

Albanian Migration as a Post-Totalitarian Legacy

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The totalitarian regime in Albania was considered as one of the most rigid and isolated in all of Eastern Europe from 1945 to 1991. Starting from 1990 when the system collapsed, Albania has witnessed one of the great migrations of recent times. This Balkan country has experienced the highest level of international migration after the fall of the communist regime compared to other post-communist countries in Eastern Europe. The paper seeks to understand the phenomenon of Albanian emigration (from Albania – not from other parts of the Balkans e.g. Kosovo, Macedonia) as one of the major features of post-totalitarian legacy. The first part of the text provides a brief overview of the Albanian communism system, the second part is an analysis of different waves of Albanian emigration after the collapse of communism, and the third part presents the current situation regarding Albanian migration. The article offers an overview of Albanian post-communist migration and represents a summary of up-to-date knowledge about this phenomenon.

Keywords: Albania, post-communism, migration, asylum seekers

Reaching, never mind crossing, the borders of a country under a totalitarian regime like Albania was, until 1991, the equivalent of a miracle – or a mortal sin. Exit visas were few and far between; those who got them were the lucky ones. The rest of us that is, looked on the ones who got them as a breed apart, something along the lines of extra-terrestrials. We were condemned to speculate endlessly about what lay on the other side of the borders. (...) As the years went by, and Albania's isolation became absolute, the world-beyond-the-borders gradually assumed the status of a separate planet. For some people that planet was paradise, for others it was a place of terror. But for all that, another planet (Kapllani, 2009, p. 3–4).

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Introduction

In 1945 the communist regime was set up by Albanian communists led by Enver Hoxha, who proclaimed Albania a People's Republic. Like other states in Eastern Europe, this communist country was ruled by a monolithic party and its economy was centrally planned. However, Albanian communism in some aspects was unique, incomparable with any of the other communist regimes. From the end of World War II until his death in 1985, Enver Hoxha ruled the country following an isolationist policy. Albania first broke its relations with Yugoslavia (1948), and then with the Soviet Union as well. After that Albania chose China as its new patron; however, this cooperation also did not last long. Eventually, Hoxha introduced a policy of strict autarchy when China decided to suspend aid to Albania in 1978 (Hupchick, 2002, p. 410).

What is more, in contrast to the other Eastern European communist countries Albania did not experience a liberalization period at the end of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time the Albanian regime implemented even more extreme isolationism of the country (Tafili, 2008, p. 2). The Albanian soil then contained 600,000 mushroom shaped concrete bunkers. Freedom of expression was denied and practice of religion was outlawed (1967). Many mosques and churches were destroyed. Anton Logoreci emphasized that "this extinction of religious life exemplified the regime's unwillingness to tolerate the existence of extraneous institutions of any kind, however weak, obedient or subservient they might be" (O'Donnell, 1999, p. 143). In contrast to the other states from Central and Eastern Europe, Albania had no opposition movement – Hoxha was able to remove all his political opponents. It was only in December 1990 that a student movement started.

It has to be highlighted that during the communist period in Albania international migration was strictly restricted. It was illegal and punishable. Emigration was regarded as an act of treason – as article 47 of the Albanian Criminal Code stated that "escape outside the state, as well as refusal to return to the Fatherland by a person who has been sent to serve or has been permitted temporarily to go outside the state" is a crime of treason which is punishable by a minimum sentence of ten years or even death (O'Donnell, 1999, p. 136). It has to be stressed that not only external but also internal movement was controlled (King, 2003, p. 284). All in all, emigration was almost non-existent.

Hoxha died in 1985 and was buried at the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Nation. A red marble slab was placed over his coffin bearing the inscription 'Enver Hoxha 1908–1985'. During the funeral Ramiz Alia declared: "There should be no date of death on this marble stone! It should only have '16 October 1908' on it. There is just one date for Enver Hoxha, his date of birth, and that is how it will always be; there is no death for him. Enver Hoxha is immortal" (Fevziu, 2016, p. 258). In 1992, already after the collapse of communism, Hoxha's remains were transferred to the Tirana municipal cemetery.

As Blendi Fevziu, an Albanian author of Enver Hoxha's biography, wrote "in his 46 years of rule, 5,037 men and 450 women were executed; 16,788 men and 7,367 women were convicted and sentenced to between three and 35 years of imprisonment, terms which were often extended by reconvictions in jail; 70,000 people were interned; and 354 foreign nationals were executed by a firing squad, 95 of whom were Albanians from Kosovo" (Fevziu, 2016, p. 259).

After Hoxha's death in 1985, Ramiz Alia emerged as his successor (Narayan-swamy, 1990, p. 1943). Alia had a similar political experience; however, as a new communist leader he slowly tried to change the system by relaxing long-held restrictions. First of all, he was focused on economic efficiency because especially in this area the new version of communism created by Enver Hoxha was a failure. Albanians were getting poorer and poorer. In 1990 Albania was positioned as the world's thirty-second least developed country, below Lesotho and just above Sri Lanka, with the gross domestic product per capita at about US\$450 (Zickel, Iwaskiw, 1994, p. 103) (see table 1). Indeed, Albania was the poorest country in Europe at that time. As Kosta Barjarba emphasized,

During this period, the Albanian economy was in crisis: inflation hovered around three hundred and fifty percent, and the gross domestic product (GDP) was rapidly decreasing, about fifty percent a year. From 1989 to 1991 exports were reduced from four hundred million US dollars to fifty million US dollars, and the external debt was forty percent of the nation's GDP. These economic difficulties came hand in hand with rapidly increasing unemployment stimulated by interrupted production and job loss for thousands of people in the public sector. Unemployment in rural areas also forced thousands of citizens to move to large cities in search for employment. This economic crisis produced an explosive environment, and made emigration appear to be a healthy alternative to remaining in Albania (Barjarba, 2004, p. 232).

The situation in Albania changed dramatically in 1990 when the communist regime fell and both a political and economic crisis erupted. First, large-scale democratic demonstrations began in Shkoder (January 1990), where people tried to topple down a statue of Stalin. Two weeks later in the capital city of Albania students again gathered in the streets. They fiercely demanded mitigation of repressions and the removal of Hoxha's name from the name of the University (Czekalski, 2013, p. 136; Biberaj, p. 134, Vickers 1997). The culmination of the strike was a protest at the University of Tirana that started in December 1990 and grew to include over 3,000 people. The student protest focused on better living conditions but soon transformed into a broader civic movement that pressed the government to agree to a multiparty system. After meetings with Albanian students, the leader of Party of Labour of Albania, Ramiz Alia, agreed to introduce certain democratic reforms in the country.

During the student strikes a new political power was formed: the Independent Organization of Democratic Students and Young Intellectuals (Czekalski, 2013, p. 137).

Table 1

Key economic indicators in Albania (1990)

Indicators/year	1990
ECONOMY	
GDP per capita (US\$)	842
GDP growth rate (year on year)	-9,6
Value added in agriculture (% of GDP)	36
Value added in manufacturing (% of GDP)	48
Value added in services (% of GDP)	16
PEOPLE	
Total fertility rate	3,6
Under 5 mortality rate	66
Male adult literacy rate	87
Female adult literacy rate	67
Poverty rate (headcount)	20

Source: USAID, *Albania – an Economic Snapshot*, Retrieved from: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/Pnadh669.pdf, p. 1.

At the same time the first independent political party, the Democratic Party (alb. *Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë*), announced its formation (Bogdani, Loughlin, 2007, p. 123). The government decided to legalize it. Following this, other new political parties were established by Albanians.

The symbolic end of the Albanian communist regime were the protesters toppling down the huge statue of Enver Hoxha in the center of Tirana: “Police, some with dogs, at first fired in the air in an attempt to keep thousands of people from a 30-foot-tall bronze statue that dominated Skanderbeg Square in the center of Albania’s capital [...] But then the police began to embrace people in the jubilant pro-democracy protest [...]” (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2002).

The first multi-party election took place in March 1991. The Party of Labour of Albania which had renamed itself as the Socialist Party of Albania (alb. *Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë*), or “Socialists”, won, but the Democrats were able to get the majority of votes in large towns like Tirana, Durres and Shkoder. However, the new communist government lasted only until June 1991 when another string of demonstrations and riots erupted (De Waal, 2005, p. 7). The interim government was formed by the Communists, Democrats and representatives of three smaller political

parties. Eventually, national-wide protests led to a new election in April 1992, in which the anti-Communist and reformist Democratic Party won an overwhelming majority of votes (Bogdani, Loughlin, 2007, p. 124).

Table 2

Parliamentary elections in Albania (1991 and 1992)

	1991		1992	
	Distribution of votes [%]	Distribution of seats	Distribution of votes [%]	Distribution of seats
Party of Labour of Albania / Socialist Party of Albania	56,17	169	25	38
Democratic Party	38,71	75	62,3	92

Source: Author’s own research based on: Albania – Parliamentary Chamber: Kuvendi Popullor,

To summarize, it is fitting to recall the words of Najada Tafili:

Compared to other Eastern European countries such as Poland or Bulgaria, the emerging Albanian political elite, although claiming to fight against communist legacies, was deeply rooted in its communist past. Albania stands somehow alone among former communist nations in its isolation and complete destruction of any dissident or Western-educated group of intellectuals. The group that started the Democratic Party (DP), although claiming that it was against communism and though it gathered support from those social strata that had suffered most under communism, could not be said to have been prepared for the democratic changes of the country. The DP was riding the anticommunist wave although its leaders were educated under communism and to some extent members of the former communist elite. The leader of the party, Sali Berisha, had been the secretary of the Party of Labor for the medical school of the University of Tirana, the only university in the country (Tafili, 2008, p. 4).

The aim of the paper is to understand the phenomenon of Albanian emigration as one of the major features of post-totalitarian legacy. The analysis covers the period from 1991 to 2018. The choice of appropriate research methods should facilitate finding the answer to the posed research problem. Considering the subject of this study, qualitative research seemed necessary while the formulated research topic justifies the application of content analysis. As the last stage of the research process involves conclusions or placing the collected information in a wider context, the case study method has been selected as well.

Albanian emigration phenomenon in the 1990s

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe removed the barriers for people who wished to emigrate. That is why in the 1990s Albania became the world's most dramatic example of mass emigration (King, 2003, p. 283). The collapse of communism in Albania brought tremendous changes – political, socio-cultural and economic. First of all, it has to be emphasized that the Albanian economy was ruined. Massive emigration was accompanied by a chaotic transformation of the economy. Another result of the system collapsing was opening the borders, the way to the whole world. By the end of 1990 passports were made available to ordinary people for the first time since 1945 (Human Rights Watch, 1991, p. 2). Many Albanians decided to leave the country, in most cases for neighboring countries such as Italy and Greece.

Analyzing the Albanian emigration in the 1990's, we can divide this period into several waves of emigration (King, Mai, Dalipaj, 2003; King, 2003; King, 2005; King, Vullnetari, 2003; Pastore 1998; Vullnetari, King, 2011; Vickers, Pettifer, 1997). According to Julie Vullnetari's typology (Vullnetari, 2007): (1) the first wave — the so called "embassy emigration" (July 1990); (2) the second wave – from March to August 1991; (3) the third wave – after 'the pyramid crisis' (1996/1997).

In July 1990 around 5,000 Albanians tried to find a safe place in foreign embassies in Tirana – the capital city of Albania. They entered by force and sought political exile in different embassies of countries like Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom but also China, Algeria and Egypt (Varsori, 2012, p. 623). These people were later called the "embassy people". Soon many of them were granted political asylum and were authorized to leave their country. All in all, the Albanians' dream to see the world was finally becoming fulfilled in 1990.

Albanians were predominantly heading in two directions – to the west in order to reach the Italian soil and to the south to get to Greece. Of the over 5,000 people who are believed to have entered the embassies, more than 3,000 were brought to Italy (Pajo, 2007, p. 14). Many of them decided to use boats to cross the Adriatic sea in order to reach Italian shores. At the same time, other groups of Albanians walked across the mountains in the southern parts of their country towards Greece (Likaj, 2014, p. 146). Only within one night on the last day of 1990, around 3,000 people were reported to have crossed the mountainous border into Greece (Pastore, 1998, p. 2). Another 3,600 fled to this country in February (Human Rights Watch, 1991, p. 3).

It has to be added that in February 1991 thousands of Albanians were prevented by the police from leaving Albania at the port of Durres (Crawford, 1996, p. 339). In February 1991 the Associated Press described a day in Albania:

Albanians crowded on to ships sailing for Italy . . . and police fired over the heads of thousands of others who mobbed Tirana's embassy row seeking exit visas . . . The crowds had gathered outside the French, German, Greek, Polish and Czechoslovak missions, drawn by

rumors of wholesale visa giveaways. Police fired warning shots and doused people with water cannons. Some in the crowd threw rocks at the police. In Durrës . . . thousands of people ignored police warning shots and boarded the 11,000-tonne ship *Tirana*, which they forced to sail for Italy . . . a total of 15 ships headed for Italy, 80 kilometres across the Adriatic Sea, and some carried children without their parents (Pajo, 2007, p. 17).

Overall, between the embassy invasion and February 1991, an estimated 20,000 Albanians left the country.

Another wave of Albanian emigration began in March 1991 when almost 25,000 Albanians took boats and ships and sailed out to arrive at the ports of the southern part of Italy (Brindisi, Bari, Otranto and Monopoli).

Beginning at about 11:30 p.m. on March 8, troops stormed some 1000 refugees perched on the ship the *Partizan* in Durres harbor, Albania's principal port. According to a broadcast heard on Radio Tirana at noon on March 9 but apparently not repeated in subsequent broadcasts, two died and ten were wounded in the attack. The Democratic Party reported that three had been killed, including at least one who was asphyxiated by tear gas. Helsinki Watch's independent investigation confirmed at least two dead and eight wounded. The March 8 assault was the culmination of a week-long flight of some 20,000 refugees to Italy. As noted, the refugees had hijacked every available vessel in Durres, Vlore and Shengjin harbors. Although the *Partizan* proved not to be seaworthy, the refugees refused to leave the ship. Albanian authorities insisted that they vacate the ship (Human Rights Watch, 1991, p. 10–11).

Next, in August 1991, another 20,000 Albanians reached the western port of Durres and the southern port of Vlora in order to flee to Italy. It is calculated that around 20 percent of the Albanian working population decided to leave the country in the mid-1990's (Papathimiou 2012, p. 111). The Albanian government tried to prevent them from emigrating by putting the ports under military control (*Parliamentary Assembly*, 1992).

According to the most careful estimates, during the initial three years of the transition (1990–1993), more than 300,000 Albanians left the country (Pastore, 1998, p. 2; King, Vullnetari, 2009, p. 386). There were two main motivations to fuel Albanian emigration at the beginning of the 90s – the first was economic survival and the second was personal liberation and self-expression (King, 2005, p. 141). According to the 1998 Living Conditions Survey, 30 per cent of Albanians were living below the poverty line (living on less than \$2 per day), and 500,000 were living in extreme poverty (below \$1 per day). Emigration also became a strategy of political resistance against an extremely authoritarian political culture (King, 2005, p. 141). It has to be mentioned that these first waves of emigration were comprised mostly of young males, while migration of women took place on a smaller scale. Many of them emigrated together with their husbands (Papathimiou 2012, p. 111–112).

In 1992 after the victory of the Democratic Party in parliamentary elections and when its leader, Sali Berisha, was elected the president of Albania, the situation in the country began to improve. Berisha was perceived not only in Albania but also abroad as a social and political reformer. Due to Western aid and loans the Albanian economy also started to flourish.

During the period between 1992 and 1996 Albania experienced economic stabilization and emigration took place then at much lower rates than before. Some Albanians even decided to come back and tried to invest in their own country. The other reason for lower emigration rates was also the development of border control. The situation in the country changed dramatically in 1997 when the pyramid-scheme collapsed. Almost half of the Albanian nation invested in those schemes and the World Bank estimated Albanians' lost savings at \$ 1.2 billion, equal to half the country's GDP in 1996 (King, 2003, p. 288). Once again thousands of Albanians emigrated after the first riots erupted (Carletto, Davis, Stampini, Trento, Zezza, 2004, p. 3). In as little as six days in the early spring of 1997, 10,600 Albanians crossed the Adriatic Sea to land on the Italian shore. (King, 2003, p. 288). The government fell and Albania slipped into anarchy. As many as 2 000 people were killed (Jarvis, 1999, p. 1) All in all, the collapse of the pyramid schemes led to the emigration of over 100,000 people.

According to Albanian statistics, between 1989 and 2001 around 700,000 Albanians left the country (INSTAT, 2004, p. 10). This wave of migration was particularly evident among males, whose population dropped over 20 percent. What is more, Albanian migrants were predominantly young and more educated than the overall population of their country of origin (Gedeshi & Jorgoni, 2012, p. 11). Men mostly worked in construction, while women in the domestic sector (Danaj, 2019, p. 141).

After 2001 Albanian migration started to slow down. One of the reasons was the improvement of the socio-economic situation in the country and stabilization. Another reason could be the stronger migration control mechanisms and legalization in Italy and Greece – in the two main destinations of Albanian emigration (Gedeshi & Jorgoni, 2012, p. 7). What is more, since 2001 the form and structure of Albanian migration has been changing – the main feature is feminization. The share of Albanian women among all migrants has increased (Kocaqi, Plaku & Wittberger, 2016, p. 65). According to the statistics, 288,000 men and 285,000 women emigrated during 2001–2011 (Danaj, 2019, p. 144). There are many different reasons why Albanian women decided to emigrate – family unification, economic and educational opportunities (student emigration), and different ways/models of life. Nowadays the average size of a migrant household is 3 people (in most cases: husband, wife and one or two children). Moreover, the majority of migrants speak the language of their destination country fluently or well and they have constantly improved their socio-economic situation (Gedeshi & Jorgoni, 2012, p. 11).

It has to be added that another wave of migration started in 2008 as a result of the financial crisis and economic slowdown. Albanians were once again forced

to look for work outside their own country. On the other hand, the Greek crisis had a huge impact on Albanian migrants living in Greece. Between 2008 and 2012 there was an important wave of returnees (around 180,000 persons according to Albanian institutions' estimations). However, it is not easy to estimate how many of them remained in Albania and how many returned again to Greece (ACIT, 2012, p. 9).

Albania today – shrinking population?

According to the preliminary results of the census, the population of Albania is 2,831,741, or 7.7 per cent less than what it was ten years ago. Analyzing the population census in Albania we can see the differences in numbers between 2001 (3 069 275) and 2011 (2 821 977). Compared to the 2001 census the population has declined by around 8.0 percent (INSTAT, 2013, p. 7). The decrease in the total population revealed by the 2011 census makes the impact of emigration clear: emigration was one of the major reasons for the declining population in Albania between 2001 and 2011. Between 1990 and 2013, roughly 800,000 people migrated out of Albania (Demalija, 2014, p. 4). According to the Albanian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, around 500,000 left for Greece and 200,000 for Italy. Many Albanians chose to live in Germany (12,000), the United States (12,000), the United Kingdom (5,000), Canada (5,000) Belgium (2,500), France (2,000), Turkey (2,000), Austria (1,000), Switzerland (1,000) and Australia (1,460) (Demalija, 2014, p. 4).

Currently, according to the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs data, Albania still has one of the world's highest emigration rates, relative to its population, at -3.3 migrants per 1,000 people, and a total emigrant population of more than 1.25 million in 2014 (Barjaba and Barjaba, 2015). What is more, the main directions of emigration also have not changed since 1990. Most Albanians fled to Italy or Greece. Some of them also decided to emigrate to other Western European countries like Germany, Austria, Great Britain or to the United States. There are still three main pull factors for emigration: 1) lack of employment, 2) better job opportunities, 3) better income prospects (INSTAT and IOM, 2014, p. 36).

From 2014 to 2016 yet another wave of Albanian emigration took place. The majority headed to Germany in order to escape poverty. According to German estimations, in 2015 and in 2016 as many as 68 658 asylum seekers from Albania arrived in Germany (see table 3). Many of them declared themselves as economic asylum seekers and cited unemployment and poverty as reasons for leaving the country. However, economic reasons are not recognized under the 1951 Refugee Convention. In order to prevent Albanians from leaving the country, the German embassy in Tirana decided to launch an ad campaign with the headline "no economic asylum in Germany" (Barjaba and Barjaba, 2015).

Table 3

First-time asylum applications by main origin, 2015 and 2016

	Total 2015 and 2016	2015	2016
Syria	424 907	158 657	266 250
Afghanistan	158 394	31 382	127 012
Iraq	125 900	29 784	96 116
Albania	68 658	53 805	14 853
Kosovo	38 007	33427	4 580
Eritrea	29 730	10 876	18 854
Iran	31 820	5 394	26 426
Pakistan	22 683	8 199	14 484
Serbia	22 735	16 700	6 035
Nigeria	17 916	5 207	12 709
Other	223 519	88 468	135 051
Total	1 164 269	441 899	722 370

Source: *Finding their way. Labour Market Integration of Refugees in Germany*, OECD, March 2017, p. 21.

The United Kingdom is another destination which Albanians want to reach. Many of them are caught trying to illegally enter the country. According to Home Office statistics released to the *Guardian* under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, twice as many Albanians have been caught as stowaways at British ports than any other nationality – some 981 Albanians were discovered trying to enter the country via ports, including Eurostar terminals and airports from 2008 until spring 2016 (Pidd, 2017).

Table 4

Desire to migrate in Southeast European countries

Southeast Europe countries	Desire to migrate, 2013–16	Desire to migrate, 2010–12
Albania	56%	36%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	36%	20%
Moldova	35%	32%
Macedonia	34%	35%
Kosovo	34%	29%

Source: *More than half of Albanians want to emigrate – Gallup*, Retrieved from: <https://seenews.com/news/more-than-half-of-albanians-want-to-emigrate-gallup-571888#sthash.u6dw8qj6.dpuf>

Finally, it has to be also emphasized that according to the latest survey made by the international polling company Gallup (2013–2016), more than half of the Albanian nation (56%) still would like to emigrate (see the table 4) (Mikhaylova, 2017). The main reason why they declare a desire to leave the country is the unemployment rate.

Conclusion

Albania experienced huge population changes after the collapse of communism. Many states perceive Albania as a country of origin for economic migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. The changes that occurred along with the collapse of the communist system strengthened the emigration flow from Albania since the beginning of the 1990s. The result of these different waves of Albanian migration during the last 25 years is that Albanian communities are present in almost every part of the world. Besides Italy and Greece, which were and still are the most popular destinations for the Albanians who choose to leave the country, Albanians can also be found in Western European countries like Germany, Switzerland, Austria, France, UK, and Belgium as well as in the United States and Canada. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Albania (*Ministria e Punëve të Brendshme*) “the Albanian diaspora currently consists of five main groups: i) economic emigrants; ii) family members of economic emigrants; iii) students; iv) asylum-seekers and refugees; v) unaccompanied children. The biggest groups of Diaspora consist of economic emigrants, family members of economic emigrants and students” (Migration Profile, 2016, p. 29).

There are some positive news regarding Albanian migration. According to the research of the Albanian Institute of Statistics (*Instituti i Statistikës*, INSTAT) from January 1st 2017 the Albanian population reached 2.88 million. It was the first increase since 2001; the population increased by one thousand inhabitants compared to the previous year (Population, 2017, p. 1). What is more, the absolute value of net migration has decreased, as a result of the decrease of the number of emigrants, from 41 thousand to 33 thousand, and an increase of the number of immigrants from 21 thousand to 23 thousand during 2015–2016 (Population, 2017, p. 3). In 2018 the number of emigration was 38 703 while immigration – 23 673 (INSTAT, 2018). However, according to the recent study led by Ilir Gedeshi, the Albania’s potential migration had grown from 44 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2018 (Albania migration trends, 2018). The migration trends have changed since more Albanians want to leave their country in order to receive a better education. The economic motives are still the main factor.

With a view to further research on the phenomenon of Albanian emigration, a detailed comparison should be made, including the specific cases of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

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