VEHAP KOLA

FROM EXIT TO CULTIVATION: FUTURE IMAGINARIES AND YOUTH AGENCY IN ALBANIA THROUGH REPEATED CAUSAL LAYERED ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Young people in Albania are frequently discussed in terms of a familiar set of concerns: migration, insecurity, institutional distrust, corruption, and blocked opportunity. Regional evidence strongly supports that picture. Recent research on youth in the Western Balkans points to persistent difficulties with employment, transitions to stable work, and confidence in public institutions while also showing that responses must be sensitive to local conditions rather than treated as one-size-fits-all solutions (Eurofound, 2024). The 2024 Youth Study Southeast Europe similarly portrays young people in the region as concerned, observant, and politically aware, even as they remain doubtful about the broader trajectory of their societies (Hasanović et al., 2024).

Yet the picture remains incomplete. It captures pressure, disappointment, and mistrust while revealing little about how young people imagine the future, how those imagined futures

are revised across time, and under what conditions alternative futures become believable enough to matter. That is the central question this paper addresses. Drawing on a three-wave Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) study with university students in Tirana, the paper asks what becomes visible when future-oriented discussions are repeated rather than captured only once. More specifically, it examines *how participants describe Albania's path to Europe in the present as a used future and how they articulate desirable alternatives*.

The paper argues that repeated CLA reveals more than recurring complaints. Across the three waves, many participants shifted from diffuse frustration to clearer diagnoses of insecurity, blocked civic circulation, weak institutional response, and the public conditions that would make a more desirable future credible. The strongest movement is therefore not from pessimism to optimism, but from broad dissatisfaction toward more nuanced accounts of what is blocked, what is desired, and what would make a different future believable. In that sense, the paper contributes to research on future imaginaries, youth agency, desirable futures, and qualitative futures methods by showing that repeated CLA can reveal how futures become more or less socially credible over time.

Conceptual background: Future imaginaries, used and desirable futures, and youth agency

Futures are not merely private expectations or neutral forecasts. They are socially patterned ways of imagining what is likely, desirable, or possible, and they shape present action by orienting attention, judgment, and conduct (Brown & Michael, 2003; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015; Mische, 2009). This paper begins with that premise and examines how young adults in Albania imagine the country's path to Europe, how those imaginaries are revised through repeated discussion, and what conditions make alternative futures more believable.

This view draws first on scholarship on imaginaries and the sociology of expectations. That literature shows that futures are collectively held visions, tied to assumptions about institutions,

power, and pathways of change, rather than simple predictions of what comes next (Brown & Michael, 2003; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). Its central insight is that actors respond not only to present conditions but also to anticipated futures, and that those anticipations shape what seems realistic, naïve, urgent, or worth pursuing.

A second relevant conversation emerges from work on projectivity and the capacity to aspire. Projectivity highlights the future-oriented dimensions of action by showing how actors imagine trajectories, position themselves within possible scenarios, and connect imagined futures to present choices (Mische, 2009). Appadurai's (2004) notion of the capacity to aspire adds that the ability to imagine and navigate the future is unevenly distributed across social settings. This matters here because participants in the workshops not only express opinions about the future but also reveal different degrees of confidence in whether a future can be acted upon, inhabited, or defended.

A third conversation centers on civic imagination and desirable futures. Civic imagination scholarship argues that political agency depends not only on formal participation but also on the ability to picture alternatives and to see oneself within them (Jenkins et al., 2020). Recent work on desirable futures sharpens this point by insisting that normative futures should be treated as serious analytical objects rather than vague moral add-ons (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022, 2024). In this paper, that means desirable futures are not treated as generic optimism. They matter analytically when participants can connect them to concrete pathways, arrangements, or repeated practices that make a different future seem more plausible.

This is why the paper distinguishes between used futures (Inayatullah, 1998) and desirable futures (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022, 2024). Used futures refer to dominant, inherited, or taken-for-granted future narratives that participants perceive as already structuring the present. Desirable futures refer to alternatives they regard as preferable and more worth inhabiting. The distinction is important because it allows the analysis to ask not only what young people criticize, but also whether the futures they prefer remain abstract wishes or become attached to

more specific public conditions. In this sense, the key issue is not whether participants "have hope," but what makes a future socially believable.

Repeated CLA offers a fitting framework for examining this process. Causal Layered Analysis distinguishes among litany, system, worldview, and myth/metaphor; it is designed to move inquiry from surface complaints toward deeper assumptions and symbolic structures (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004). It is especially useful here because the paper concerns how future imaginaries become layered, revised, and, in some cases, made more credible across time. The paper's conceptual claim is therefore modest but clear: youth future imaginaries are not best understood as simple expressions of optimism or pessimism, but as layered anticipations through which participants interpret what is blocked, what is desirable, and what would make a different future believable.

Method and research design

This study adopts a longitudinal qualitative design centered on repeated CLA workshops with young adults in Albania. The design was chosen because the research question concerns not only what participants think about Albania's future at a single point in time, but also how their interpretations, diagnoses, and desirable futures are revised, stabilized, or contested across repeated encounters. Qualitative longitudinal research is particularly appropriate for examining shifts in meaning, hindsight, foresight, and interpretive development rather than for measuring static attitudes (Neale, 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003). In that sense, time was treated as part of the phenomenon under investigation rather than a background condition of the study.

Research setting and participants

The study was conducted in Albania with participants aged 19 to 29, predominantly females enrolled in bachelor's- and master's-level programs at a private university in Tirana (see Table 1 below). This institutional setting provided a practical and analytically coherent site for repeated workshop-based inquiry by

enabling access to a relatively stable participant pool across the three waves of data collection. The design aimed to retain the same participant cohort across the three waves in order to support temporal comparisons. Of the 28 participants attending Wave 1, 25 returned in Wave 2 and 27 in Wave 3, with minor variation in attendance due to scheduling and availability. What remained stable was the panel logic of repeated engagement with the same pool of institutional participants.

Each workshop involved approximately 25 to 28 participants. For the CLA exercises, participants were divided into six smaller groups, with roughly four to five participants each. Group composition remained relatively stable across waves in order to support continuity of discussion, with minor adjustments as attendance varied. This small-group format was methodologically appropriate because it provided participants with enough space to articulate, compare, and contest interpretations while still sustaining interaction and collective discussion (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Morgan, 1997). That interactional quality was central to the present study, since the objective was to observe how future imaginaries were collectively produced, not only privately held.

Table 1 *Descriptive statistics of participants across three waves of workshops*

Wave	Participants	Groups	Approx. group size	Educational level	Females	Males
Wave 1	28	6	4-5	BA/MA	21	7
Wave 2	25	6	4-5	BA/MA	20	5
Wave 3	27	6	4-5	BA/MA	20	7

Sampling strategy

Sampling was purposive and criterion-based. Participants were included on the basis of three criteria: they had to be between the ages of 19 and 29, enrolled in bachelor's or master's programs at the selected university, and available to participate

in repeated workshop sessions throughout the study period. The value of this sampling lies in its capacity to generate information-rich material rather than to mirror a wider population numerically (Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014).

More specifically, the study relied on a bounded purposive panel. It was bounded because all participants came from one private university in Tirana; purposive because they were selected as relevant cases for examining youth future imaginaries; and panel-based because the same broad participant pool was followed across three waves, aligning with qualitative longitudinal designs that aim to capture continuity, revision, and process over time rather than isolated snapshots of opinion (Neale, 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003).

At the same time, because participants were students at a single private university in the capital city, the findings should not be generalized to all youth in Albania, to non-student youth, or to rural youth populations. The strength of the sample lies in repeated access to a relatively coherent cohort of young adults capable of sustained reflection on Albania's path to Europe and on alternative futures for that path.

Workshop design and procedure

The empirical core of the study consisted of three repeated CLA workshops conducted over approximately three months. Each workshop lasted between 2.5 and 3 hours. The use of repeated workshops followed the logic of qualitative longitudinal research: the objective was not simply to gather views once, but to observe whether and how participants' future-oriented narratives changed, deepened, or were reformulated across waves (Neale, 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Causal Layered Analysis was used as the principal elicitation method because it is specifically designed to move inquiry beyond surface-level descriptions toward deeper assumptions, structures, and symbolic framings of the future (Inayatullah, 1998). It distinguishes among four layers: (1) *litany*, (2) *social/systemic causes*, (3) *worldview/discourse*, and (4) *myth/metaphor*. In the present study, its value lay in enabling participants to move

from immediate concerns about Albania's trajectory to deeper narratives about institutions, Europe, agency, belonging, and desirable alternatives. In this sense, CLA was not used as a forecasting tool, but as a structured method for opening up and interrogating multiple layers of future-oriented meaning (Inayatullah, 1998).

In each workshop, participants received CLA templates and completed two related tasks. First, they were asked to describe Albania's path to Europe in the present, framed as the "used future" (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004). Second, they were asked to imagine alternative futures for that path, framed as the "desirable future" (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022, 2024). This dual structure was analytically important because it enabled comparison of dominant, taken-for-granted future narratives with alternative futures that participants regarded as more desirable or more just. The workshop sequence also resonates with the broader tradition of future workshops, which move participants from a critique of present conditions toward articulating alternative possibilities and the conditions for their realization (Jungk & Müllert, 1987).

Participants first worked in small groups to discuss and complete the CLA templates. They were given time to prepare their layered analyses before presenting them to the rest of the workshop. The presentation stage was followed by comments, questions, and open discussion among the wider participant pool. The facilitator guided the discussion through the four CLA levels by prompting participants to move from surface-level concerns to systemic causes, deeper assumptions, and metaphorical framings, while allowing for disagreement, reformulation, and cross-group comparison. This discussion phase was methodologically important because the first version of a group's CLA was not treated as fixed. Instead, interaction with others often led participants to fine-tune, reframe, qualify, or sometimes abandon elements of their earlier formulations of both the used future and the desirable future. One of the strengths of group discussion methods is that data emerge not only from initial responses but from the social process through which participants compare perspectives, negotiate meanings, and revise positions in relation to others (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995; Morgan, 1997).

Analytical strategy

The analysis combined repeated CLA with inductive qualitative coding. First, as shown in Table 2, workshop materials were examined layer by layer using the CLA framework: litany, systemic causes, worldview, and myth/metaphor. This approach allowed the study to distinguish between surface complaints, structural diagnoses, deeper interpretive assumptions, and the symbolic images through which participants condensed their understandings of Albania's future. Second, the material was coded inductively using a Gioia-style progression from first-order terms that were close to participants' language to more abstract second-order themes and aggregate patterns (Gioia et al., 2013). This combination was appropriate because CLA provided a layered architecture of interpretation, while the Gioia approach offered a clear procedure for transitioning from participant-centered language to analytically more general themes.

Third, the coded material was compared across the three waves. The study treated "movement" not as a simple shift from pessimism to optimism, but as a temporal and interpretive phenomenon. Movement referred to changes in the depth of diagnosis, the specificity of desirable futures, the transformation of metaphors, and the extent to which participants linked desirable futures to more concrete institutional or collective conditions. This temporal orientation aligns with process-sensitive qualitative research, which treats unfolding interpretations and changing meaning structures as analytically significant rather than as methodological noise (Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013; Neale, 2021).

The study did not assume that all participants moved in a single direction or that the material would resolve into clean, mutually exclusive trajectories. On the contrary, overlap, contradiction, hesitation, and reformulation were treated as meaningful features of the data. This analytical restraint is important because repeated workshop designs can reveal not only consolidation and clarification but also drift, fragmentation, and unresolved tension. The aim, therefore, was not to impose stable typologies but to reconstruct recurrent patterns in how future imaginaries were articulated and reworked over time.

Gioia coding structure

To organize the repeated workshop material, the analysis transitioned from first-order expressions and metaphors to second-order themes and three higher-order patterns (see Table 3 in Findings). These patterns are best understood as heuristic devices for presenting the data rather than as exhaustive or mutually exclusive classifications. They emerged through repeated comparison across CLA layers, across the used and desirable futures, and across the three workshop waves.

Table 2 *CLA results in the three waves*

CLA level	Wave 1
Litany	"Everything feels unstable. Prices keep rising, salaries stay low, and then of course people start thinking about visas and leaving." "There is always noise online, reactions, comments, debates, but in real life, nothing much changes." "People do care about problems here, but that care stays scattered. It does not easily become organized action."
System	"The problem is not only low salaries. It is that there are too few credible paths to build a stable life here." "It is easy to speak, post, and react, but there is no real mechanism that carries those reactions into institutions or decisions." "People care, but participation stays fragmented because there is no continuity, no follow-up, and no structure that keeps collective action going."
Worldview	"You end up thinking, first, I need to secure myself. After that, maybe I can think about society." "Online, you can feel visible, but visibility is not the same thing as influence." "People do care about problems here, but that care stays scattered. It does not easily become organized action."
Myth / Metaphor	"Sometimes Albania feels less like a place to build a future and more like a station people are passing through." "It feels like we have a microphone, but it is not connected to anything." "A better future is not a slogan. It is something practical, like a bridge that is actually finished and usable."

CLA level	Wave 2
Litany	"Before talking about changing Albania, most people first want to know whether they can get a job and live normally." "We can explain the problems very clearly. That is not the issue. The issue is that explaining them does not seem to lead anywhere." "When even one small action works, it changes how people think. They start believing that not everything is pointless."
System	"Big change sounds good, but when you do not know how to support yourself, work becomes the main issue." "What gets rewarded online is speed and performance, not patient work or long-term organizing." "Everything online moves fast, but institutions answer slowly, if they answer at all."
Worldview	"It is not that young people do not care. It is just that insecurity pushes them to focus on their own survival first." "We can explain the problems very clearly. That is not the issue. The issue is that explaining them does not seem to lead anywhere." "When even one small action works, it changes how people think. They start believing that not everything is pointless."
Myth / Metaphor	"For many people, the future looks like a one-way ticket. You leave first, and then maybe later you think about whether coming back is even possible." "Some things explode online for one moment, everyone reacts, and then it all disappears." "We do not need more stages where people perform. We need spaces where people actually meet and shape things together."

CLA level	Wave 3
Litany	"Sometimes when someone says they want to stay here, it sounds almost unrealistic, like they are ignoring what is happening around them." "Young people are often invited to speak once, but not really included in an ongoing process." "Maybe we cannot fix the whole country at once, but we could perhaps make one place work better."
System	"It is not that we cannot speak. We can. The problem is there is no clear link between speaking and being heard where decisions are made." "Even a small response matters. If institutions show they listened, people take participation more seriously." "If people speak and nothing comes back, after a while, participation starts feeling fake."
Worldview	"It is not that we cannot speak. We can. The problem is there is no clear link between speaking and being heard where decisions are made." "Maybe we cannot fix the whole country at once, but we could perhaps make one place work better." "The future should feel open, like a place where people can enter, contribute, and stay involved."
Myth / Metaphor	"You keep trying, studying, working, pushing, but it still feels like you are running without moving forward." "It is like sending messages again and again, and your message is left on seen." "A believable future feels more like a garden that people keep taking care of together."

Research quality and trustworthiness

Rigor in this study was pursued through methodological congruence, temporal transparency, and interpretive traceability rather than checklist logic alone. Methodological congruence was achieved by aligning the research question with a repeated workshop design that captured change in future-oriented meaning-making. Temporal transparency was maintained by organizing the material wave by wave and by comparing the same broad participant pool across repeated sessions. Interpretive traceability was strengthened by transitioning systematically from CLA layers to inductive coding categories and by preserving links between emerging interpretations and the underlying workshop material.

The study also followed contemporary qualitative guidance that treats reflexivity, analytic transparency, and clarity of reporting as central to research quality (Braun et al., 2019; Byrne, 2022; O'Brien et al., 2014; Tracy, 2010). Because CLA and metaphor analysis can invite over-interpretation, particular care was taken to ground claims in repeated patterns across groups and waves rather than in isolated striking formulations. In this sense, trustworthiness was pursued through careful documentation, iterative comparison, and explicit attention to the sample's limits and the scope of the claims (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethics

Participation in the workshops was voluntary. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and workshop materials were anonymized during transcription and analysis. Given that the discussions addressed politically and socially sensitive issues, identifying details were removed from the reported material to protect participant confidentiality. This approach is consistent with qualitative reporting standards that emphasize transparent attention to participant protection, context, and the ethical handling of qualitative materials (Levitt et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2014).

Findings

The repeated CLA workshops did not yield three fixed or mutually exclusive types of participants. Instead, they revealed three recurring patterns in how future imaginaries were organized, discussed, and revised across the three waves. These patterns emerged through comparisons across the four CLA layers, the distinction between used and desirable futures, and the temporal sequence of the workshops. Some groups combined elements of more than one pattern, and some discussions remained contradictory or unresolved. For example, the same discussion could frame exit as the most rational response to insecurity while also expressing a desire for more continuous local participation, suggesting that security-first reasoning and cultivation-oriented futures sometimes coexisted rather than neatly replacing one another.

Three patterns were especially salient. The first pattern organized the future around insecurity, precarity, and the rationality of exit. The second centered on expressive critique and the frustration of speaking without consequence. The third rescaled the future toward local repair, continuity, and more inhabitable forms of participation. What changed most across the three waves was the depth and specificity with which participants linked complaints to structures, institutions, and possible conditions of change. This general movement from diffuse frustration toward more articulated diagnoses and more concrete desirable futures is already built into the study's repeated CLA design and Gioia coding approach (see Table 3 below).

Pattern 1: Security, precarity, and exit as a rational horizon

The first pattern framed the future around security, stability, and the growing rationality of leaving the country amid uncertainty. In the early workshops, participants described a present in which instability, low salaries, and rising costs weighed heavily on daily life. Two formulations captured this surface diagnosis directly:

"Everything feels unstable. Prices keep rising, salaries stay low, and then of course people start thinking about visas and leaving."

"Before talking about changing Albania, most people first want to know whether they can get a job and live normally."

These statements showed that, at the level of the litany, the future was primarily experienced as a problem of material insecurity rather than as an arena of public imagination.

Over repeated workshops, this surface frustration deepened into a clearer structural diagnosis. By the second and third waves, employment insecurity was no longer treated solely as a private difficulty; it was increasingly linked to a broader sense that effort, qualifications, and loyalty to place were not reliably rewarded. This is why the prospect of staying began to sound less like commitment and more like risk. As one formulation puts it, "*Sometimes when someone says they want to stay here, it sounds almost unrealistic, like they are ignoring what is happening around them*." The point is not simply that migration appears attractive. It is that local conditions make exit intelligible as a rational response.

This pattern also became clear at the level of worldview. In the earlier wave, the dominant moral logic was strongly individualizing: "*You end up thinking, first, I need to secure myself. After that, maybe I can think about society.*" Yet as discussions repeated, that stance was interpreted less as selfishness and more as a social effect of prolonged insecurity. Participants increasingly recognized that insecurity pushes broader commitments into the background. One group suggested:

"It is not that young people do not care. It is just that insecurity pushes them to focus on their own survival first."

What began as a private ethic of self-protection evolved into a broader diagnosis of how precarious conditions reshape citizenship and narrow the horizon of public action.

The metaphorical layer condensed this pattern in especially powerful ways. Albania was imagined as "*a station people are passing through*," while effort felt like "*running without moving for-*

ward." Another image captured that frustration more bluntly: "*You keep trying, studying, working, pushing, but it still feels like you are running without moving forward.*" The train station, the one-way ticket, and the treadmill all pointed toward the same vision of the future: motion without settlement, aspiration lacking credible arrival, and belonging deprived of security.

At the level of desirable futures, however, the repeated design also showed a modest but important shift. Participants did not simply say that people should stop leaving. Instead, desirable futures became more specific when tied to concrete public conditions. Rather than abstract wishes for dignity or hope, groups increasingly pointed toward fairer access to work, more reliable opportunity structures, and a social setting in which staying would no longer require sacrificing one's future. In that sense, the main movement in this pattern was not from wanting to leave toward wanting to stay, but from a relatively thin account of migration as necessity toward a more developed interpretation of exit as a socially produced script and of staying as something that would require credible institutional and economic support.

Table 3 *Quotations supporting the interpretation*

Aggregate dimension	Second-order theme	First-order concept	Supporting quotes
Exit-rational agency	Security-first pragmatism	**Instability, cost, visa/salary horizons**	Everything feels unstable. Prices keep rising, salaries stay low, and then of course people start thinking about visas and leaving."
		Employment remains the practical horizon	"Before talking about changing Albania, most people first want to know whether they can get a job and live normally."
		Staying sounds naïve	"Sometimes when someone says they want to stay here, it sounds almost unrealistic, like they are ignoring what is happening around them."
	Survivalist individualism under constraint	**Take care of yourself first**	"You end up thinking, first, I need to secure myself. After that, maybe I can think about society."
		Employment outranks transformation	"Big change sounds good, but when you do not know how to support yourself, work becomes the main issue."
		Security logic is politically consequential	"It is not that young people do not care. It is just that insecurity pushes them to focus on their own survival first."

Exit-rational agency	Exit as a collective script	**Train station**	"Sometimes Albania feels less like a place to build a future and more like a station people are passing through."
		One-way ticket	"For many people, the future looks like a one-way ticket. You leave first, and then maybe later you think about whether coming back is even possible."
		Treadmill	"You keep trying, studying, working, pushing, but it still feels like you are running without moving forward."
Blocked circulation	Expressive visibility without efficacy	**Lots of online talk, little real-world change**	"There is always noise online, reactions, comments, debates, but in real life, nothing much changes."
		Politically articulate but ineffective	"We can explain the problems very clearly. That is not the issue. The issue is that explaining them does not seem to lead anywhere."
		Visibility mistaken for influence	"Online, you can feel visible, but visibility is not the same thing as influence."
	Digital-civic disjuncture	**Platforms reward performance, not durable organizing**	"What gets rewarded online is speed and performance, not patient work or long-term organizing."

Blocked circulation	Digital-civic disjuncture	**Speed clashes with duration**	"Everything online moves fast, but institutions answer slowly, if they answer at all."
		Missing links to institutions	"It is not that we cannot speak. We can. The problem is there is no clear link between speaking and being heard where decisions are made."
	Disconnected expression	**Microphone with no cable**	"It feels like we have a microphone, but it is not connected to anything."
		Fireworks in the dark	"Some things explode online for one moment, everyone reacts, and then it all disappears."
		Phone with no signal	"It is like sending messages again and again, and your message is left on seen."
Cultivation and rescaling	Localized collective repair	**Concern is real, but organization is weak**	"People do care about problems here, but that care stays scattered. It does not easily become organized action."
		Small collective actions begin to matter	"When even one small action works, it changes how people think. They start believing that not everything is pointless."
		Rescaling agency locally	"Maybe we cannot fix the whole country at once, but maybe we can make one place work better."

Cultivation and rescaling	Institutionalized local participation	**Participation should be continuous**	"Young people are often invited to speak once, but not really included in an ongoing process."
		Institutions should respond visibly	"Even a small response matters. If institutions show they listened, people take participation more seriously."
		Feedback loops matter	"If people speak and nothing comes back, after a while, participation starts feeling fake."
	Inhabitation, repair, and shared cultivation	**Completed bridge**	"A better future is not a slogan. It is something practical, like a bridge that is actually finished and usable."
		Open house	"The future should feel open, like a place where people can enter, contribute, and stay involved."
		Square instead of stage	"We do not need more stages where people perform. We need spaces where people actually meet and shape things together."
		Watered garden	"A believable future feels more like a garden that people keep taking care of together."

Pattern 2: Expressive critique and blocked civic circulation

The second pattern began with visibility and critique, but across the workshops, it increasingly revealed the limits of expression when no durable channel links speech to response. In the first wave, participants described a public world saturated with online commentary but thin in visible consequences. One of the groups formulated this bluntly:

> *"There is always noise online, reactions, comments, debates, but in real life, nothing much changes."*

At this level, the problem was not silence. It was a mismatch between the abundance of expression and the weakness of impact.

By the second wave, that frustration became more reflexive. Participants increasingly distinguished between being articulate and being effective. Two quotes captured and sharpened this distinction well:

> *"We can explain the problems very clearly. That is not the issue. The issue is that explaining them does not seem to lead anywhere."*
>
> *"Online, you can feel visible, but visibility is not the same thing as influence."*

Overall, the workshops led participants to separate the sensation of participation from its actual consequences.

At the systems level, the diagnosis became more concrete over time. Participants increasingly identified a structural gap between expression and institutions. Digital environments were seen as rewarding speed, performance, and temporary attention rather than continuity, organization, or uptake. As one group put it, *"What gets rewarded online is speed and performance, not patient work or long-term organizing."* Another group pointed to the temporal mismatch more directly: *"Everything online moves fast, but institutions answer slowly, if they answer at all."* By the later wave, the most pointed diagnosis was that there was no durable link between speech and answerability:

"It is not that we cannot speak. We can. The problem is there is no clear link between speaking and being heard where decisions are made."

This pattern was especially vivid at the metaphorical layer. Participants repeatedly returned to images of disconnection:

"It feels like we have a microphone, but it is not connected to anything"; "Some things explode online for one moment, everyone reacts, and then it all disappears"; and *"It is like sending messages again and again, and your message is left on seen."*

These images gave symbolic coherence to what was otherwise expressed as frustration with reactive politics, weak follow-up, and episodic public attention. They show that agency was not absent from participants' imagination, but it was repeatedly blocked from circulating toward consequence.

When participants turned to desirable futures, the shift was not toward abandoning digital tools. Instead, digital media were re-imagined as useful only when connected to institutions, assemblies, follow-up, and continuity. In other words, the desirable future was not less mediated; it was less performative and more infrastructural. Participants increasingly imagined communication channels that would do more than host expression: they would carry demands, generate responses, and support repeated participation over time. The main movement in this pattern was therefore from generalized frustration with online politics toward a more precise diagnosis of blocked civic circulation and a clearer sense of what would be required for expression to become consequential. At the same time, this shift was uneven: some discussions continued to treat digitally mediated expression as largely reactive and politically thin even when participants were invited to imagine more desirable futures.

Pattern 3: Local repair, participation, and inhabitable futures

The third pattern began with recognition that public concern was real, but collective organization was weak. In the first

wave, participants often described a gap between caring about problems and being able to act together in sustained ways. One distinct formulation described this as, "*People do care about problems here, but that care stays scattered. It does not easily become organized action.*" This is important because it shifts the issue away from the lazy claim that youth are indifferent. The problem, in this pattern, was not the absence of concern but the weakness of the forms through which concern could become a durable collective practice.

Across the repeated workshops, this pattern became less rhetorical and more grounded. By the second wave, participants began to speak more seriously about the value of small-scale collective action. One of the clearest formulations was: "*When even one small action works, it changes how people think. They start believing that not everything is pointless.*" This statement shows a change in scale. By this wave, the future was no longer judged only against the standard of dramatic national transformation; smaller actions began to matter because they altered what seemed believable to participants.

At the systems level, this movement was tied to continuity, responsiveness, and institutional follow-through. Participants increasingly argued that participation could not remain an occasional event. "*Young people are often invited to speak once, but not really included in an ongoing process,*" one group stated. Another pushed the point further: "*Even a small response matters. If institutions show they listened, people take participation more seriously.*" A third made the mechanism explicit: "*If people speak and nothing comes back, after a while participation starts feeling fake*." These statements suggest that trust was not imagined as a moral value that could simply be asked of citizens but was increasingly understood as conditional upon visible response, repetition, and feedback loops.

The worldview shift in this pattern was equally important. Participants began to rescale the future toward places, practices, and institutions that felt more inhabitable. Instead of imagining politics only at the level of sweeping national repair, some groups increasingly framed meaningful action in smaller but more credi-

ble terms: "*Maybe we cannot fix the whole country at once, but we could perhaps make one place work better*." This meant loosening the expectation that futures are meaningful only if they are total, dramatic, and immediate.

The metaphorical layer made this shift especially visible. Earlier imagery suggested incompletion and neglect: the cracked wall, the half-built bridge, the dry garden. In the desirable-future discussions, these images were reworked into more habitable symbols of shared maintenance and collective life:

> *"A better future is ... something practical, like a bridge that is actually finished and usable." "The future should feel open, like a place where people can enter, contribute, and stay involved." "We do not need more stages where people perform. We need spaces where people actually meet and shape things together." "A believable future feels more like a garden that people keep taking care of together."*

These metaphors point to a future imagined less as spectacle and more as continuity, shared labor, and public inhabitation.

The main movement in this third pattern was therefore not, in any simple sense, from frustration to optimism. Frustration and distrust remained, but desirable futures became more credible when imagined as local, continuous, and maintainable rather than as grand declarations detached from everyday institutional life. In that sense, the repeated workshops made visible a rescaling of political imagination: from abstract transformation toward more grounded, more participatory, and more livable forms of collective future-making. This rescaling, however, was not total; some discussions continued to return to national blockage and institutional distrust, which suggests that local repair emerged less as a full resolution than as a more credible scale of action under constrained conditions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper contributes to four connected conversations by showing what becomes visible when future imaginaries are revisited through repeated Causal Layered Analysis (CLA). Across

three waves of workshops, the analysis revealed not simply dissatisfaction with the present, but patterned differences in how participants interpreted blockage, articulated desirable futures, and judged their believability. The main contribution is therefore not that young people can imagine alternatives, but that repeated CLA shows whether such alternatives remain diffuse and expressive or become more socially specified and credible over time.

First, the paper contributes to the literature on imaginaries and expectations. Research on sociotechnical imaginaries and expectations has shown that futures shape present action by organizing what actors see as possible, desirable, or inevitable (Brown & Michael, 2003; Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). This paper extends that insight by shifting attention from elite and policy settings to youth discussions in an everyday educational context. It also shows that imaginaries should be studied not only in terms of content, but also in terms of temporal revision. Across the workshops, used futures shifted, in some cases, from broad narratives of instability and stagnation toward clearer diagnoses of structural blockage and absent response.

Second, the paper contributes to works on projectivity, the capacity to aspire, and youth agency. Rather than treating agency as optimism, resilience, or participation alone, the findings suggest that agency depends on whether a future can still be seen as worth investing in (Appadurai, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2020; Mische, 2009). In the first pattern, agency narrowed amid insecurity and became oriented toward exit. In the second, agency remained expressive but was experienced as blocked in its movement toward institutions. In the third, agency was rescaled toward smaller, more maintainable forms of collective repair. The contribution here is to show that youth agency is best understood as a future-oriented relation to credibility.

Third, the paper contributes to the literature on desirable futures. Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022, 2024) argue that desirable futures should be treated as serious analytical objects rather than vague normative aspirations. This study supports that claim but adds that desirability is most analytically useful when studied alongside used futures and across time. Desirable futures mat-

tered in this dataset not because they were more positive, but because they revealed the conditions under which participants judged a future believable. Here, desirable futures became more credible when attached to fairer opportunities, visible response, continuity in participation, and more inhabitable forms of collective life.

Fourth, the paper contributes methodologically to CLA and qualitative futures research. Causal Layered Analysis is valuable because it shifts analysis from surface-level complaints to deeper structures, worldviews, and metaphors (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004). This paper shows the added value of repeating CLA rather than using it once. Repetition made it possible to observe whether concerns remained at the level of the litany, deepened into a systemic diagnosis, or were reworked into more concrete desirable futures. In this sense, repeated CLA works not only as a layered elicitation tool, but also as a temporal interpretive method, bringing futures research into closer dialogue with qualitative longitudinal inquiry (Neale, 2021; Thomson & Holland, 2003).

Taken together, these contributions suggest that the central distinction in this study was not between hopeful and hopeless participants, but between futures that remained expressive and futures that became believable. At the same time, the contribution should be read within the limits of a bounded sample of students at one private university in Tirana. The participant pool was student-based, predominantly female, and observed across a relatively short period of approximately three months. The paper, therefore, speaks most directly to the temporal deepening of future imaginaries in a specific institutional setting rather than to all youth in Albania. Even so, the paper clearly shows that repeated CLA can reveal not only what young people fear or desire, but also how they distinguish the believable from the merely wished for.

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