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Meeting the needs of Hoxha regime survivors: An analysis of the responsiveness of Albania's new democratic system

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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

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Abstract

The fall of the communist regime ushered in a wave of hope and optimism across Albanian society, especially among survivors of labor camps, prisoners, and political detainees. This paper seeks to analyze the strategies adopted to assist and reintegrate these survivors into society, employing the social-ecological systems framework and Transitional Justice theory as its lens. In conclusion, it highlights the necessity of adopting a holistic approach that encompasses legal and policy reforms, alongside addressing social and psychological needs, to facilitate a seamless transition to a democratic society.

Riassunto

Il crollo del regime comunista ha portato un senso di speranza e ottimismo per la società albanese, in particolare per i sopravvissuti ai campi di lavoro, dei prigionieri e degli internati politici. Questo articolo si pone l'obiettivo di esaminare le misure implementate per supportare e integrare i sopravvissuti del regime attraverso la lente dell'approccio dei sistemi socio-ecologici e della teoria della giustizia transizionale. In conclusione esalta l'importanza di un approccio completo che includa misure legali e politiche, nonché supporto delle esigenze sociali e psicologiche, per garantire una transizione di successo verso una società democratica.

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1. Introduction

The period following the Second World War marked the beginning of a highly discussed socio-historical era in the evolution of Albanian society. From the war's conclusion until 1990, Albania found itself governed by one of the most oppressive regimes in its records. The authoritarian regime led by Hoxha was notorious for its brutal treatment of citizens, encompassing women, youths, and the elderly, who frequently faced inhumane practices including violence, imprisonment, exile, torture, and murder.

The transformative winds ushered in by totalitarian regimes across Central and Eastern Europe during the 1980s also challenged the remnants of Albania's dictatorial governance. The advocacy for regime change escalated into widespread popular movements by 1990, demanding a "We love Albania like all of Europe"—a symbolic plea embodying the desire for freedom and future progress. Similar to other nations within the former communist bloc of Central and Eastern Europe, Albania's transition was fraught with complex challenges in democracy consolidation.

Initial development practices predominantly focused on macro-social alterations, such as structural-functional changes within the government and economic systems. However, these approaches largely overlooked micro-level relationships, the reconciliation of past and present, and the rehabilitation of victims of communism. This oversight led to a societal and community milieu characterized more by an interindividual peace than by the collective "amnesia" often linked with peace efforts. The era of pluralist changes witnessed traits of authoritarianism, confusion, and short-term objectives. Instead of prioritizing the construction of a peaceful social fabric, "shock therapy" or "big-bang" models were implemented (Marangos, 2003 e 2004). The essence of the shock therapy model was to embrace neo-liberal economic policies, transitioning from closed to more open economies (Berend - Bugaric, 2015). Nonetheless, studies have shown that this transition model led to substantial economic, political, social, and cultural ramifications, inducing severe social disruptions with enduring consequences for the implementing countries (Pusca, 2007; Alam - Nguyen - Majumdar, 2009).

The transition from communism to democracy in Albania ought to incorporate, among other elements, the political determination to hold accountable those who supported, promoted, and perpetrated crimes under the communist regime. The post-communist transition should extend beyond mere geopolitical reorientation and Westernization of former communist societies, aspiring instead to foster social peace through Transitional Justice. This approach aims to address the legacy of

human rights violations, facilitating efforts to punish, purge, and hold the dictatorial elite accountable. Moreover, it seeks to assist victims in reclaiming their dignity, lost property, and societal status (Jusufi *et al.*, 2021).

Even though three decades have passed since the adoption of the shock therapy model, Albanian society still demonstrates a clear lack of genuine political will to confront past issues in relation to the present. Justice for the victims has often taken various forms, yet the processes have been opaque, characterized by a widespread hesitancy to recognize the importance of transitional justice. This recognition is crucial for creating an environment that supports the recovery of individuals persecuted during the dictatorship era.

This article explores key aspects of post-communist legal changes aimed at positively impacting the rehabilitation process of communism's victims through a Transitional Justice and Ecological System approach. The impact of post-communist developments on rehabilitating victims of communism will be examined from the survivors' perspective. This study endeavors to address the challenges faced by Albanian society in transition, particularly in recognizing, rehabilitating, integrating, and compensating the victims of communism. It aims to explore the impact of perceived interventions on the victims of the dictatorial regime and assess how transitional governments have advanced towards reconciliation with history and among parties.

2. Transitional Justice amidst Shock

Recent studies on the impact of pluralistic developments in countries of the former communist bloc indicate a narrowing gap between the East and West in macro-social indicators such as market dynamics, freedom, rights, gender equality, inclusion, democracy, and social security (Fuchs-Schündeln - Schündeln, 2020). However, the outcomes of transitioning from communism to democracy differ among the nations of Central and Eastern Europe. In these countries, democratic indicators are frequently jeopardized by the authoritarian inclinations of political leaders and the manipulation of democratizing reforms (Berend - Bugaric, 2015).

Similar to other former communist countries, democratization reforms in Albania sought to address the needs of survivors of labor camps, political exiles, and imprisonments, and to reevaluate their denied rights. Nonetheless, Albania's transition during the era of pluralistic developments has resulted in a social environment marked by widespread cultural delays. The initial social changes in

the democratization process primarily catered to the demand for comprehensive reforms in governance, economic systems, and institutional development. These reforms were implemented through radical legal changes and developments.

Sociological studies frequently examine social transformations and their dynamics through the lens of the Cultural Lag theory. This theory suggests that social change is marked by diverging developments between material culture and non-material culture (Ogburn, 1957). The adoption of the shock therapy model in the early stages of Albania's transition towards democracy heightened the risk of disproportionate changes between legal (material) culture and the nation's capacity to effectively tackle inherited issues from the past and forge a conflict-free social environment. Legal changes in Albania often exhibit symptoms of Cultural Lag, failing to meet or satisfy the needs and expectations of the community they intend to serve.

According to data from the Institute for the Integration of the Persecuted since 1993, there are 42,772 individuals[1] identified as political convicts and persecuted. Furthermore, the Institute of Crime Studies and the Consequences of Communism reports 34,135 political prisoners, 59,009 individuals interned in labor camps, 984 Albanians who died in regime prisons, 6,027 individuals executed during the regime, 308 individuals who lost their mental health while imprisoned, and 7,022 individuals who died in labor camps[2].

To address the distorted social relations inherited from the communist era, legislators in the early years of pluralistic changes and subsequently have undertaken dedicated legal measures focusing on the victims of the communist regime. In Albanian society, efforts and legal interventions for the rehabilitation of those persecuted by the regime are organized into four main areas.

First Direction: *Recognition of the Status of Victims of Persecution and Political Punishment.* Following the collapse of communism, Albania gradually integrated into international organizations by ratifying fundamental United Nations documents, including the 1985 "Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" (ratified by Law No. 7727, dated 30.06.1993). According to this United Nations declaration, individuals

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[1]   Insituti për Integrimin e të përndjekurve, Statistika: Instituti Ish të përndjekurit politikë | STATISTIKA (ishperndjekurit.gov.al)

[2]   Insituti për Integrimin e të përndjekurve, Statistika: Instituti Ish të përndjekurit politikë | STATISTIKA (ishperndjekurit.gov.al)

persecuted, convicted, and killed during the communist regime are recognized as victims of crime and abuse of power.

As a testament to the recognition of the victims of communism, the first government formed after the pluralist elections in March 1991 enacted Law No. 7514, dated 30.09.1991, titled "On the Innocence, Amnesty, and Rehabilitation of Ex-Convicts and Politically Persecuted Individuals". This legislation acknowledged the injustices suffered by those persecuted and provided for their rehabilitation and financial compensation. This legal framework marked a significant initial step towards acknowledging the status of victims and facilitating their rehabilitation within Albanian society. (Official Bulletin of the Republic of Albania, No. 7, p. 3233, 1991, subsequently amended by Law No. 7660, dated 14.01.1993, Official Bulletin of the Republic of Albania No. 1, page 11, 1993; further amended by Law No. 7719, dated 8.6.1993, Official Bulletin of the Republic of Albania No. 9, p. 923, 1993).

The initial legal measure acknowledging the illegitimacy of political punishments under the new political framework was Law No. 7514, dated 30.09.1991, titled "On the Innocence, Amnesty, and Rehabilitation of Ex-Convicts and Politically Persecuted" (Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 7, p. 3233, 1991). This law underwent subsequent amendments: Law No. 7660, dated 14.01.1993 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 1, page 11, 1993), and Law No. 7719, dated 8.6.1993 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 9, p. 923, 1993).

Continuing the legal initiatives for ex-convicts and politically persecuted individuals, Law No. 7748, dated 29.07.1993, "On the Status of Ex-Convicts and Politically Persecuted by the Communist System" was enacted.

The essential criteria and conditions for acquiring the status of convicted and politically persecuted individuals, determining their treatment forms, were established by Law No. 7748, dated 29.07.1993 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 10, p. 678, 1993), and later amended by Law No. 8665, dated 18.9.2000 (Official Gazette of the Republic of Albania, No. 31, page 1578, 2000).

A significant milestone was reached in 2007 with the acknowledgment of the disappeared during the communist era and their destinies, marking a crucial contribution to the enactment of the UN International Convention "For the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances" (Law No. 9802, dated 13.9.2007).

The second direction focuses on the rehabilitation and assessment of the status of those persecuted. During a period of rapid political shifts, political parties concurred on recognizing the atrocities committed during the communist era as acts of genocide and crimes against humanity, motivated by political, religious, and ideological grounds (Law 8001, dated 22.09.1995). In the same year, the political resolve to expel former communist regime functionaries from the pluralistic political elite was manifested through the enactment of Law 8043, dated 30.11.1995, "On the Verification of the Backgrounds of Officials and Other Persons Affiliated with the Protection of the Democratic State" (Official Bulletin of the Republic of Albania, No. 26, p. 1139, 1995).

The Albanian transition via shock therapy led to various contradictions within social realities, a phenomenon observed across many nations of the former communist bloc. The resulting unstable, fragile, and perilous social environment compelled individuals to engage in pathological behaviors such as withdrawal, distraction, normalization, corruption, and the creation of illusory perceptions of a new form of social solidarity (Pusca, 2007). In this milieu, dialogue between the past and the future seemed unattainable, as even opposing factions struggled to navigate the tumultuous changes.

Third Direction: Assistance, Compensation, and Reparation for Victims. Since the regime change, successive governments have incorporated into their political agendas the issue of compensating former political prisoners and victims of the communist regime. A comprehensive legal framework has been developed to facilitate compensation for these individuals. Financial compensation has emerged as the most prevalent form of reparation offered by the legislature. Compensation covers a range of injustices, including years spent in imprisonment under unjust sentences, loss of relatives, and loss of property, such as forests, agricultural lands, and meadows. Various laws and bylaws have been implemented to ensure appropriate compensation for the victims, including Law No. 7598 dated 1.9.1992, Decision No. 40 dated 29.1.1993, Decision No. 504 dated 18.10.1993, Law No. 9831 dated 12.11.2007, and Law No. 7699 dated 21.4.1993.

The goal of these legislative and regulatory measures is to provide financial compensation by the Albanian state to the surviving political prisoners of the communist regime, their families, and those interned in labor camps. This effort represents a commitment by the democratic state to acknowledge and address the crimes of the totalitarian communist regime and to improve the lives of the victims. Additionally, certain legal actions have been directed at facilitating the

social integration of the victims, addressing issues such as pensions, education, qualifications, housing, and employment (Decision No. 184, dated 4.5.1994).

The fourth direction entails the establishment of institutions dedicated to researching, documenting, and addressing the crimes of communism to aid in the integration and rehabilitation of the regime's victims. Beyond the national legal framework designed to compensate and support the victims of communism and their families, the Republic of Albania has instituted a legal framework focused on integrating former persecuted individuals, systematically studying the crimes of communism, managing the files of the formerly persecuted, and locating missing persons. Within this legal framework, institutions such as the Institute for the Integration of the Formerly Politically Persecuted (Law No. 8246, dated 1.10.1997), the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences (Law No. 10242, dated 25.2.2010), and the Authority for Access to Information on Former State Security Documents (Law 45/2015) have been established. These entities are tasked with steering Albanian society towards recognizing and addressing human rights abuses and fostering dialogue among groups with a history of antagonism. They serve as platforms for truth-telling and play a crucial role in preventing potential destabilization within society.

The past often appears to be a peripheral concern in the electoral agendas of politicians, and Albanian society continues to face challenges in reconciling with its history. In this context, the legal reforms and actions undertaken to rectify past wrongs underscore the persistent obstacles to Albania's development. Research on transitional societies like Albania highlights the significance of fortifying transitional justice mechanisms. The initiatives undertaken by Albanian legislation and practice in confronting historical injustices resonate with Weber's (2012) notion of trading justice for political stability. These strategies give precedence to the broad and conceptual facets of justice over ensuring "adequate justice" for individual victims.

3. Using Transitional Justice to Transition towards a Social-Ecological System

In the realm of social science and interdisciplinary studies, the concept of social organization is frequently related to an ecological system, wherein social actors engage at various tiers of social systems and subsystems (Colding - Barthel, 2019; Keels, 2022; Neal - Neal, 2013). The relationships within these social-ecological systems are interconnected, with each being directly or indirectly influenced by

social interactions. Such social transformations and transitions exert a profound effect on social-ecological systems, steering groups and societies towards bolstered resilience (Stone-Jovicich *et al.*, 2018).

This study investigates into the application of transitional justice in the shift towards a social-ecological system framework. By acknowledging, rehabilitating, integrating, and compensating victims of environmental injustices, transitional justice plays a pivotal role in enhancing the resilience of social-ecological systems. Furthermore, transitional justice aids in the establishment of institutions and mechanisms dedicated to promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable development, paving the way for a society characterized by greater equity and justice.

As previously emphasized, the regime shift and the radical overhaul of social systems under the shock therapy model in 1990 significantly jeopardized the stability of social-ecological systems within Albanian society. In these challenging times, transitional governments were tasked with prioritizing social sources of renewal and reorganization to preserve the inherent connections among individuals, organizations, agencies, and institutions. Yet, the transition period from communism to democracy, along with subsequent democratic administrations, appears to have marginally addressed the critical reassessment of the roles of victims of communism and their victimizers within a democratic society. Folke et al. (2005) argue that legislation and government policies focused on resolving past conflicts, fostering cooperation, and cultivating a resilient social-ecological system could have turned the crisis into an opportunity to build bridges between previously conflicting communities and groups.

Holling (1973) defines resilience as the capacity of a system to maintain functional relationships despite significant environmental disturbances triggered by external factors. Transitional changes pose a formidable challenge that can destabilize the social fabric; therefore, resilience emerges as a vital attribute that enhances community resilience, safeguarding the social-ecological systems that underpin human relationships (Faulkner *et al.*, 2018).

From this perspective, transitional governments in Albanian society have not significantly contributed as they potentially could have. Their role in facilitating the ecological integration of social relations within a democracy, especially among groups with memories of past communist conflicts, has been limited. In a social-ecological context, the interplay between individuals and their environments should promote healthy and interdependent interactions (Ungar, 2002). Research

underscores the importance of social sources of resilience in navigating crises and reorganizing the social-ecological environment, advocating for adaptive governance that fosters collaborative systems, trust, leadership, appreciation of social capital, and social memory (Folke *et al*., 2005).

A development paradigm that can be adopted to establish social-ecological systems in transitioning societies is Transitional Justice. This approach entails the formulation of comprehensive strategies designed to reconcile the current state of affairs with the legacy of extensive past abuses, ensuring accountability for perpetrators in the pursuit of justice for victims, and fostering reconciliation (Greiff, 2012; Leebaw, 2008; Webber, 2012). Implementing such a strategy demands cross-sectoral and multi-level engagement to cultivate the ecology of social systems.

The processes and mechanisms that support transitional justice are complex. They include criminal prosecutions through human rights trials focused on retributive justice, reparations for victims, and restorative justice. Additionally, they involve amnesties, truth-seeking initiatives, institutional reforms, vetting, and dismissals, or an appropriate mix of these strategies (Yusufi et al., 2021; Olsen et al., 2010). The pursuit of transitional justice is geared towards establishing legal systems of justice that foster trust, reconciliation, and acknowledgment of victims, alongside enhancing public confidence in institutions and their members, thereby contributing to the strengthening of democracy (Greiff, 2012). Transitional governments are tasked with modifying legal frameworks to attain both retrospective and prospective justice, which involves, on one hand, addressing the repercussions of past injustices and, on the other hand, structuring societal relations to ensure fair treatment of all parties moving forward (Webber, 2012).

According to Kim and Sikkink (2010), a critical component of transitional justice processes is the prosecution of human rights violators from authoritarian pasts, coupled with the establishment of truth commissions. This approach aims to set a precedent for punishing future human rights violations by enhancing preventive mechanisms. The shift in political regimes leads societies in transition to inherit conflict-laden relations from their authoritarian predecessors. In these conflicts, states have occasionally utilized their sovereignty to grant amnesty for past crimes. McEvoy and Mallinder (2012) note that amnesty acknowledges the occurrence of a crime but seeks to eliminate the possibility of criminal prosecution in the interest of mercy and as a compromise between former adversaries, thereby preventing the emergence of new conflicts.

From this viewpoint, the political landscape in Albania, and consequently Albanian society, display a unique stance toward transitional justice mechanisms, consistently exhibiting an absence of accountability and political will among citizens to undertake decisive actions in this regard (Stasa, 2021). Initiatives in this domain appear sporadic and fragmented, lacking the comprehensive approach needed for a thorough "repair" of past relations. Transitional justice strategies often emerge as part of control and obligation frameworks dictated by membership in international organizations, rather than as a result of a genuine internal demand and willingness within the social system. Jusufi *et al.* (2021) highlight that, over 30 years of democracy, the former dictatorial elite has neither been held accountable nor punished, thereby ensuring impunity and promoting them to prominent political and economic positions. This practice of granting amnesty for communist-era crimes in the name of social stability further underscores the challenges in achieving genuine transitional justice in Albania.

In these development conditions, it is of interest to investigate the perspectives of victims of communism regarding the impact of reform, rehabilitation, and transitional processes by democratic governments. To what extent has Albanian society been able to construct a social and ecological environment through transitional justice processes, primarily focused on laws for reparations and compensation for the persecuted? What is the influence of the transition on the lives of the persecuted in Albanian society? What are the reflections of victims of communism in light of the successes and failures of the transition concerning their experiences?

4. Methodology

To address the aim and objective of the research there were used the qualitative data collection approach through semi structured interviews of survivors' experiences from the labor camp in Savër Lushnjë, in Albania.

The research team conducted 27 interviews (21 men and 6 women) designed to explore four main themes related to the survivors' experiences. Less than 20 years of internment were experienced by only 2 of the interviewees, while 10 of the interviewees experienced internment for 20-30 years, and another 10 interviewees experienced internment for 31-40 years. Only 5 of the interviewees experienced internment for more than 40 years. Regarding the age of internment, 12 interviewees were born in the labor camps and experienced internment for less

than 1 year. 11 interviewees were between the ages of 1-10 during their internment, and 4 interviewees were over 10 years old during internment. As for education pursued during internment, only 1 interviewee completed elementary education, while 9 interviewees completed 8-year education, and 17 interviewees completed middle school education. No interviewee pursued higher education during internment. Regarding pursuing of education after leaving the camps, only 5 interviewee's pursued education while 22 did not. Finally, in terms of the completed education level after leaving the camps, 1 interviewee completed elementary education, 9 completed 8-year education, 12 completed middle school education, and 5 completed higher education.

The interview format was revised multiple times by the researchers, reviewed and approved by the Ethic Committee for Research, and adapted into Albanian to ensure cultural appropriateness and understanding for the survivors. Participants were contacted prior to the interviews and informed of the study's purpose, methodology, research questions, and expectations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom and lasted on average more than two hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into Albanian, and a summary was provided in English. The transcripts were analyzed by coding and categorization, and the data were interpreted in light of the research objectives, using theoretical frameworks or concepts.

Overall, the use of a semi-structured interview format allowed the participants to share their experiences in a comfortable and natural way, resulting in rich and detailed information that provided insight into the experiences of survivors from the labor camp in Savër Lushnjë. The study's methodology and data collection process were designed to ensure the collection of reliable and comprehensive information from survivors.

5. Results

Changes after the fall of the Communist regime.
Following the collapse of the Communist regime, Albania experienced profound transformations, including the establishment of a multi-party democratic system and the enactment of laws dedicated to safeguarding human rights and individual freedoms. These reforms heralded a new era for those who had endured suffering in labor camps under the dictatorship, affording them rights such as freedom of speech and the chance to live in peace.

New life and acquired rights. The newfound freedoms encompass the fundamental human rights previously suppressed by the oppressive regime, including the rights to free speech and to live without fear of retaliation. The stark contrast between life under the dictatorship and the subsequent era, characterized by the acquisition of rights, is vividly reflected in the joy of those who witnessed these changes. This transformation serves as a powerful testament to the value attributed to basic human rights and the opportunity to truthfully recount personal experiences. The ability to speak freely, devoid of fear, emerges as a cornerstone of these newly acquired rights, engendering a profound sense of security and freedom.

These transformations signified not just the chance to reconstruct one's life with newfound freedoms and opportunities but also offered a pathway to reclaim one's dignity and self-worth. Overall, the profound impact of the changes following the collapse of the Communist regime in Albania highlights the intrinsic value of basic human rights and the prospects that emerge when individuals are granted the liberty to begin anew.

> What can I say? I was like the Sphinx that had risen from its ashes and come to life. I was given the freedom to start over, and being free, I was happy and started my life anew.
> Life had just begun because we had not lived. It is not called life to live without any human rights. A new life was coming, a life of freedom, to at least speak, to have the opportunity to speak freely. To talk about what we saw, to talk about what we heard, and to be able to tell the truth. This was a great joy for us.
> Life was more beautiful and better. We lived in a house with my husband's sister, and I also started working in tailoring.

Immigration: Following the collapse of the communist regime, numerous individuals who had endured hardships in labor camps during the dictatorship pursued avenues to enhance their and their families' living conditions. For some, this entailed leaving their homeland to migrate to countries with superior living standards and heightened respect for human rights. These individuals viewed immigration as a chance to initiate anew, distancing themselves from the oppressive conditions of their past.

Choosing to immigrate was not an easy decision, as it often entailed leaving behind loved ones and familiar environments. Yet, the aspiration for an improved life and a more promising future for their families took precedence over the

challenges associated with departing from their home country. For many, the immigration process was arduous and intricate, marked by complex legal procedures and substantial financial expenditures. Despite these hurdles, they regarded immigration as an essential step toward attaining a better standard of living.

> The first thing I did was take off my shoes and leave in order to secure a better future for my family and children. As soon as opportunities arose, I went to the Italian embassy in Tirana in 1991. I explained my situation and how I had been in an internment camp for 35 years. To my surprise, they granted me a visa, and it felt surreal until the plane took off.
>
> I was over the moon when I arrived in Italy. I met my father for the first time in my life and lived with him for six years. It was a life-changing experience.
>
> I never had the opportunity to make a change in my life here, but in May 1991, I decided to leave Albania. I left on May 31st and never looked back.

Pursuing the Dream of Education: A significant transformation for many former detainees in the labor camps was the opportunity to finally realize their long-held university studies aspiration. Prior to the fall of the communist regime, educational; opportunities were scant and predominantly reserved for those aligned with the party's ideology. Following the regime change, several interviewees seized the opportunity to pursue university studies for themselves or their children, a privilege that had previously been denied to them. This underscores the transformative impact of emigration on the lives of those who departed Albania in quest of a better existence, including the opportunities and experiences they acquired.

> I had always dreamed of continuing my education, and after the regime fell, I immediately enrolled in law school. In 1992, I started at the Faculty of Law, and in 1996, I received my degree.
>
> After graduating as a construction technician, we moved to Durrës, where I had the opportunity to work in my field and apply my skills. It was a dream come true for me.
>
> Despite the challenges we faced, my son was able to obtain a degree in Political Science from Columbia University, thanks to the education he received after the fall of the regime.

Challenges in Reorganizing Life Post-Communism:

Housing Considerations. The collapse of the communist regime marked a turning point for former detainees in labor camps, especially concerning housing. The transition period was characterized by a pronounced scarcity of proper housing and essential amenities, presenting substantial hurdles for these individuals. Many had been dispossessed of their homes during the communist era, and others found themselves in substandard living situations, including temporary shelters or overcrowded apartments.

The transition to a democratic government ushered in both new prospects and hurdles. A paramount issue for many former detainees was securing adequate housing. Following the regime's collapse, initiatives were launched to allocate housing to the displaced and homeless; however, these efforts were often protracted and fell short of the need. Some former convict endured lengthy waits to obtain permanent residences or locate appropriate lodging.

> This is the first time I own my own house, an apartment. We started from the basics, from cutlery to the most essential things.
> Yes, there were difficulties, including finding housing. We were homeless, searching for food, a place to call home, and shelter.
> We paid for the house and had it notarized, but Lushnja lost all the documents, and today the apartment appears unregistered. As a result, my sister is still homeless.

Family and Community Support: Building Resilience. Despite facing numerous challenges, former internees exhibited resilience and determination in reconstructing their lives. They adeptly navigated their circumstances with available resources, leaning on family and community support. Many seized the emerging opportunities to enhance their living conditions. Through government programs or by consolidating resources with others, some obtained improved housing. Additionally, the newfound economic freedoms enabled others to acquire essential household items, further stabilizing their post-regime lives. Overall, the collapse of the communist regime instigated substantial alterations in the housing landscape for former labor camp detainees. However, numerous challenges remained that required resolution.

Compensation for Former Persecuted Individuals Remains Elusive. Even years after the collapse of the communist regime, the distribution of rewards to formerly persecuted individuals remains unfulfilled. The issue of compensation for those who endured incarceration in labor camps persists as a significant concern. Many of these individuals were subjected to severe physical and psychological torture,

with the enduring trauma of their experiences continuing to impact them. Despite governmental pledges to offer compensation to the persecuted, a considerable number of these individuals have yet received any form of restitution or support.

During interviews with former internees, narratives frequently emerge of receiving meager payments or, in some cases, no compensation whatsoever from the state. This shortfall in compensation has precipitated considerable financial hardships for these individuals, a significant portion of whom are elderly and no longer able to engage in employment. Consequently, some have become dependent on their families for financial support, whereas others grapple with the challenge of sustaining themselves independently.

> We have not received the rewards we deserve, despite the unpaid work we did both in exile and in the political prisons where my father was held. We were not even paid the minimum wage for that labor.
> To this day, our funds have been misused. Where are the funds that belong to me and my father?
> When it comes to our pension, it is very meager. We receive a minimal amount that is not enough to sustain us.

The absence of adequate compensation has further fostered a sentiment of injustice and frustration among the former internees. They perceive their sufferings and sacrifices as being disregarded or overlooked by the state, which has not fulfilled its commitment to them. Consequently, this breach of promise has resulted in diminished trust in the government and a pervasive sense of disillusionment with the democratic system. Ironically, they view this system as being equally flawed as the communist regime they opposed, underscoring a profound disconnection and discontent with the current political landscape.

Overall, the inability to furnish adequate compensation to the former detainees of labor camps represents a significant concern that demands resolution. This issue transcends financial restitution, touching on the principles of justice and fundamental human rights. It is incumbent upon the government to undertake measures to amend this situation, ensuring that the grievances of these individuals are acknowledged and redressed.

> We have not received the rewards we deserve. We did unpaid work both in exile and in the political prisons where my father was held. We did not even receive the minimum compensation for our efforts.

> Our funds have been misused to this day. Where are our funds, for me and for my father?
> When it comes to our pensions, they have been significantly reduced. We receive a very minimal pension.

Insufficient Political and Official Support. The absence of backing from political spheres and high-ranking state officials significantly obstructed the former detainees of labour camps in their efforts to reintegrate into society post-internment. Numerous individuals recounted their difficulties in securing any form of assistance or support from the government, in spite of enduring years of hardship in the labour camps. They voiced their frustration and disillusionment regarding the authorities' inaction to acknowledge and cater to their needs and concerns.

Several former internees recounted attempts to seek assistance from politicians and officials, only to have their pleas frequently ignored or dismissed. They reported feeling as though their voices went unheard and that they were marginalized by the government. This perceived neglect compounded the difficulties of reintegrating into society and reconstructing their lives post-internment.

Lacking essential support and resources, these individuals encountered substantial barriers in securing employment, finding adequate housing, and accessing fundamental services. Consequently, they were compelled to depend on their own fortitude and resilience to surmount these challenges. The insufficiency of political and official support continues to be a pressing concern for many former detainees, highlighting a critical gap in the post-internment recovery process.

> People in power are more interested in their own benefits than in the needs of the people. Albania would be a different place for everyone if those in power paid attention to the needs of the people. Unfortunately, for the last 30 years, political attention has not been focused on the well-being of the people.
> We did not receive any support from politicians or high state officials. It was like they were not even aware of our struggles. We do not support any political party.
> No, absolutely nothing. No individual has been able to bring the change we need.

Personal effort to succeed and the support of others. The resilience exhibited by the majority of former labor camp internees is noteworthy, as they have successfully rebuilt their lives despite the adversities encountered during their internment.

Personal initiative was a crucial factor in their achievement, reflecting their determination to adapt and reintegrate into society. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that their journey was not solitary. The unwavering support from family, friends, and fellow survivors played an indispensable role in assisting them to surmount the traumas of internment and flourish in their lives after release.

Furthermore, the establishment of structures and programs designed to facilitate their reintegration post-exile was pivotal. These initiatives offered critical support, including access to housing, employment, education, and counseling services. The comprehensive assistance received from these varied sources empowered the former internees to restore a sense of normality and purpose in their lives.

> Today, things are different. Even those who were not persecuted have become closer, and we have good relationships.
> We have shown that we are not vindictive and have had very good relationships. We have demonstrated how we should behave as kind people, so we had good relationships more or less.
> I have become more sociable, and I can say that I value my friends, comrades, opponents, etc.

The repercussions of the experiences endured in labor camps extended beyond physical and psychological ramifications, significantly affecting the social dynamics of the former internees after the regime's collapse. The ordeal of exile imparted crucial lessons on sustaining relationships with family and friends. Numerous former detainees emphasized that the anguish of separation from their loved ones and the looming threat of loss heightened their appreciation and valuation of these bonds.

Moreover, the experience of internment not only left a lasting imprint on the physical and psychological well-being of those affected but also significantly enriched their capacity for empathy and compassion towards others who have endured or are enduring similar hardships. This heightened sense of empathy has propelled some former internees to engage in social activism or volunteerism, dedicating their efforts to assist those in need.

> To be honest, everyone has their own experiences and beliefs, but I no longer harbor any kind of hatred.

> I cannot say anything, as in most cases, many people followed the law, and that was the law. I have also met people who were witnesses against my father, but I have not spoken ill of them. They were forced to do what they did.
> I don't feel anything towards them. Every man who acted, did it for himself.

Nevertheless, the internment experience also exerted adverse effects on their social relations. Several former internees reported challenges in trusting others, particularly individuals in positions of authority, stemming from betrayal experiences under the communist regime. Additionally, some expressed difficulties in relating to people who had not undergone comparable traumas, finding it hard to establish connections with them.

> I feel pity for the people who exiled and mistreated us. I'm sure they didn't know the reality of what they were doing.
> To have a poisoned soul is worse than having nothing at all, no matter how much of the world you possess.

Message Regarding the Communist Regime. The experiences endured by former detainees in labor camps under the communist regime have significantly impacted their emotional and psychological health. Some report a complete emotional disengagement from those who inflicted suffering upon them during their internment, stating they harbor no resentment or hatred towards their persecutors. For these individuals, the acts of forgiveness and releasing past animosities have been crucial in their journey towards healing and progression.

Conversely, certain former internees continue to nurture negative sentiments towards individuals associated with the regime who subjected them to mistreatment. These individuals may grapple with feelings of anger, bitterness, or a yearning for retribution. For this group, the trauma inflicted upon them remains an acute and unresolved issue, posing significant challenges to moving forward and reconstructing their lives fully.

> I told my children, 'Be whatever you want, just don't be a communist'.
> We should learn from the past mistakes so as not to repeat them.
> That regime should never return. It made us slaves.
> Democracy and justice will always prevail.
> My constant message is that we should all respect each other, regardless of political beliefs. Let's see each other as Albanians, not enemies. Being optimistic, I believe that this is necessary because we have gone through one of the most brutal dictatorships

in Europe. I hope the moment when Albanians can live in peace with each other is near.

People should be kinder, more tolerant, and love and respect each other. We should be more social and help others whenever we can.

It is crucial to recognize that the experiences of former labor camp internees are distinct and individualized, resulting in a spectrum of emotions and attitudes towards those who perpetrated oppression during the communist regime. The journey towards healing and reconciliation is multifaceted and continuous, shaped by various elements including personal coping strategies, the availability of support networks, and prevailing societal perspectives on historical injustices.

6. Conclusion

The collapse of the Communist regime in Albania precipitated considerable transformations, profoundly affecting the lives of its citizens. The inauguration of a multi-party democratic system, alongside the enactment of legislation aimed at upholding human rights and individual freedoms, endowed individuals with newfound opportunities and rights that had been previously withheld. However, the transition to a democratic governance also introduced fresh challenges, underscoring the significant influence of political and social frameworks on the accessibility of resources and infrastructure.

From a transformative perspective, the collapse of the Communist regime marked a new dawn for individuals who endured suffering in labor camps, affording them the chance to restore their dignity and reconstruct their lives. Immigration emerged as a prevalent choice for those in search of enhanced living conditions and a greater respect for human rights, presenting an opportunity to forge a new existence and break free from the oppressive constraints of their past. Furthermore, the pursuit of education represented another significant opportunity for transformation among some former labor camp internees, who had previously faced restricted educational access. The transformations witnessed in Albanian society following the communist era, along with the endeavors of its survivors during the post-dictatorial phase, illustrate efforts toward community resilience, as conceptualized by Holling (1973) and further elaborated by Faulkner *et al.* (2018). Given that transitional changes often introduce considerable instability into the social environment, resilience has proven to be an essential attribute. This

resilience has played a critical role in enabling survivors to protect and sustain the social-ecological systems inherent in human relationships.

At the individual level, these survivors have faced financial hardships and persistent trauma, impacting their overall well-being. On the community scale, a pervasive sense of injustice and a diminished trust in the government have contributed to a fracturing of faith and a growing disillusionment with the democratic system. Furthermore, the absence of adequate support has erected systemic obstacles to reintegration and recovery, complicating the ability of former internees to access essential services and resources critical for their survival.

The findings of this study reveal that the social foundations for community resilience, as outlined by Folke et al. (2005), amidst crises and the reorganization of the social-ecological environment within the pluralistic Albanian society, seem chaotic and inadequate. Over the span of three decades, pluralistic governments have failed to implement mechanisms that would enhance adaptive governance, foster collaborative systems, cultivate trust, encourage leadership, value social capital, and maintain social memory.

Overall, the ecological approach underscores the interdependence of individuals, societies, and the environment, illuminating how the collapse of the Communist regime in Albania influenced individuals' lives and the nation's collective path. The scarcity of adequate housing and essential needs represents an environmental challenge that impinges on the social and personal well-being of former detainees. This dilemma signifies a shortfall in resources and infrastructure, impairing individuals' capacity to secure fundamental necessities and establish stable, wholesome lives. The absence of compensation for former detainees underscores a shortfall in the political and social systems' capacity to acknowledge and rectify past injustices. This oversight has profound repercussions for the psychological and financial health of those impacted. The deficiency in compensation fosters a pervasive sense of injustice and disenchantment with the political framework, bearing significant implications for the societal cohesion. The findings suggest that Greiff's (2012) strategy for fortifying democracy via transitional justice—aimed at enhancing law-based systems that foster trust, reconciliation, acknowledgment of victims, and civic confidence in institutions and their members—has been stymied by the perpetual state of transition in Albanian society. This continuous flux has hindered the effective implementation of transitional justice measures, thereby impeding progress toward creating a society characterized by justice and fairness.

As Weber (2012) contends, transitional governments are tasked with the dual goal of achieving both retrospective and prospective justice. Nevertheless, the findings of this study indicate that transitional governments in Albania have fallen short of meeting their responsibilities to remedy the repercussions of past misconduct and to manage relations within society effectively.

In conclusion, an ecological approach underscores the intricate interplay among environmental, social, and individual factors in determining the experiences and outcomes of former labor camp internees in Albania. This perspective advocates for a comprehensive strategy that tackles systemic challenges while acknowledging the critical role of social and environmental influences on individual well-being.

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