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**Scientific research in Albanian secret police files, three
decades after the regime's fall. The authenticity of
files facing their believability**

Ardita Repishti

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Special Issue

**Face Up. Faces from the past. The fight
for freedom and democracy in Albania
during the regime of Enver Hoxha**

A cura di / Edited by

Michele Rabà - Gaetano Sabatini

RiMe 14/V n.s. (June 2024)

Special Issue

Face Up. Faces from the past.
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Scientific research in Albanian secret police files, three decades after the regime's fall The authenticity of files facing their believability

Ardita Repishti

(The Albanian Authority on Access
to Information on the Former State Security Service)

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Riassunto

Uno degli aspetti più complicati del rapporto tra la società albanese e il suo passato comunista è il dibattito sulla repressione perpetrata dal regime totalitario tra il 1944 e il 1991. Dopo tre decenni, la società manifesta ancora una sorta di rifiuto a impegnarsi nel dibattito sulla violenza esercitata in più modi contro gli oppositori politici e i loro familiari. Istituita nel 2017 come incentivo per l'adesione dell'Albania all'Unione Europea, la 'Autorità dei Fascicoli' si è impegnata a fornire informazioni credibili, aprendo i fascicoli segreti del Sigurimi e facendo luce sulle sue procedure.

Abstract

One of the most difficult components regarding Albanian society's relationships with its communist past is the debate on repressing features of the totalitarian regime, 1944-1991. After 3 decades the society still manifests some sort of refusal to involve itself in debates on the multi-dimensional violence exercised against political opponents and their family members. Established in 2017 as an incentive for EU membership of Albania, the Authority of Files faced serious challenges in providing believable information by opening the secret files of Sigurimi and shedding light on its procedures.

Parole chiave

Transitional justice; Era comunista; fascicoli segreti; autenticità; credibilità.

Keywords

Transitional Justice; Communist-Era; Secret Files; Authenticity; Believability.

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I.

One of the most difficult components of all hardships regarding Albanian society's relationships with its communist past is the debate on repressing features of the totalitarian regime, 1944-1991.

Three decades after the communist regime fall, Albanian society still manifests some sort of refusal to involve itself in debates on the multi-dimensional violence exercised against political opponents and their family members; about political prisons, about internment/deportation system, people's suffering for generations in such prisons and camps, and the numerous maltreatments they went through.

Most of the Albanian people (living in the country and abroad) are still dealing with the consequences of not addressing issues of the past, also with individual and collective trauma, even generational, neither addressed by the state nor its institutions.

Key transitional justice mechanisms including holding communist-era perpetrators accountable, the rehabilitation and compensation of former victims, and state acknowledgment of past injustices have been incomplete. The voices and interests of victims and their families have often been marginalized.

On the other side, in 30 years the country moved forward, ruled also by individuals with institutional and political power, as legal and social influence, who had meaningful official experiences during the communist regime, and who adopted their competencies to the new democratic era, being always attentive to be part of all the important processes which the post-totalitarian Albania went through.

For a population of almost 3 million in isolated Albania in 1991 - where 34.000 were political prisoners, 59.000 put in concentration or internment camps or places, where forced labor was widely applied, 7.022 were deceased because of the internment conditions; some 6000 persons were estimated to have disappeared at the hands of state or state security officials as a result of (extra-)judicial killings in prisons, internment and labor camps, deaths resulting from hunger, exhaustion and disease, as well as citizens murdered while attempting to flee the country (ICMP 2021), and some thousands of people put in the hospitals for mental health, – dealing with the totalitarian past was yet hazy phenomenon from the historical perspective, also the human rights point of view.

Today, Albanian society and politics continue to be marked by high levels of antagonism and distrust. One of their driving forces is the unaddressed legacies of

the communist past, which permeates civil society and has shaped antagonistic views both on the past and the present.

In this regard, dealing with the past violence from different perspectives, with little predictability and no linearity of society, – including opening the files of the secret political service, – addresses this challenge head-on, trying to reconcile Albanians with their past, as well as among themselves.

The communist past might remain a battlefield for politicians rather than an opportunity for reflection, apologies, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

On the other hand, the legacies of a hurtful past will not disappear magically, they will continue to hunt Albania and pop up in unexpected places and contexts. Thirty years after the end of the old regime, the time appears ripe to address it. In this regard, the files of Sigurimi service have been secret for decades, even some initiatives of independent commissions such 'Mezini' and 'Bezhani', were undertaken during the first years of democracy (1995).

Many officials of the communist regime, well-known and unknown to public opinion went through the *verification process* of the commissions during that period. Others retired from public life before the commission came with a public result of their careers in the Secret Service or its structures. This was a silenced success of the transparency process.

On the other hand, there were important officials of the communist state, involved with Sigurimi, that went through the verification process and resulted "negative". "Certificated" as "pure" of their "past", they had the opportunity to continue their careers in the democratic Albanian society, and in decades, to contribute and to be part of the decisions and reforms made by the Albanian state, in crucial phases of transition.

Lustration was missing from the beginning and no access to Sigurimi files was allowed, except for the members of the commissions.

This led to speculation, myths, blackmail, and deep-rooted social problems.

In 1997, Albania faced difficult times regarding the problems with the post-totalitarian pyramid system. The whole country went on fire, especially the archives, the depositories that hold the data of thousands and thousands of people during the dictatorship or the previous years.

A lot of central and local archives of different typologies went destroyed, vandalized, or reported as such, partially destroyed; so, many files and information on Albanian history and its legacy were considered as turned pages of the "past", closed forever by the chaos and fire.

In 2017, 26 years after communism fall, the Albanian Authority on Access to Information on the former State Security Service was established by the law (No. 45/2015) on the right to information on the files of the former state security services during communist times, to provide access to the files, preserve the records of oppression, to educate the public and future generations, and support the democratic values of justice, truth, reconciliation, transparency, integrity, collaboration, responsibility, and proactive learning.

EU membership of Albania as a candidate in 2014, was an incentive to demonstrate its democratic capacities. The efforts to address human rights violations during communism were intensified. Public debates focused on the current treatment of communist victims, the absence of lustration law, and the publication, in local media, of Sigurimi files on particular individuals, typically by anonymous sources.

Interesting insights into popular perceptions about the communist past were the results of the 2016 survey on 'Citizens' understanding and perceptions of the communist past in Albania and expectations for the future' published by the OSCE (OSCE 2016) before the Authority was established.

The survey concluded that, in general, there was low concern about the communist past in Albanian society; that almost half of the respondents consider the historical role of Enver Hoxha as "positive"; and that the communist past does not rank+ compared to other problems such as corruption, bad governance, economic problems, and impunity. The survey highlighted that even respondents who were persecuted during communism were not significantly more informed about transitional justice measures than non-victims (concretely on the 2015 law *On Opening the Files of Former Secret Service*)¹. The OSCE survey revealed a strong distrust towards dealing with the past processes – an outcome of the failure of the previous 25 years in terms of building trustworthy state institutions and the rule of law (OSCE 2016).

Authority of Files was established in this hazy atmosphere of doubt and mistrust, strongly supported by the Euro-Atlantic institutions, embodying the European Parliament's call to keep alive the memory of the past, since there can be no reconciliation without truth and remembrance; reconfirming Albania's stand against the totalitarian rule of any form or ideological background and respecting

¹ Interesting is that the survey nevertheless showed that 90% of people which had read the 2015 law on Opening Files of former Secret Service in Albania supported it (OSCE 2016).

the European values of human rights and dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, and the rule of law.

As understood, until 2017, the year when the Authority started to work as a collegial institution, scientific research on Sigurimi files was impossible. But the process had to begin, first by opening the secret files.

The suspicions were present because, as mentioned above, many of the officials of the past continued and closed peacefully their careers during democracy, having even important roles in all the democratic processes of the future of the country.

A future held by a present called transition, where the *dialogue* or the *debate* on the past and the fate of the victims, their rehabilitation, integration, and re-narration of the history of the “enemies of people” was systematically postponed, not addressed properly and victims continued to act and to be considered as such.

This victim’s legacy marginalized them during the decades of democracy, without shedding light on the past, with no open information on political prisons and forced labor camps and forced labor work during dictatorship; in a present with almost no chance of finding the remains of their familiars still missing, executed with or without trial, tortured or arrested from the regime...

No information, no evidence, no body, no crime...

I began to work for the Authority of Files in 2018, after years of experience with communication, culture and education in governmental and nongovernmental institutions. It was one year after the institution applied the organic law 45/2015 on the first requests of opening the files from individuals, institutions, researchers and media.

As a public servant, I had to deal with the fatigue of wounded people, and their distrust of institutions of memory, especially the new one, established almost three decades after the fall of the regime.

On the other side, the organic law 45/2015 of Authority, with its need for improvements, had wide international support and it went hand in hand with the internal need of society for transparency and healing. I understood, with my colleagues, that we had a chance to make it right.

There were a lot of files and millions of pages of documents inherited from the former communist regime, even part of them were destroyed at the beginning of ‘90. This considerable amount of archival material provided an excellent opportunity for researchers of different backgrounds to conduct in-depth archival investigations and contribute with evidence to a strengthened public debate on the country's reconciliation process.

Convinced that Albanian society's emancipation can be nurtured only by adopting a bold scientifically objective and empathic approach towards the past, since its first steps, Authority was supported in national and international projects, for different studies on files and personalities persecuted and surveilled.

In this regard, Authority had a meaningful role in the critical debate and memorialization of the communist past, – with a creative mixture of cultural and educational activities, – involving both government counterparts and civil society actors (including Albanian youth, pupils and members of the diaspora) to further dealing with the past, remembrance and accountability.

This had to do with the implementation of an innovative mix of legal, cultural, educational, artistic and psycho-social approaches and instruments:

- 1) realizing victims' rights to justice and rehabilitation,
- 2) promoting a public memory recognizing past injustices,
- 3) engaging new audiences in debates about the communist past and
- 4) educating the next generation.

Scientific research and civic education, – through open communication, publications, and collaborations, thematically and geographically addressed with all the instruments and actors involved, – became the perspectives the Authority routed its challenges of opening the secret files.

Almost three decades after the fall of the regime, Albanian history had been narrated only by particular selective aspects of the oppressive communist experience.

In this regard, the Authority faced the challenges of providing believable information, by opening the secret files of Sigurimi; and then explaining their content; shedding light on the procedures of Sigurimi to surveille and persecute thousands of Albanians, also on the procedures and combinations that perpetrators used to maintain the power and weaken the victims.

Important initiatives of dealing with the past: national projects, scientific conferences, educational and informative exhibitions, and publications on opened files were undertaken, with the expertise and support of international organizations and the Authority's counterparts in ex-communist countries of the Eastern bloc.

Their experiences, challenges, successes, or failures helped Authority in its work with files.

The communication strategy of opening the files, providing their content, information and also demystification of Sigurimi, with exhibitions of authentic

documents, or presentation of informative ones; dedicated events, roundtables; awarded personalities, well-known and unknown from the public opinion for their actions of dissidence during the dictatorship; publications, open meetings, and mobile exhibitions all over the country, escalated slowly and gradually in big public events, always involving central public institutions, local government, NGO's and youth, gaining step by step, considerable impact.

Different publications of Authority, of studies on files and personalities, persecuted and surveilled, in Albanian and English, have been widely delivered and shared, hardcopy and online.

Authority operated always in close collaboration with the media, considered an important actor of transparency and communication, providing access to Sigurimi files, and ridimensioning personalities in the light of new facts.

Gradually, these had been contributions to the transitional justice processes in Albania.

Between them, the project on untold stories of Lushnje, – which started in 2019 with the first collaborations in Lushnje and its 11 villages with interned people: Saver, Gjaze, Plug, Grabian, Gradishte, etc., – based on social engagement, scientific research on the full Tepelena narrative, to continue with the contribution of the files and the pictures of the families of survivors of “Face up...”, EU-funded project, a combined work of different academic institutions and NGOs.

Since March 2022, the Authority on Files has physically assembled all Sigurimi-related files from the Intelligence, the Ministry of Interior and the Labor Party archives in its new building on the premises of the former military aviation school. Currently, Authority it is digitizing these files.

The original stock of the Sigurimi archive consists of some 212'000 paper files, corresponding to some 20 million individual paper documents. The archive also includes '1'600 inventory lists, 8'500 minutes (procès-verbal, paper documents), and approx. 250'00 indexing cards and around 1'400 microfilms (containing approx. 43'000 images)' (Diday 2017). The Sigurimi had classified about 14,000 individuals as employees and collaborators who often spied on relatives and friends (IDMC 2019). Importantly, many of the politically sensitive files were destroyed in the early 1990s.

From time to time, the challenge of openness faced important questions: can the truth be discovered in Sigurimi files? How do you get information about the past and the secret political police?

Do you need to be previously well informed, in order to open, and understand a file written from the “weapon” of the ruling party?

So, are the Sigurimi files authentic? Can you rely on them?

How can be understood and explained what is written in Sigurimi documents, once you read what the secret police of state managed to provide for the “enemies of people”?

II.

The published file of Martin Camaj in 2020, – a well-known Albanologist, poet, and modern novelist, – was a highlight of the work of Authority with files, about their scientific and transparent publication.

The article *Fake myths* was published by a known communicator of *scoops*, history or social activism, using the first page of the file of Martin Camaj, – a page that suggested that Camaj, loved and appreciated by Albanians all over the world, – was a collaborator of Sigurimi.

Only this document of the file of Martin Camaj (92 pages total) was compared with some other information, selected in short sequences from CIA files, to enforce the idea of a guilty personality, finally discovered and put to light for everyone.

This article had an impressive domino effect on Albanian society, intellectuals, linguists, readers, and people who grew up with his poetry and novels. Past and its shadows were present in Albanian daily life and people had to deal with it.

This publication (an inappropriate one, that didn’t respect the rules, nor the declaration of confidentiality of materials) made everyone to pretend an answer from the Authority of Files.

Was it true? Was the document authentic and believable?

Was Martin Camaj a collaborator of Sigurimi, an agent that operated for the Albanian secret service against the people who believed in him, in Albania, Italy, and Germany, where he lived and had an impressive carrier in Albanian language and literature? Did communist power use him, as other Albanians that escape the country, a wise man appreciated by the Albanian diaspora that opposed the dictatorial regime?

10 requests from well-known historians were presented immediately to the Authority of Sigurimi Files, to discover what the file was about. More than 70 articles were shared by Albanian journalists, critics, and historians all over the

world, to discuss the phenomenon of secret files, if he was really a collaborator, and what the files were about.

Once again, the collaborators were in the eye of the cyclone, not the operatives of Sigurimi. The debate continued to distort the guilt, from perpetrators (as persons that obeyed the law) to collaborators (stigmatized).

In this context, the debate of ex-operatives of Sigurimi, who wrote as experts of files and gave their interpretation regarding the document published from the file of Camaj, tried to avoid the real issues of files, addressing collaboration, and not instruments of the system on innocent people that opposed the regime.

Sigurimi “worked” with different typologies of collaborators; most of them under coercion, through pressure on the families of people persecuted and surveilled. So, victims of totalitarianism, – not their perpetrators, – were accused once again, and the debate was once again on ethical opinions and judgments.

Authority had to answer professionally and transparently to the high interest of society, media, and intellectuals on files, serving the truth, and catching the moment for the society to get lessons from a past that didn’t pass.

A roundtable on Martin Camaj was organized, where all the attitudes had to be faced, and discussed. The meeting was held in presence and online, with the participation of his family, of well-known intellectuals in Albania, and his scientific collaborators in Germany, the United States, and Italy. All of them had studied his file and everybody came with different views on it. The truth had so many voices...

It was the first time that the Authority talked about the authenticity of files, facing their believability. It was an important turning point in the work with files and their content.

Incorrect reading of files and their messages can lead to the mistake of blaming the victim again and justifying the actions of the regime as procedures supported by the laws of the time.

This mechanical reading, without background and research on Sigurimi, damages the process of transparency and truth, leading to disinformation, which continues craftily 30 years after the fall of the system, nurturing the old narrative of “enemies of people”.

The roundtable on Camaj, in COVID times, was transmitted live from Albanian public TV and social platforms, with the participation of historians, scientists, journalists, counterpart institutions, Albanian’s Prime Minister, representatives of politically persecuted people, international organizations, youth, and media.

The crystal personality of Martin Camaj, loved by everybody, made together a country and its diaspora on the issues regarding the secret files of Sigurimi. Past and present, hand in hand, had to contribute to a future without fear of guilt and mud.

The same day of the roundtable, for the first time, Authority presented a documentary exhibition with a large number of files of collaborators (protecting personal data), in order to inform people about Sigurimi, shed light on the past, and also to demystify what Sigurimi was described.

Authority could explain what the secret files were about, how they were written, produced, or fabricated, and the way they should be read, – avoiding manipulation and disinformation, – in order to be understood.

As in Camaj's case, the answer on his file and every file similar to his, was not just *yes* or *no*. The file of Martin Camaj was not the file of a collaborator, with its elements of collaboration and being a secret agent. It was a large file of surveillance in Albania, Italy, and Germany, except for the first page.

So, the information and content of the file had to be explained, as the fact that a declaration of collaboration, - with some suspicious elements on the language, sign, and perfect details of composition (that in fact were strongly improved in the last years of the regime), - was part of a file of surveillance, opened in 1948.

All the other pages (90) had information on surveillance and operative techniques how Camaj was followed and provoked worldwide. There were zero data on his activity as a collaborator in Albania, Italy, and Germany.

Sigurimi aimed to create a fake distorted image of him in the Albanian diaspora, and all the action plans and procedures that led to that, also as intimidation and plans of threatening, were documented in his file.

Most of the materials presented at the roundtable from Albanian institutions and researchers, also from German and American ones, soon will be published by Authority, as a contribution of the actions and procedures that the secret police used to create the files of *enemies of the regime*.

My land
When I die, may I turn into grass
On my mountains in spring,
In autumn I will turn to seed.

When I die, may I turn into water,
My misty breath

Will fall onto the meadows as rain.

When I die, may I turn into stone,
On the confines of my land
May I be a landmark.

Martin Camaj, 1962

[Vendit tem, from the volume *Lirika midis dy moteve*, Munich 1967, translated from the Albanian by Robert Elsie and first published in English in *An elusive eagle soars, Anthology of modern Albanian poetry*. London: Forest Books 1993, p. 32]

III.

The second case regarding believability is the file of Mikel Koliqi, a man of religion, which illustrates the history of the communist half-century, mostly as an “oriented history”, neatly inherited from power, that fed opinions and perceptions commanded at the source, escalated them, oriented them and finally used them as facts.

Among the others is the case of Dom Mikel Koliqi, the first Albanian cardinal, appointed by Pope John Paul II in 1994, one of the Catholic priests who had gone through the system of violence in communist Albania. Born in Shkodra in 1902, the vice-bishop Mikel Koliqi was considered by the regime to be “rich, with a high theological education, and the brother of the ‘war criminal’ Ernest Koliqi”².

These would be sufficient to classify him among the “enemies of the people”, and to sentence him to prison and internment, from 1945-1986, accused of being an “agent of the Italians”, along with his brother, Ernest Koliqi, former Minister of Education during the Italian occupation, active in the neighboring country in the activity against the “people’s power” in Albania.

The pre-prepared scenario, which punished Dom Mikel based on superficial opinions and judgments, due to family proximity and without factual evidence, marked the life of an “enemy” for 38 years, in 47 years of totalitarianism. This is one of several thousand stories of persecution that together make the big picture that portrays the totalitarian state and its relationship with the citizens.

² AIDSSH (Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents), F. Operative, D. 5781, According to the file of the Security for Mikel Shahin Koliqi, under surveillance from 1953 to 1988.

In most of the political processes, supported by files with a strong political background, the accusation would also include the connection of the accused with the government or foreign intelligence services. This reinforced not only the “treason against the fatherland” of the accused, but served to convince the people that the individuals who were against the “people’s power” were simultaneously traitors to the fatherland, since only this power could maintain the independence and sovereignty of the state, trampled by the “ruling classes” in the past. Such binomization of the “class enemy” with the “traitor of the fatherland” served the regime to promote the syndrome of fear for the independence threatened by foreign interference and, as a consequence, to convince the people “keep close relations” with the government.

In this context, the 38th year file of Koliqi, one of the thousands of enemies condemned in Lushnje in interment villages, is a collection of opinions, political attitudes and secret police organization against the enemy. It has a strong language of hate, as all the files of the clerics, who were prejudiced by the communist regime.

In the case of Koliqi and other representatives of religion, the questions on their Sigurimi files have to deal with a centered political approach: how can their “documented” opponent’s activity against the state and people be repeatedly condemned, once facts are missing in the files, substituted by opinions and political attitudes? How a new narrative or memory can be rebuilt, if the official documents of surveillance, that led to years of political prison and internment, are prescribed scenarios?

IV.

Anyone who thinks that the Communist regimes are exclusively the work of criminals is overlooking a basic truth: the criminal regimes were made not by criminals, but by enthusiasts convinced...

Milan Kundera, *The unbearable lightness of being*

Missing people during the communist dictatorship and data on their disappearance in Sigurimi files are other cases of *enthusiasts convinced*.

Even though people knew Sigurimi tortured them, data on violence and torture is difficult to find in Sigurimi’s files. Torture couldn’t be documented, (in the

instructions and rule procedures of secret police and surveillance, violence and torture are not mentioned).

When the Party and Sigurimi decided to turn the page, sacrificing high-ranked officials and new people were appointed, they were condemned as enemies, and torture and violence were addressed to their leadership of secret police service or Ministry of Interior. So, reports on violent acts on “enemies of people” in four decades, starting from 1944, can be found in their “testimonies”, part of Sigurimi files.

Also, opponents of the communist regime, former politicians, former State Security Service collaborators, citizens who became part of the list of enemies, fugitives, clerics, former party secretaries, former ministers, artists, journalists, and intellectuals, are found in the official Historical records of the former State Security with a common denominator: victims of totalitarianism. No one could ever be secure.

Behind 19 books, preserved as reports in Sigurimi archives, with important data of violence and acting in secret, for more than four decades stands the story of a society that, through the Historical records of the former State Security Service seems to be a calendar of murders, shootings, eliminations, annihilations, and no fewer prisons and internments.

The secret documents, through the history written by the winners, are now summaries that document their deeds.

Authority reviewed the Historical records of 19 former State Security Service branches of the country, to make up the informative exhibition *Sigurimi in its own words*, where came out that 510 people were killed by the State Security, mentioned by name in the respective historical records and 470 people killed without keeping a record of their names, who are registered next to the others, described as: others.

The research identified persons for whose execution, the State Security Service takes over the authorship, referring to its documentation issued in 1973-1980, as it is already affirmed, “carefully worked and scientifically edited”. The documents covered a wide period, which indicated that the activity of the State Security Service dated back to the Second World War, confirming acts and actions against political opponents, even earlier than the installation of the communist system(!).

Nevertheless, should State Security documents be taken for granted, and should the information of these Official Historical records be considered as complete? Certainly, not!

Historical records, like documents compiled by the Secret Police of the former system, disclose summarized information on a time when the State Security Service was consolidated and intended to present the events from certain perspectives.

According to Official Historical records declassified by the Authority in 2019-2021, State Security assumes the authorship of several events, providing at the same time its point of view on the names involved. The Secret Police admits that they have fought or eliminated in many ways the political opponents, who are referred to by terms like *saboteurs*, *war criminals*, *people's enemies*, *spies*, *bandits*, *kulaks*, etc., in their confronts both had losses. All this is given directly through the evidence of the State Security Service, which provides information on the execution sites, but without giving exact coordinates (!).

A list compiled by the Interior Ministry before the collapse of the communist regime counted 3,031 people killed without trial. The Institute of Former Political Persecuted estimates in its data 106 women executed or died in prison. Family members today can seek clarification of the fate of their relatives, pursuant to the scope of law 45/2015, as amended, for missing persons.

The revision of 19 official historical record books was a beginning of urging academics to open all the documents, to delve into the research in the archives, in order to present all sides of the history, of those judged under communism, tried without trial, dead in the investigation premises and others who still today need to be revealed and get to know their true activity.

The exhibition on Sigurimi and its violence, was opened on the International Day of the Disappeared, aimed to tell the story of the victims of communism, limiting itself to the victims that come out from official historical records, identified – through various names, known or unknown, – the total summarizes the methods of persecution used by the State Security Service over the years, i.e. methods used to capture opponents, from the invention of diseases to the ‘combinations’ accepted by the Security staff themselves, through “legends” that imply the spread of false news, “lightning-like investigations” where are accepted “the traps” “beatings”, therefore shedding light, on the recruitment ways of collaborators done under coercion, through the pressure of the arrest of family members, or looking the child tied upside down in a cell.

The reports did not have their complete story, they were the version written and accepted by State Security Service.

A version *not destroyed*, as other important documents of Sigurimi, that raises many questions about the way the crimes are explained, accepted, and written.

In the documents displayed or cited, the terminology used for political opponents, arrested, or killed, was harsh. They were labeled as *criminals, spies, traitors to the homeland, degenerate, or with low morals*, therefore reading the documentation required very special care and awareness since they contained tough layers of communist ideology.

State Security Service spoke with the language of power, with the political approach of the time when man was important as a living body, easily commanded and manipulated.

Having this important unilateral material, – with reports and information, suggested or fabricated, that had to be considered historically, surely opposed by the different groups of interest on documentary bases, – Authority had to deepen the public debate on files, with authentic files which shared wide information on violence and torture.

The enormous exhibition *Sigurimi in its own words* was presented at the garden of the Prime Minister's office, at the center of Tirana, putting on a crossroad (literally and symbolically) a big problem of post-communist Albanian society, dealing with the past for transparency and truth, using secret materials of archives and files, that had to be compared and verified, in order to be accepted.

This brought once again the past into our present, putting into discussion the documents of Sigurimi and inviting people and researchers to contribute to a new public memory, based on facts, comparison, and exchange of information.

V.

My last months at the Authority were the ones when the controversy surrounding 'I.M.', widely speculated to be former President Ilir Meta, put on the table once again the case of collaborators of Sigurimi.

The Authority on Files informed Albanian Parliament in July of 2022 that a senior official with the initials 'I.M.' had worked as a Sigurimi informer. The I.M. controversy generated considerable political controversy and public debate among ordinary Albanians³.

³ Balkan Insight, "'Secret police informer' claims spark political bust-up in Albania', 2 August 2022, <<https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/02/secret-police-informer-claims-spark->

The Authority on Files, five years after its creation, demonstrated to have a strong impact and it increased capacities to extract information from its archive.

The Sigurimi files were starting to speak back to the Albanian public and its political establishment, raising public awareness about the past.

This situation brought to significant changes and improvements to the law 45/2015 of Authority and the activity of research and education. Art. 36 of the law has been amended in view of civil education and informing the younger generation, now stating that the Authority cooperates with the national museums of memory, making available to the institutions of cultural heritage, the archival documentation that it has and cooperates with them for clarifying the truth of the crimes of communism; and supports the organization of school visits, encouraged and suggested by Ministry of Education, as part of the annual program, to places of memory on historical commemorative days.

On I. M. debate, once again the media pretended short and clear information on the file and documents that proved that the informer I. M. who spied on his university friend was or not the ex-president of Albania, one of the members of the youth movement of December 1990, then head of Socialist Youth, Prime Minister of Albania, Spokesperson of Albanian Parliament, and President of the country. *Yes or no?*

Once again, the authentic files of Sigurimi, although a limited legacy of the secret police, had to pass the test of believability in the era of fast information and social media.

As before, transparency was not enough, research, study, and comparison of documents was needed to have a professional answer, protecting the personal data of the persons involved and respecting human dignity.

In this case, as in others, answers could be found in the authentic documents or in the destroying reports of Sigurimi, reading through the lines or unraveling the elements of oppression and hate that transform a file into an instrument.

The remaining files that the Albanian Authority preserves in its archives are authentic and untouched.

Their content and the information they provide to interested researchers and scholars have to be studied and compared to other documents, testimonies, and witnesses, to understand the mechanisms of totalitarian systems to maintain and inherit power, to control the present and the future.

The research results serve the truth and lead to reflection, integration, apologies, healing, and reconciliation, preventing acts of totalitarianism in the future.

Dealing with the past in Albania means addressing layers upon layers of buried and hidden truths, silences, and traumas.

I left Authority aiming to be a “national memory institute”, which goes beyond managing the Sigurimi archive, but also works on and makes available additional historical sources, including oral testimonies. An institution that would have investigative powers and be able to collect additional information from witnesses and individuals who are identified in the files.

These processes are complex and unpredictable. But they are very necessary to move society forward. Without coming to terms with its communist past, the democratic transition in Albania will remain incomplete.

Formal institutions and rules can be reformed, redesigned, or re-invented to fit international templates of democracy, anti-corruption, and the rule of law. However, the practices and perceptions of both state and society are deeply enmeshed in the past, which informs the present and future. Initiatives to deal with the past in Albania are thus not only an effort to do justice to the past and its victims, but an investment in the country’s political future within Europe.

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Curriculum vitae

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