



Damaged bunker at the river Valbona - one among many thousand such bunkers built during the Hoxha era and spread all over Albania

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Debates About the Communist Past as Personal Feuds: The Long Shadow of the Hoxha Regime in Albania

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More than thirty years after the end of the Hoxha regime, the communist period is still subject of heated public debates in Albania - debates that frequently degenerate into personal attacks and insults. The article traces the origins of the strong polarization in the public discourse to the communist repressive tool of 'family liability' and to an insufficient and heavily instrumentalized post-communist process of transitional justice.

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Debates About the Communist Past as Personal Feuds: The Long Shadow of the Hoxha Regime in Albania

In April 2019, a book published by the [Albanian Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences \(ISKK\)](#) about crimes committed by communist partisans during the Second World War, sparking extremely charged debates that descended into personal insults, accusations and threats.^[1] Spartak Braho, a member of parliament for the ex-communist Socialist Party (SP) [denounced](#) the work of the Institute as poisonous and accused the head of the ISKK, Agron Tufa, of blackening names of the heroes of the anti-fascist resistance, calling for his dismissal. [Tufa rebutted](#) via Facebook, accusing Braho – a judge during the communist era – of having sentenced people to death for political reasons, offering an archival document as evidence. [Braho retorted](#) by expressing amusement at the accusation and calling Tufa scum and a contract killer without evidence. The feud escalated further when other political and public figures chimed in to support Braho. Thus, one member of the SP's "old guard" and reportedly a former member of the medical team surrounding Communist dictator Enver Hoxha, [called the ISKK director a sick mind](#). Likewise, a former ambassador and current professor of sociology and international relations in Tirana, Fatos Tarifa [insulted](#) Tufa by calling him an ignorant peasant, threatening him with the wrath not only of his father and all other still-living partisans, but also their tens of thousands of children. Along the same lines, Agron Duka, a poet known for glorifying the communist dictator, declared war on Tufa, [calling him a fascist and an Islamic fundamentalist](#) and stating that he was now in trouble with the thousands of children and grandchildren of the people he had accused of crimes. Tufa responded to these threats by [filing a defamation suit](#); he also maintained that Braho was responsible for crimes against humanity. In doing so, he was backed by the opposition Democratic Party (DP), for whom this was an opportunity [to rage against the ruling party](#). In reaction, the SP initiated a parliamentary review of the law that regulates the ISKK's work, calling a prohibition on the study of the Second World War altogether.^[2] Public accusations and counteraccusations continued until, on 2 December 2019, Tufa announced that he had sought asylum in Switzerland after receiving death threats. [In an interview in the online journal EXIT](#), he raged against former communists holding leading positions in state and other institutions and against the Socialists, in particular Prime Minister Edi Rama, for turning Albania into a dictatorship. For their part, Braho and his supporters [continued to harshly attack Tufa and his successor](#), the new director of the ISKK, Çelo Hoxha.

This public controversy over how to assess the communist past is symptomatic for such debates in Albania today. Thirty years after its demise, the Hoxha regime still sparks aggressive feud-like polemics among political and intellectual elites. Why is that? In order to provide an answer, we first have to consider the specific historical conditions of Albania under communism, its political background since 1991 and the constellations that emerged in the last decade. Only from such a broad perspective, can one adequately understand the specific phenomena and behaviour under scrutiny. Needless to say, the article does not examine the validity of Tufa's claims about having received death threats, nor the legal charges against his opponents, as this remains the responsibility and competency of judicial organs.

The Communist Dictatorship in Albania and its Impact on the Process of Facing the Past

Until the late 1980s, Albania's communist regime, one of the most repressive, radical and bizarre in Eastern Europe, adhered to Stalinism, class struggle and the claim to totalitarian power.^[3] It used

peculiar and particularly brutal methods of rule and repression, the consequences of which still weigh heavily on Albanian society. Of these, three had had a significant impact on the process of facing the past: first, the division of society, defined by the social-political profile of the family and the subsequent categorisation of people with “bad biographies”; second, the spread of a thinking in categories of ‘friend versus foe’ and a mentality of violence; third, the establishment of a continuous and perfidious system of spying. These methods of repression went far beyond the persecution of political dissidents, violent rhetoric, and surveillance engaged in by other communist countries in the post-Stalin era.

Within the framework of class struggle, the communist regime in Albania proceeded according to the principle of kin/family liability over generations and gave central importance to the concept of biography. For instance, family members of fugitives were usually either imprisoned or forcibly relocated to internment camps or villages with disastrous living and working conditions. They, their relatives and their descendants were stigmatised and discriminated against for life. [People with such a “bad biography”](#) lived in fear of punishment by arbitrary and overly powerful state actors. Provocations, intrigues and harassment by local communists were the rule. Entire families led a life of worry, anxious about how to survive economically – a life in humiliation, employed in physically exhausting and poorly paid positions, systematically discriminated against with regard to access to goods and services (even to basic foodstuffs), denied any kind of recognition and socially excluded and denigrated on a daily basis.^[4]

The repression of individuals with a “bad biography” took place in the context of the regime’s constant agitation against them, which called on people to be vigilant against the “class enemy”. The smallest (supposed) deviance could quickly be branded an ‘enemy act’ that needed to be countered with great severity and eradicated. In addition, the regime fomented a siege mentality and spread a cult of war and weapons. As a result, dichotomous friend-foe thinking and an atmosphere of violence became central features of the political culture.^[5]

Albanians were also forced to live with the paranoia that informers from the much-feared security service, the Sigurimi, were lurking everywhere, behind every door and wall, listening in on every conversation. The Sigurimi’s perfidious methods included blackmailing people with “bad biographies” into spying, provoking targeted victims into making politically incorrect statements and even putting anti-regime statements into their mouths. In addition, the regime fuelled a phenomenon of denunciation letters, which made people afraid of garnering further surveillance from hostile colleagues, neighbours and acquaintances. In addition, people were spied on or reported to the police by those nearest to them, consequently suffering draconian punishments. All this shattered the trust of Albanians in social relations.^[6]

Failed Transitional Justice and the Hijacking and Instrumentalization of Debates

After the March 1992 landslide election victory of the newly formed Democratic Party, which put anti-communism at the heart of its programme or at least its rhetoric, expectations were high for the implementation of a rigorous model of transitional justice in the country. Former political prisoners, who played an important role within the DP, however, could not assert themselves against those who advocated for a milder approach or were simply uninterested in digging deeper into the past due to their own links to the old regime. A more lenient approach was also supported by then DP leader Sali Berisha, who – despite his own former communist party membership – was extremely popular in the country. Under these conditions, only a superficial de-communisation and a pseudo-lustration process took place, which consisted of a chaotic crusade against communist-era symbols, a massive purge of the state

administration (primarily aimed at securing jobs for the DP's own clientele), and showy trials of former communist leaders on petty economic charges.^[7] Only in autumn 1995, after clear signs of decreasing popular support, did the DP government introduce two laws that initially seemed to provide the basis for stronger and more comprehensive measures. Under the auspices of Law no. 8001 "On Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Committed in Albania during Communist Rule for Political, Ideological or Religious Motives (22 September 1995)", 24 former senior communist officials, many of whom were already in jail for financial crimes, were prosecuted and sentenced to prison terms ranging from five years to life. Beyond this, the law remained ineffective. Under the framework of [Law no. 8043 "On the Verification of the Moral Character of Officials and Other Persons Connected with the Defence of the Democratic State \(30 November 1995\)"](#), a lustration body – the "Verification Committee" (Komisioni i verifikimit) – was created. It soon became clear, however, that it only served the DP's political interests in their fight with the opposition. Under the firm control of the government and working in almost complete secrecy, it disqualified numerous SP MPs, including party leader Fatos Nano, from competing in forthcoming elections.^[8]

Public debates about communist-era crimes and repressions were characterized by harsh, inflammatory language and repetitive anti-communist rhetoric, as well as being monopolized by a small number of actors – namely the DP and its leader Sali Berisha. Only former political prisoners, both from within and outside the party, were able to assert some pressure on Berisha, pushing for the implementation of stronger and more comprehensive lustration processes and financial compensation for time spent in jail and in forced labour camps. Overall, the number of individuals who raised their voice in these debates was very small and public attention was limited. The oppositional SP was mainly engaged in escaping prosecution. The intellectual elite was small and often under the control of political parties. Previously anchored in the communist system and often closely interconnected with the communist nomenklatura through family and social relationships, most intellectuals moreover did not have a genuine interest in addressing the wrongs of the past and tried to keep their distance from the subject. In addition, the media landscape was fragile and highly politicised, and civil society was almost non-existent.

In 1996, after an election that [Human Rights Watch \(among others\) deemed effectively fraudulent](#), the ruling DP won an absolute majority. Rejecting the result, the SP boycotted Parliament. Around the same time, several huge financial pyramid schemes that were supported by government officials and initially flourished led about two-thirds of the population to invest their private money.^[9] When the schemes collapsed in early 1997, the country was plunged into civil war-like anarchy. In the south, where the Socialists had their base, army weapon stores were plundered by angry individuals, government opponents and criminals. State order collapsed throughout the country, and thousands of people were killed and wounded. In response to the unrest and under strong international pressure, Berisha called new elections, which the Socialists won in a landslide victory. The DP was furious at their loss, further exacerbating the tense and very fragile situation in the country. In September, an SP MP shot and wounded a major DP figure, Azem Hajdari; roughly a year later, Hajdari was killed by unknown assailants. The Democrats reacted with violent protests during which armed men entered the seat of government.^[10]

Following the SP's 1997 victory, the already limited transitional justice process came to a standstill. Furthermore, some of the main measures were overturned, including the release of all imprisoned former communist officials. Fatos Nano, who had been disqualified under the "Verification Law", became the new prime minister and even received compensation for his imprisonment. Meanwhile, despite angry protests, the compensation process for former communist-era political prisoners came to a halt. Both 1995 laws were effectively dead letters. The state administration underwent a purge, targeting DP

supporters this time, albeit without the pretext of a lustration process. These dramatic events clearly eclipsed any critical debates about communist-era wrongs. The topic was 'addressed' almost exclusively by opposition Democrats from within the framework of their extremely loaded anti-government and anti-Nano rhetoric, as well as their calls to fight the communists and their offspring. Clearly, this narrative was not about debating the past, but fighting in the present.

After 2005, after the Democrats regained power and Nano left the political limelight, a new pair of arch-enemies emerged: Sali Berisha (DP) and Edi Rama, the new leader of the Socialist Party, who, [by his own account](#), had been beaten up by Berisha's men during the 1997 turbulences. The change in government returned transitional justice to the political agenda, but debates remained superficial and limited in content. In 2006, Parliament passed a resolution ["On the Punishment of the Crimes of the Communist Regime in Albania"](#), which would remain largely symbolic with little of its the ambitious programme implemented. Two additional laws, [Law no. 9831 "For the Compensation of Former Politically Prosecuted by Communist Regime \(12 November 2007\)"](#) and [Law no. 10034 "On the Purity of the Figure of High Functionaries of the Public Administration and Elected Persons \(22 December 2008\)"](#), followed. Yet, compensation was only slowly and partially implemented, and the lustration law [was subsequently blocked by the Constitutional Court](#). The Court argued that it could lead to the firing of communist-era judges and prosecutors without needing to provide proof of their guilt. When not politically instrumentalised, debates about the past were generally avoided. An example of this is the 2008 Academy of Sciences publication, *The History of the Albanian People, Vol. 4: The Albanians during the Second World War and Afterwards, 1939–1990*.^[11] This supposedly key publication on twentieth century Albanian history circumvented the word communism in its title, and devoted less than half of the text to the communist period, addressing the system only in a very general and vague manner.

Following its re-election in 2009, the Democrats established the previously mentioned Albanian Institute for the Study of Communist Crimes and Consequences (ISKK) with the help of state funds. The ISKK can be considered an important step in the development of the still nascent field of communist studies in Albania. However, public debates remained characterized by sensationalist and scandal-oriented journalistic pieces, as more substantial debates about communism and transitional justice continued to be eclipsed by the tense political situation. On 21 January 2011, police responded to acts of violence during a demonstration by the oppositional Socialists with gunfire. Four people died. Only pressure from the international community prevented a further escalation.

Bitter controversies also emerged between the DP leadership and former persecuted individuals protesting against delays and reductions to their compensation. After its re-election in 2009, the DP was forced to govern in a coalition with the Socialist Movement for Integration (Lëvizja Socialiste për Integrim, LSI), a SP splinter party founded in 2004. While there is no evidence that this ideologically-odd coalition has influenced the DP's attitude towards dealing with the past, it is safe to assume that it did strengthen those who were sceptical about the party's anti-communism. In September 2012, around twenty former communist-era political prisoners went on a hunger strike. They were heavily criticized and denigrated by Prime Minister Berisha, who called them criminals and alcoholics and claimed they had been paid by the oppositional Socialists. In October, [two of the strikers set themselves on fire](#); only one survived, severely wounded. In 2013, the general elections brought a left-wing SP and LSI coalition to power. Berisha resigned as chairman of the DP, but remained in politics. To this day, he continues to wage a personal war against Edi Rama – mainly via social media.

Intensification and Aggravation of the Debates in the Past Decade

The previous decade has seen an increased political and public engagement with the past. Not only has the SP, in government since 2013, shown a markedly more active approach to tackling the issue, but foreign and international actors – first and foremost the [Konrad Adenauer Foundation](#) (KAS), the [OSCE](#) and a few embassies – have begun to actively support various projects aimed at raising awareness about the Hoxha dictatorship. Civil society initiatives such as the [Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture](#) and the [online archive Kujto](#) (Remember) have also addressed the history of communism more comprehensively. Moreover, the ISKK and the [Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents](#) (AIDSSH), established in 2015, are two state-funded institutions specifically dealing with communist crimes and repressions.

Progress in facing the past is however still slow and remains limited and precarious. The number of domestic actors who genuinely and substantially contribute to the process of examining, evaluating and debating the communist past is still extremely small. They often find themselves in a very difficult situation and are substantially dependent on support from foreign actors such as the KAS or the OSCE. Communist rule in Albania has thus far been approached in a rather unsystematic manner within a chaotic and underfunded research and educational environment.^[12] It seems as if there are no taboos anymore and everything can be said (a precondition for any open and diverse public debate), but this can also backfire, as instances of public downplaying of communist-era crimes, nostalgia for the past, glorification of dictator Enver Hoxha and of the communist partisans are on the rise. Not only are former communists no longer hesitant to talk about their activities under communist rule, but more and more of them appear proudly in the media and lecture the public about it. Attacks against former political prisoners, as well as against actors who work towards raising awareness about communist crimes, have increased, becoming more open and markedly more aggressive.

During its electoral campaign in 2013, the SP for the first time addressed the issue of compensation for former political prisoners of the Hoxha regime and promised a “swift solution”. Following its victory, in 2014 the compensation law was amended to introduce a new categorisation and prioritisation scheme. Further amendments followed in 2017 and 2018, continuing the decade-long process of delays and bureaucracy. The issue subsequently faded more and more into the background as other concerns and government acts received greater attention, including a new law, passed in 2015, that would open up the secret police files and establish an institution, the AIDSSH, to implement the process. Needless to say, due to the enormous impact of the Sigurimi on the lives of large parts of the population, public interest in these documents was high. Yet there was also wide-spread [scepticism about how much was left from the original files](#), given that a supposedly significant number of documents had been destroyed during the transition period. The public also lacked insight in what had happened behind archive walls during this troublesome time. Since its establishment, the AIDSSH has been very active, engaging in various activities, from organising conferences and commemorations to collecting oral accounts and musealizing internment camps. This has sparked criticism as the archive is not spending enough of its limited resources on its core responsibility – to open the files to the public. Further, some have lamented that the AIDSSH has damaged the Archive of the Ministry of Interior by taking control over its documents.^[13]

Another attention-grabbing government act involved the opening of two museum-art installations – [Bunk'Art 1](#) in 2014 and [Bunk'Art 2](#) in 2016 – which intertwine, as one observer notes, “modes of avant-garde political and artistic practices with neoliberal discourses of international tourism”.^[14] Another museum, the [Museum of Secret Surveillance - House of Leaves](#), was opened in 2017. These projects, especially the former, have been criticized for commercialising past tragedies and making them a tourist attraction, instead of coming to terms with them.^[15] Representatives of former persecuted individuals

have also pointed out that during the time these museums were established, actual former sites of notorious communist-era crimes, such as prisons and camps, have further decayed, and the much-needed memorial to the victims of communism in Tirana has remained unrealized. Finally, the government's decision to build a communist era-type bunker for Bunk'Art 2 in the centre of Tirana, in a country with hundreds of thousands of such objects, played into the hands of the opposition as the project was accompanied by mass protests, many of which turned violent.^[16]

The position of the governing Socialists has remained ambiguous and inconsistent, becoming especially problematic after the party's re-election in 2017. Prime Minister Edi Rama, [a former artist who seems to like to cultivate the image of an eccentric](#), has displayed various and contradicting views on the past. In 2017, the SP-dominated parliament commemorated the 70th anniversary of the killing of 15 MPs by the communist regime. Paradoxically, the session was led by the parliamentary speaker, Socialist Gramoz Ruçi, who himself was the last Minister of the Interior under the communist dictatorship and has [been accused by the DP and former persecuted people](#) of being responsible for police violence and the killing of anti-communist protesters during that time.^[17] Prime Minister and SP leader [Rama countered such accusations](#) with the 'argument' that Ruçi was a pure communist, whereas former DP leader Berisha had been a hypocritical anti-communist. In 2018, the [prime minister praised intellectual and politician Mit'hat Frashëri](#), one of the main opponents of the partisan forces during the Second World War, and in 2020, he [raged against a former Socialist MP](#) who had accused two intellectuals prosecuted under communism as foreign agents. Conversely, the SP harshly attacked the ISKK for researching crimes committed by communists during the War, and in October 2020, [voted to limit the Institute's research activity](#) to encompass only the time after November 1944. Earlier that year, Rama also had declared, in response to questions about his father's communist past, that [as a communist, he was "on the right side of history"](#).

Meanwhile, the Democrats' contribution to the debates about the communist past have largely remained superficial in content, polemical in tone and utilitarian in purpose. The DP's main interest continues to lie in personally denigrating opponents with personal or family ties to communism. For example, Berisha regularly refers to his arch-enemy as "Edvin Kristaq Rama" in order to draw attention to his father, a member of the Praesidium of the People's Assembly under communism who reportedly co-signed a death sentence for a poet critical of the regime. The accusation of 'being Kristaq's son', frequently stated in contexts other than those relating to the communist past, follows the communist-era logic of heritable kin/family guilt and only harms the causa of finding justice for the communist wrongs. Moreover, one of Berisha's trademark phrases is that he will do to the socialists what he did to their fathers, or worse, referring to the downfall of the communist regime. He styles thus himself as the conqueror of the communists in 1991 and paints a picture of an ideologically-driven, but simultaneously personalised struggle that has lasted and will last for generations. Despite a tendency on the part of the Democrats to instrumentalise the debates on communism, the party's 2019 decision to relinquish its parliamentary mandates, in a move to bring down the government,^[18] weakened the de-communisation cause. When parliament voted, in October 2020, to prohibit the ISKK from researching communism before 1944, there were no influential actors left to contest it.

Conclusion

In Albania, communist rule has left behind a divided society and many painful memories of severe oppression, discrimination, stigmatisation, humiliation and perfidiousness, as well as a culture of deep distrust, extreme friend-foe thinking and a violence mentality. After the fall of the regime, hopes for justice were sorely dashed. The transitional justice process was politically instrumentalised and

discredited and ultimately failed to bring justice to those who had suffered under the Hoxha regime. Any debates about the communist past were hijacked by the two major political parties who each approached the topic superficially, instrumentalizing it to their own ends. The balance of political power in the last years has tilted in favour of the ex-communist SP, resulting in a situation that seems to fuel aggression on both sides: former communist perpetrators, their accomplices and sympathisers feel emboldened to break with political correctness when commenting on the Hoxha dictatorship and to harshly attack former persecuted individuals and their descendants, who in turn feel deeply frustrated. The tendency of the political class to debate communism by sparking feuds stems from an inherited political culture of dichotomous friend-foe thinking and a desire to exploit the issue in day-to-day politics. This should nonetheless not obscure the fact that, in this small country where 'everyone knows everyone', the peculiar and particularly brutal repression methods and failed *Aufarbeitung* of crimes, injustice and suffering have left behind countless unresolved personal and family conflicts. From this perspective, the feud-like polemics between Braho and Tufa and their respective supporters in 2019 described in the introduction are as much an expression of the deeply polarized political environment and typical debating culture in the country, as they are a reflection of the inextricable problem of addressing the systemic wrongs of the communist regime on the one hand and evaluating individual (wrong)doing in the past on the other. As long as those who, during communism, could claim a 'good biography' – perpetrators and beneficiaries of the regime, and their descendants – do not seriously acknowledge the suffering that was inflicted on those with ostensibly "bad biographies", the fighting between the camps will persist, and public debates are unlikely to move towards more impersonal discussions.

Footnotes

* The author serves as member of the academic committee of the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences (ISKK) in Albania since 2016 and has worked with the Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture (IDMC) in a number of projects. All views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this text belong solely to the author.

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8. See Robert C. Austin and Jonathan Ellison, *Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania*, *East European Politics and Societies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 373-401, 383-391. For an overview of the transitional justice legislation, see: Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture, [\(Non\)Rehabilitation of Former Politically Persecuted in the Process of Transitional Justice \(1991–2018\)](#), Tirana: IDMC, 2019, retrieved 8 April 2021.
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11. Xhelal Gjeçovi (ed.), *Historia e popullit shqiptar. Vol. 4: Shqiptarët gjatë Luftës së Dytë Botërore dhe pas saj 1939–1990*. Tirana: Toena, 2008.
12. Cf. Elidor Mëhilli, *Documents as Weapons: The Uses of a Dictatorship's Archives*, *Contemporary European History* 28, no.1 (2019): 82-95.
13. One of the most outspoken critics has been former director of the Interior Ministry archive Kastriot Dervishi. Dervishi has a huge following on [Facebook, where he posts](#) documents and statements about the communist dictatorship on an almost daily basis.
14. Raino Isto, ["An Itinerary of the Creative Imagination": Bunk'Art and the Politics of Art and Tourism in Remembering Albania's Socialist Past](#), *Cultures of History Forum* (16 May 2017), <https://doi.org/10.25626/0063>.
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17. See also Fadjona Mejdini, [Albania Commemorates Communist Killing of MPs](#), *Balkan Insight* (10 October 2017), retrieved 8 April 2021.
18. See Gjergj Erebara, [Albania Opposition MPs to Quit 'Mafia' Parliament](#), *Balkan Insight* (18 February 2019), retrieved 8 April 2021.



View of one of the most notorious political prisons and forced labour camps in Albania, the Spaç Prison in Mirditë
Photo: Pasztilla aka Attila Terbócs, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons



A public commemoration of the communist partisans in Tirana, November 2017, displaying among others photos of dictator Enver Hoxha and the symbols of the Communist Party
Photo: IDMC



Street exhibition "The Fall of the Dictator" in downtown Tirana, put up by the IDMC in February 2021
Photo: IDMC



Portrait of a communist-era prisoner who suffered for 43 years in prison and internment, exhibited at the Museum of Secret Surveillance House of Leaves

Author: Idrit Idrizi



A heated debate between MPs during a Parliament session in September 2020, Speaker of Parliament Gramoz Ruçi in the background

Photo: Snapshot https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xxkTx_NnRI | Oranews.tv