increased, especially in service exports such as tourism, but overall exports, particularly goods, are below the potential (European Commission 2023). Despite being affected by COVID-19, the economy has grown steadily. An informal economy poses unfair competition for formal SMEs, thus hindering access to financing and markets. Strict lending criteria and high collateral requirements burden SMEs, whereas corruption hinders growth.

E-commerce presents a promising solution, bridging physical distances, connecting Albanians with domestic and international markets, and establishing businesses globally. It offers a low-cost method for SMEs to expand, build trust with customers, and enter new markets. By enabling cost-effective scaling and business expansion, e-commerce empowers entrepreneurs and facilitates international brand establishment and customer trust-building. Albania has a low percentage of businesses selling products online, with only 5.8% engaging in e-commerce (World Bank 2020). However, 14.8% of the enterprises sold products/services online through websites or applications (INSTAT 2023). Certain sectors such as information, communication, accommodation, food services, and administrative support have higher e-commerce participation rates. Some Albanian entrepreneurs now focus on the online resale of imported goods within the country. E-commerce mainly serves as a complement to traditional shopping for many Albanians, with 34% using online platforms to replace local purchases (World Bank 2020). Domestic e-commerce in Albania primarily occurs through social media and local webshops with cash on delivery, while international purchases are made on global platforms using card transactions. The country's e-

commerce activity primarily involves importing foreign goods and exporting Albanian services to advanced economies. Challenges faced by Albanian e-commerce firms include limited adoption of electronic payments, logistical issues, taxation problems, lack of digital skills, consumer trust issues, and a shortage of IT and e-commerce specialists (Curraj 2021).

Trusted international online platforms can assist Albanian businesses by providing payment processing services and ensuring product quality and returns. Distrust of local webshops is a major obstacle for online markets in Albania. People fear receiving products that don't meet expectations and worry about identity and payment theft. Challenges for consumers include limited payment options, language barriers, and restricted internet access. However, Albanians recognize the benefits of online shopping, such as time-saving and a wider selection of products. Trust issues extend to cross-border transactions, along with high delivery costs and customs duties. Albania Post offers postal services, but prices are high due to operational expenses (World Bank 2020). Value-added services like customs duty prepayment and parcel lockers support e-commerce growth. Simplified returns and international payment solutions could enhance online shopping further. Cash-on-delivery is preferred by many Albanian e-commerce sites, catering to customer preferences and concerns about online payment risks (ITU 2022). However, this method limits the reach of webshops, especially internationally. Expanding electronic payment options and reducing transaction costs through credit transfers and interchange fee regulation could improve the e-commerce landscape in Albania (World Bank 2020). Despite challenges, innovative payment models like Amazon PayCode could provide solutions in the future. Regulation is essential for digital markets, enabling e-commerce and digital trade by facilitating remote transactions and building trust through data protection and privacy. It covers areas like data governance, consumer protection, electronic signatures, and intermediary liability, benefiting both individuals and digital businesses. However, gaps exist in cybersecurity and e-documentation, and challenges persist in implementing regulations due to limited capacity and awareness in the private sector. Regulatory bodies need improvements in practices and innovations, particularly in consumer protection and cybersecurity.

Albanian businesses face obstacles from unclear regulations enforcement. The Western Balkans' Digital Agenda, which began in June 2018, aims to boost the digital economy in the region by focusing on broadband, cybersecurity, and innovation. Albania leads in digital integration and connectivity in the WB DESI 2022, but human capital development requires further enhancement. While excelling in ICT specialists and training, only 24% of individuals possess basic digital skills, indicating the need for continued efforts to improve digital literacy in the country (RCC 2022).

Albania made significant progress in broadband infrastructure, digital transformation, and e-government services in 2021, surpassing Western Balkans averages in various areas. While slightly falling below the region's average in ICT for environmental sustainability, Albania excelled in online services, e-government usage, and data exchange modernization (NRI 2023). Utilizing AI technology and improving public services are essential in reaching Digital Agenda objectives by 2026. The nation's objective is to enhance the commercial landscape, draw in investments, aid small and medium enterprises, and streamline processes via initiatives such as the Business Development and Investment Strategy (2021-2027) and the Law on Electronic Documents and Trust Services. Albania also demonstrates proficiency in data recycling among governments and promoting open data accessibility. Placed 79th in the Global

Information Technology Report 2023, strengths are observed in the People pillar, while the Technology pillar requires improvement. Key strengths include Affordable and Clean Energy, Income inequality, and E-Participation, with areas of concern being High-tech exports and the Socioeconomic gap in digital payments.

Albania lags behind EU countries in digital development, including new EU states, with the digital transformation of new EU states expected to accelerate due to DSM initiatives, widening the gap with Albania (Kalaj and Merko 2021). To prevent further discrepancies, Albania must hasten its digital transformation. Integration into the EU's Digital Single Market involves aligning with EU regulations and standards for electronic contracts, payments, digital content distribution, copyright, and more. This alignment offers economic benefits such as reduced trade barriers, increased productivity, and cost savings (Pano and Gjika 2020). However, it also brings obligations for Albania, including adopting EU consumer protection rules and enhancing infrastructure. Businesses will face increased competition from European companies and must comply with EU regulations. These changes are crucial for establishing a common economic space with the EU amidst the growing impact of digitalization on trade and the economy.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR ALBANIAN FIRMS

Albanian businesses are motivated to join the European Digital Single Market (DSM) to access a larger consumer base and increase revenue streams (European Commission, 2015). Integration into the DSM attracts foreign investment, expands market reach, and enhances digital competencies. Participation in the DSM elevates brand visibility (European Parliament, 2019), improves market positioning, and mitigates risks of economic instability. Furthermore, DSM engagement fosters cross-border collaboration, innovation ecosystems, and alignment with EU development priorities (World Bank 2020). Harmonized data protection regulations within the DSM framework promote collaboration, fair competition, and consumer protection. Participation in the DSM offers Albanian firms access to a wider market, smoother export processes, and exposure to leading practices in the EU. Alignment with EU regulations enhances appeal to foreign investors, incentivizes digital transformation, and improves efficiency. DSM integration provides opportunities for funding, collaboration, and skill development, while also streamlining regulatory frameworks and reducing compliance costs. Overall, engagement in the DSM promotes job creation, economic growth, and regional stability in Albania. The Digital Single Market (DSM) provides advantages at the microeconomic level including fostering skill enhancement, accumulating human capital, and promoting international partnerships, ultimately boosting competitiveness and economic growth within the digital industry. Companies benefit from reaching more markets, saving money, and improving operations, while customers gain from increased convenience, options, and access to a variety of products.

However, Albanian firms face challenges entering the European digital market, including regulatory complexities, competition, limited technology access, and financing (European Commission, 2018). The digital divide, low internet access, and inadequate digital literacy also hinder growth. Concerns regarding cultural uniformity, cybersecurity risks, and regulatory challenges must be addressed for effective governance and inclusivity. Some Albanian firms lack the technological expertise, innovation culture, strategic planning, and collaboration necessary for DSM participation, hindering their competitiveness and ability to develop competitive digital

products (World Bank, 2020). Addressing these challenges through strategic vision, resource allocation, knowledge of EU markets, and collaboration with external stakeholders is crucial for successful integration into the DSM and navigating the digital market landscape. Resistance to digital transformation among employees and management, risk aversion, and uncertainty about the benefits of digitalization, compliance with EU regulations, trade barriers, inadequate digital infrastructure, and a skills gap all contribute to obstacles for Albanian firms in accessing funding, investment opportunities, and expanding into the European Digital Single Market (DSM) (European Commission, 2020). Limited availability of venture capital and institutional funding, insufficient physical and digital infrastructure including transportation networks and broadband internet access, and challenges in complying with data protection regulations like GDPR are significant barriers (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, language barriers, cultural diversity disparities, legal and regulatory complexities within the EU, and geopolitical tensions pose further challenges for Albanian firms operating within the European DSM. Overcoming these obstacles requires strategic approaches, including thorough market research, creative strategies to enhance competitiveness, investment in digital tools and skills, and developing legal proficiency and administrative capabilities to navigate the complex regulatory environment. By addressing these challenges, Albanian firms can effectively engage in the European DSM, cultivate robust relationships, and expand their market reach in the region.

DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The paper identifies three key challenges in achieving a Digital Single Market in Europe. Firstly, it points out that policy factors restricting Europe's digital performance extend beyond specific data or market issues and affect entrepreneurship and business operations across EU borders. Secondly, it highlights the need for clear and innovation-friendly data regulations to avoid confusion. Lastly, it calls for better coordination of data regulations within the EU to prevent conflicts. Firms face obstacles navigating diverse regulations, cultural differences, and market pressures.

Future efforts to build the Digital Single Market should focus on deregulation to keep pace with digital advancements. Despite some positive steps, concerns remain about companies adhering to DSM rules, especially regarding geo-blocking and VAT rates. The complexity of digital regulations, confusion surrounding data rules, and EU regulation conflicts pose conceptual challenges to creating the DSM. Challenges include national fragmentation, impacts on employment, concerns about large company power, tax evasion, and digital disparities.

To promote digitization and economic growth, the EU uses various mechanisms such as communication, policy groups, and funding. However, there are worries that current strategies do not fully address regulatory fragmentation. The DSM strategy tends to favor regulation over liberalization, leading to segmented digital markets. Moving forward, there is a need to prioritize breaking down regulatory barriers for a truly unified digital market, emphasizing greater liberalization for cross-border digital exchange and free data flow to unlock the DSM's full potential. Albanian firms stand to benefit from participating in the DSM through market access, competitiveness, innovation, job creation, and economic integration with the EU, fostering knowledge sharing and technological progress. Compliance with DSM regulations is crucial for successful engagement, promoting digital transformation, e-

commerce adoption, and data analytics utilization for socio-economic benefits like job growth, skill development, and poverty reduction.

Albanian firms face various challenges and opportunities in integrating into the European Digital Single Market (DSM), influenced by factors such as alignment with EU regulations, investment in digital skills and innovation, strategic partnerships, market intelligence, digital infrastructure, customer satisfaction, and institutional support. Emerging technologies and risk management are also crucial for successful integration, contributing to economic growth. However, limitations in digital infrastructure, data privacy concerns, and intense competition from established EU firms pose obstacles for Albanian companies. Research on Albanian firms' participation in the DSM provides valuable insights for policymaking, business strategies, and stakeholder engagement, offering evidence-based policy recommendations and guidance on market penetration and product innovation. Despite its benefits, research on this topic faces challenges such as data availability limitations, contextual specificity, and the dynamic nature of the DSM. Acknowledging these constraints is essential for enhancing research validity and identifying areas for future investigation and methodological improvement. Ultimately, understanding the complexities of Albanian firms' integration into the DSM is crucial for enhancing their competitiveness and innovation in the European market.

CONCLUSIONS

E-commerce platforms have the potential to greatly enhance trade and economic growth in Albania by surpassing traditional obstacles. They can link Albanians to markets, bridge information disparities between buyers and sellers, and tackle restrictions in finance accessibility. The potential of the digital economy can accelerate Albania's growth. Albania is confronted with difficulties because of its past isolation and the dispersion of its rural population, resulting in many residents residing far from urban marketplaces. E-commerce can overcome physical barriers by linking rural areas with urban marketplaces and connecting Albania with worldwide markets, including the prosperous EU market. Albanian companies engaging in the Digital Single Market (DSM) can benefit from economic advantages like expanded market reach, enhanced competitiveness, and boosted innovation, while also boosting job growth and strengthening economic ties with the EU. Comprehending DSM rules is essential for compliance and successful involvement, as participating actively encourages digital transformation and adoption of e-commerce. In general, DSM participation shows potential for socio-economic advantages, such as increasing employment, improving skills, and reducing poverty. Institutional backing, supportive policies, and availability of funds are essential for the success of integration initiatives. Enhancing competitiveness in the EU market is achieved by investing in digital skills and promoting innovation within the organization.

Acknowledgment

The work for this article was supported in part by ERASMUS + Jean Monnet Module, Project number 101127236 - PEET-EI - ERASMUS-JMO-2023-HEI-TCH-RSCH. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Author contributions

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: E.J. and S.K. data collection: D.D. literature review: S.K. draft manuscript preparation: E.J. draft review: S.K. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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