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**Bracing against the tide: The final stand of
the Albanian Labour Party to uphold
communism**

Adelina Nexhipi

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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

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Bracing against the tide: the final stand of the Albanian Labour Party to uphold communism

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Abstract

In the late 1980s, democratic movements overthrew the communist regimes in Central Eastern Europe. The Albanian Communists attributed the demise of communism to ideological deviations from the core principles of Marxism-Leninism. Convinced of Albania's immunity to these transformative currents, they maintained a belief in the country's capability to persevere in its socialist construction.

This scholarly inquiry adopts a descriptive-analytical approach to elucidate the Albanian Labor Party's desperate attempts to preserve the communist regime. Employing a historical methodology, it leverages primary sources and scholarly research.

Keywords:

Communist dictatorship; Albania; 1990; Reforms; Anti-communist movement.

Riassunto

I movimenti per la democratizzazione verso la fine degli anni '80 nell'Europa centro-orientale hanno reso possibile far cadere le dittature comuniste. I comunisti in Albania credevano che l'Albania non sarebbe stata toccata da questa ondata di cambiamenti e che il paese avrebbe potuto continuare a costruire il socialismo.

In questo studio descrittivo-analitico, si presenterà una riflessione sui tentativi dei comunisti albanesi per salvare il comunismo. Attraverso metodi della ricerca storica, si farà chiarezza sugli eventi accaduti nel 1990 in Albania, con interesse particolare sulle decisioni del Partito del Lavoro Albanese e il movimento popolare.

Parole chiave:

Comunismo; Albania; 1990; Riforma; Movimento democratico.

1. Background. - 2. State reforms and popular revolt during 1990. - 3. Reflections on the overthrow of the communist dictatorship in Albania. - 4. Conclusion. - 5. Bibliography. - 6. Curriculum vitae.

1. Background

At the end of the Second World War, the nations of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, with the exclusions of Greece, Yugoslavia, and Albania, were liberated

with the support of the Soviet military forces. Subsequent to the conflict, these states, Greece exempted, transitioned into satellites of the Soviet Union, and political frameworks identified as “people’s democracies” were instituted. Throughout the initial decade post-conflict, the political trajectories of these nations exhibited considerable uniformity and temporal alignment. In the initial phase, Eastern Europe witnessed the establishment of coalition governments inclusive of all factions barring the fascist elements. The ascendancy of communists within these administrations was augmented, a development facilitated by the Soviet military presence.

Distinct from this paradigm were Yugoslavia and Albania, where the communists ascended to governance devoid of external aid. In these territories, the communists’ acclaim had surged during the conflict. Their resistance against the adversary garnered the populace’s empathy, positioning them as patriotic entities. In both Yugoslavia and Albania, the democratic entities of the pre-war era were either enfeebled or non-existent, rendering the formation of coalition governments redundant, and thus authority was initially consigned to the communists.

Nevertheless, during this period, communists remained a numerical minority. Aware of their lack of popular support, the communists collaborated with other forces and endeavored to assert control over the secret police, military, and press. They were aware that consolidating their power was an imperative initial step. The recourse to violence and repression became inevitable, as communists acknowledged the absence of popular backing for a democratic acquisition of power. Resistance to the communists was minimal, owing to either the lack of opposition.

In Albania, the communists ascended to power by capitalizing on the significant economic and social backwardness of the Albanian populace at the conclusion of the Second World War. From the early years of their reign until the communist regime’s demise, the communist elite engaged in political purges, eliminating all political adversaries. By the 1970s, this conflict had morphed into a battle amongst communists themselves. High-ranking officials of the communist state, members of the Central Committee, the Political Bureau, the government, the military, were accused of plotting against the state or being foreign agents, and were subsequently imprisoned or executed. Accompanied by a pervasive fear of enemies, perceived to lurk everywhere, Enver Hoxha did not spare even his closest collaborators, such as Koçi Xoxe, Sejfulla Malëshova, Fadil Paçrami, Todi Lubonja,

Agim Mero, Beqir Balluku, Petrit Dume, Hilo Gjoka, Koço Theodhosi, Kiço Ngjela*, among others.

In Albania, the political monopoly of the Albanian Labor Party (ALP) was established, led by its “Shakespearean tyrant”, Enver Hoxha (Lory, 2007, p. 141). “This political dominance within his Party is fundamental. (...) It justifies the purges about which we know so much in terms of pain, blood, humiliation, and death. From 1945 to 1985, the purges would rhythmically mark this ‘political stability’” (Jandot, 1995, p. 142). This was also sanctioned in the Constitution of 1976. The 1976 Constitution enshrined the communist character of the Albanian constitutional order and the class nature of the state as a dictatorship of the proletariat, as Article 2 declared that “The PSRA is a state of the dictatorship of the proletariat”, affirmed the role of the ALP as the sole political force of the country, and further strengthened its dictate. The Constitution sanctioned Marxism-Leninism as the prevailing ideology in the People's Socialist Republic of Albania (PSRA) (Articles 3 and 15) and defined, as one of the basic principles of the Albanian constitutional order, the class struggle (Article 4) and the building of a socialist society with its own forces (Article 14), prohibited private property (Article 16), declared the prohibition of receiving aid and loans from abroad (Article 28), prohibited the freedom of religion, etc. The 1976 Constitution did not recognize the principle of the separation of powers, but that of the unity of power. Article 66 stipulated that “The People’s Assembly is the highest state power authority, the holder of the sovereignty of the people and the state, and the sole legislative body”. It must be emphasized that the role of the highest representative body was entirely formal, as this body was merely a cover behind which stood the state party, omnipotent and subject to no control. Based on the formal principle of the supremacy of the People’s Assembly, the latter elected, appointed, and dismissed the Presidium of the People’s Assembly, the Council of Ministers, the High Court, the General Prosecutor, and his deputies; all these bodies were accountable to the People’s Assembly and reported to it. It should also be noted that the 1976 Constitution removed the principle of the deputy's immunity for opinions expressed and votes cast in the People’s Assembly, which, at least formally, existed in the Constitution of 1946 (Law No. 5506, dated 28.12.1976).

* All of the aforementioned individuals were leaders of the communist state of Albania. They held high-ranking positions within the state administration, government, or Communist Party.

The pillars that upheld power in society were characterized by psychological violence and widespread human rights abuses of alarming magnitude. In this so-called society of “equal rights”, unimaginable injustices occurred. The expression of personal opinion or criticism of the government was fraught with danger. Anti-communist sentiments or critical spirit towards communism, even if expressed within a small friendly group, could lead to capital punishment. The state intensified repression within the country, and party control extended into all areas of life. All means of information and communication were strictly controlled by the Party. Manipulation of the masses was a common practice of all dictatorships, and the Albanian dictatorship was no exception. French researcher Gabriel Jandot describes this aspect of the policy of the Albanian communist leader as follows:

Enver Hoxha managed to wonderfully soothe the masses. The Albanian mass, stripped of dreams as a result of many years of apathetic submission, disintegrated by the isolation of each in their own living space, awaited, without knowing who it would be, the one who would unite them. To succeed was to first propose to them, forcefully and then very quickly by enchantment, a set of concepts that seemed simple to achieve but above all responded to what they were waiting for. (...) the promise of a bright future was the continuation of the origin of the eternal myth of an ideal society, but the implementation was this society prison and suffocating, this control of body and mind. (...) national Marxism presented happiness as an objective, in fact, in reality, it was the antipode of a Utopia, a hell (Jandot, 1995, p. 288).

In Albania, a fierce dictatorial system was constructed, underpinned by extreme political and economic centralization. Economic centralization, predicated on state planning of the economy, unequivocally prohibited any form of private ownership, whether in rural or urban areas. Competition was outlawed and branded as bourgeois and imperialist tendencies. Foreign investments and the procurement of external loans were forbidden under the 1976 Constitution. Additionally, the communist regime prioritized heavy industry, neglecting the development of infrastructure and the communications network, which impeded the country's economic recovery. Albania had not undertaken any significant economic and political reforms that could have revitalized the economy, such as decentralization of decision-making, enhancing the market's role, or democratizing the country. The policy of detailed centralized planning was pursued. In agriculture, the Soviet model of land collectivization into agricultural cooperatives and state farms was implemented, and individual gardens were completely banned. By 1989, 76% of

agricultural land was organized into agricultural cooperatives and 24% into state farms (Civici, 2014, p. 186). The Albanian economy showed signs of growth until the 1970s. This growth was partly due to external aid (Yugoslavia in 1945-48, Russia until the 1960s, China until 1978), while in the 1980s, the policy of relying on domestic forces and the country's complete isolation led to a significant deterioration of the economy, worsening of the balance of payments, depletion of foreign currency reserves, and scarcity of consumer goods. The communist state pursued a policy aimed at minimizing social differentiation. This was achieved through nearly equal wages, the requirement for intellectuals to work in production for certain periods, prohibition of private ownership, etc.

During the communist dictatorship, Albanian society was isolated from the rest of the world. Albanians were not permitted to travel to other countries. Crossing the border was illegal and even punishable by law. Emigration was prohibited, while migration was state-controlled.

This policy of curbing mobility intended to create a very stable and manageable society. Society was designed by its elites as a well-functioning social apparatus with all its parts fulfilling their particular purposes for the sake of the whole nation. Historical processes were interpreted in a teleological manner governed by dialectical rules which enabled the linking of the past with the present and the future in a well-designed and generally intelligible framework. Enver Hoxha's anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism was loaded with strong nationalism - according to (Pichler, 2014, p. 4).

Albania was a member of the United Nations (since 1955), but had not participated in its meetings since the 1970s. Albania was the only European country that did not sign the Helsinki Accords, thereby not participating in the OSCE. It maintained diplomatic relations with several European countries and had signed numerous agreements with countries in Asia and Africa, yet economic, political, and cultural exchanges with these nations were minimal. Enver Hoxha's fear of imperialist and revisionist enemies dictated his foreign policy. According to Misha Glenny, while this fear might have had historical justification, it was exaggerated (Glenny, 2007, p. 561).

To justify their policy, the communists systematically cultivated an ethnocentric mindset. All non-Albanian cultures were deemed degenerate, decadent, and revisionist. These mindsets and practices damaged and hindered Albania's progress in culture, economy, and science, as they isolated it from European and

global developments. No achievements in science, technology, art, or culture could penetrate Albania. The reading of foreign literature was banned, entertainments were strictly controlled by the state, as they had to be immunized from “decadent”, “bourgeois”, and “revisionist” ideologies. Hoxha’s contempt for Western society and culture is vividly expressed in one of his speeches, which is notable not only for its content but also for its vocabulary: “We cannot allow our country to turn into an inn without doors, where pigs and ducks, those with and without trousers, bare-necked and hippies come to replace our people’s wonderful dances with their unrestrained orgies” (cit. Vickers, 2008, p. 314).

The daily life of Albanians was characterized by numerous restrictions, suffocating monotony, fatigue, stress, and chronic ennui, intrusions into private life. The limitations were not only on what were considered “bourgeois tendencies or manifestations” but also on items that had no connection with bourgeois inclinations, for example, until 1991, private cars were not permitted in Albania, and the populace traveled in old and decrepit buses, trains, bicycles, or carts. For more than three decades, religious faith was denied to Albanians. In 1967, Albania eradicated every sign of faith and became the world’s only atheist country. Enver Hoxha launched a widespread anti-religious campaign, branding religion as “opium” for society.

Within the framework of socialist reforms, a vigorous propaganda campaign was launched for the emancipation of women. Immediately post-war, the engagement of women in the workforce contributed to an increase in the labor force. Theoretically, women were equal to men, but in reality, “although they could no longer be seen as property of their husbands, they had now become property of the state”, according to Miranda Vickers (Vickers, 2008, p. 303). In the name of emancipation, women became soldiers, bricklayers, tractor drivers, performed military exercises, participated in actions, and voluntary work. This not only did not alleviate the woman’s burden but actually increased it. Women were required to work in production and industry and also bear the entire weight of caring for the home (living conditions and the lack of household appliances made this process more difficult) and raising children. The state’s population increase policy encouraged childbirth, and women were denied the right to pregnancy control, while abortion and contraception were illegal. Facing the state policy, “Albanian men accepted the new role of women in public life but continued to treat women as servants in domestic life” (Vickers, 2008, p. 304).

The model implemented by Albania over 45 years was predicated on the rigorous application of Marxist ideology and Stalinist practices. Due to the insistence on continuing the principle of self-reliance, the economy entered a phase of rapid decline. The agricultural sector faced even more challenging conditions. Peasants were unable to produce enough to sustain themselves, let alone supply the cities. The prohibition of private property, the absence of material incentives, and poor working conditions adversely affected the willingness to work, which was dramatically reflected in a significant decrease in labor productivity and frequent absenteeism. Strikes were prohibited, but workers expressed their dissatisfaction by widely stealing and misusing state property.

These developments and characteristics resembled those of other Eastern Bloc countries; however, unlike them, Albania allowed no element of liberalization; it remained faithful to Marxist-Leninist ideology until the end; no aspect of capitalism was permitted, and the country was completely isolated, not being part of any Bloc. The liberalizing movements of the 1950s and 1960s in Eastern Europe were not permitted by the ALP to take roots in Albania, while the “wind of change” of the late 1980s inevitably made its presence felt in Albania as well.

2. State Reforms and Popular Revolt during 1990

The appointment of Gorbachev as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985 marked a significant ideological transformation for the Soviets. The new leader’s reform program was predicated on two fundamental elements: Perestroika — restructuring, and Glasnost — political liberalization. Gorbachev’s “new thinking” advocated for peaceful coexistence, repudiating the class struggle; it re-evaluated Soviet foreign policy with a call for international cooperation; it initiated consecutive reductions in armed forces, moving away from the arms race; and it abandoned the Brezhnev Doctrine, which had justified Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe. Gorbachev’s principle of political freedom in the Eastern Bloc was perceived as “an invitation” to rebel against communist regimes. The peoples of Eastern Europe sensed that the Soviet Union, now on the verge of social and economic collapse, was no longer capable of brutally suppressing uprisings in its satellite states. Without Moscow’s support, the communist parties ruling these states could no longer repress their peoples’ desire for freedom.

Democratic forces in Central and Eastern Europe openly demanded democracy, garnering support among the populace and the international community, thereby

further undermining totalitarian regimes. Consequently, the regimes in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany fell one after the other, and, through a domino effect, all communist dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed. The singular case necessitating a violent uprising was Romania. According to Walter Laker, the revolutions of 1989, unlike previous anti-communist movements, were successful because the communist systems were burdened with a series of accumulated failures, communist leaders no longer possessed their former self-confidence, and the “echo effect” rendered revolutionary uprisings contagious (Laker, 2003, p. 444).

The fall of totalitarian regimes was a phenomenon of universal proportions. However, the leadership of the ALP perceived the collapse of the system in these countries as a consequence of their departure from Marxist doctrine and the socialist path, the implementation of anti-socialist policies, and hostile foreign pressure. It still harbored illusions that Albania could remain unaffected by this “wind of change” and that the country could continue to build socialism despite the difficulties it was facing. According to Elez Biberaj, “Despite being frightened by the democratic changes in other countries and by the growing opposition within, the old guard of the Party of Labor was determined not to make concessions or relinquish its monopoly on political power” (Biberaj, 2011, p. 72). Bernard Lory notes that Ceaușescu’s execution was a serious warning for Ramiz Alia; moreover, “the leadership team [of the ALP] tightly knit through a web of marital alliances within the Central Committee of the ALP and periodically purged of any potential contenders for high power, was beginning to age significantly” (Lory, 2007, p. 231), making changes inevitable. For Shinasi Rama, a change from the Enverist system seemed unavoidable, as external pressure to alter the political and economic system was overwhelmingly strong and insurmountable. The deep crisis had generated significant dissatisfaction, not only among the persecuted layers across two to three generations but also among the broader swathes of urban classes, now deeply proletarianized both economically and in terms of moral values (Rama, 2012, p. 75). In 1990, the so-called “‘workers’ state’ was unable to meet the basic needs of the working class, in whose name the communists claimed to govern. The economic decline was rapidly undermining the once omnipotent authority of the ALP” (Biberaj, 2011, p. 63). The rapid population growth and limited resources in Albania were further reasons why the communist regime could not survive.

During 1989-1990, there were attempts at demonstrations in several districts of the country. In January 1990, the city of Shkodra witnessed some anti-communist movements; on January 14th, approximately 100 men attempted to topple the statue of Stalin but were dispersed by the State Security. Several of the participants were imprisoned. These events were not reported in the press at the time. Starting from January 1990, the leadership of the ALP convened several special meetings to assess the political situation and deliberate on measures to mitigate the crisis engulfing the nation.

At the 9th Plenum of the Central Committee of the ALP in January 1990, a program of measures for the reformation of the political system was adopted. It included the restructuring of the ALP and its role within this system. During the meeting, Ramiz Alia declared that calls for pluralism at that time were detrimental to the country, as they could lead to the weakening of the people's unity. According to him, the introduction of a multiparty system would occur gradually, alongside the development of a democratic culture (Academy, 2009, p. 352). Within this context, several legislative initiatives were undertaken aiming the necessary changes and improvements in the field of legislation. Thus, by law, citizens were to be guaranteed legal protection with a lawyer, both in the investigative process and in the judicial one. Similarly, the institution of legal and judicial rehabilitation was to be implemented, as well as early and conditional release for certain categories of criminal offenses. It was also decided to establish the Ministry of Justice. Meanwhile, directives were issued to review and amend certain articles of the Penal Code, such as those prescribing penalties for religious activities, for agitation and propaganda, for internment, etc.

With difficulty, yet some economic taboos began to be dismantled, certainly without changing the core of the system: state ownership. The economy would remain centralized, but elements of decentralization and the use of mechanisms that stimulated production would be introduced. Economic enterprises would be granted more autonomy to use their revenues for investments in sectors they deemed necessary. Changes also affected the realm of private initiative. Citizens were permitted to construct houses with their own income, and the sale of some depreciated houses in the outskirts of cities was allowed. State agencies at the district level began to encourage agricultural cooperatives to sell their agricultural and livestock products at the urban markets at self-set prices. Additionally, the prices of some goods were liberalized.

Nevertheless, as Kissinger articulates, “it was too late to salvage the communists (...) liberalization proved incompatible with the communist system – communists could not transform themselves into democrats without ceasing to be communists” (Kissinger, 1999, p. 794). The measures taken towards liberalizing the country’s life were evaluated both domestically and internationally as too gradual, failing to meet the increasing pressure of the popular movement that demanded a swifter pace in the path of reforms. Meanwhile, the country’s political life grew increasingly tense day by day. In the city of Kavaja, in February, several youths wrote anti-communist slogans on a school building, and in March, cries of “Democracy – Democracy” rang out during a football match of the Kavaja football team. On March 26, the revolt escalated into a march by the citizens of Kavaja wielding anti-government slogans.

In response to these developments, another meeting of the Central Committee of the ALP took place in April 1990. The Plenum evaluated the measures taken for democratization and emphasized the need to accelerate and expand these measures across all spheres of economic, social, and political life. The Plenum paid particular attention to the economic problems and difficulties, which, according to the communists, were the principal causes of citizens’ unrest. The Plenum adopted several measures to improve the supply of goods to the population, especially in rural areas experiencing significant economic hardship. It was also decided to distribute livestock and return animals to cooperative families, reinstating the former system of private yards. This decision granted peasants the right to sell surplus produce from their yards in the market. The Plenum criticized the bureaucratic and centralizing methods in the organization and management of the economy and oriented towards a path of decentralization, expanding the competencies of enterprises in the area of planning and the use of financial resources, etc. (Academy, 2009, p. 354). However, the ALP had no intention of initiating reforms that would change the economic and political system but merely to reform it, to make its position more maneuverable under the new global conditions.

A significant departure from previous policy was the permission granted for the practice of religious beliefs. The announcement in May that the practice of faith and religious rites was no longer prohibited was met with skepticism; citizens feared reprisals from state institutions. It was not until November 4th that the first legal Catholic mass in 23 years was held in Shkodër by Dom Simon Jubani.

Simultaneously, institutions of other faiths, including Muslim and Orthodox, began to open and initiate religious activities.

In the diplomatic activity, the state undertook several steps aimed at liberalizing and intensifying relations with other countries. Albania participated in various activities designed to strengthen cooperation among Balkan countries, such as multiparty meetings, Balkan conferences, the Adriatic Initiative, the Mediterranean Initiative, etc. Steps were also taken in the field of international cooperation. For this purpose, production using materials specified by foreign firms, the purchase of machinery on deferred payment terms (a form of credit), and other measures were allowed. New forms of economic and financial cooperation began to be implemented with several countries, including the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Italy, etc., within the framework of the International Organization for Assistance and Cooperation (OECD), such as the transfer of technology and equipment at no cost, construction of special projects with long-term repayment, etc. Ministers and institutions were authorized to conclude agreements of a scientific, cultural, and educational character with the ministries and analogous institutions of other countries (Academy, 2009, p. 353). In April 1990, President Ramiz Alia gave a speech that paved the way for the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the United States, Britain, the USSR, and the European Community. U.N. Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar visited Albania in May 1990.

The ideas developed during the Plenum were reflected in the “Law on Enterprises”, which was adopted by the People’s Assembly in May 1990. This law did not alter the socialist character of public property but introduced market economy elements into the functioning and activities of enterprises (Law no. 7373, dated May 8, 1990). Simultaneously, the People’s Assembly passed several laws that brought about significant changes in the organization of the Judiciary and the implementation of criminal policy. Thus, a law was enacted amending the Penal Code, which narrowed the scope for the death penalty. Article 55, prescribing penalties for the crime of agitation and propaganda against the state, also underwent modifications. The previous formulation of this article had allowed for subjective interpretations, which in practice had led to severe political and social consequences, on individuals were deemed enemies but de facto were not. The new formulation of the law also removed penalties for religious activities and beliefs. Concurrently, the decree on internment-exiles was abolished. Provisions addressing the illegal crossing of state borders were also revised. It was no longer

considered treason against the homeland but a violation of border regulations, consequently, the prescribed penalty was re-education through labor or deprivation of liberty for up to five years (Law no. 7380, dated 8.5.1990). In May 1990, "considering the needs posed by the country's development for deepening socialist democracy and further perfecting legislation and the system of state organs, as well as for the continuous strengthening of socialist legality" (Law no. 7381, dated May 9, 1990), the People's Assembly approved the Law on the establishment of the Ministry of Justice (which had been abolished for over two decades) and the Institute of Advocacy, as well as the draft law on issuing passports for foreign travel and granting visas, which addressed the issue of permitting citizens to exit and enter the territory of the PSRA. Alongside the aforementioned changes, the ALP endeavored to stimulate societal debate, creating a broader space for free speech and thought.

As the leadership of the ALP endeavored to deepen the process of reforms, certainly under its control, with the intent to mitigate the effects of the crisis and to refurbish its image, the economic and political situation deteriorated further. By mid-1990, the country plunged into total collapse. A significant decline in production was observed across major economic sectors. In the complex situation the country was navigating, work and production stoppages became commonplace, due to the lack of raw materials and the breakdown of discipline. To somewhat alleviate the workers' discontent, at the government's proposal, the Presidium of the People's Assembly was compelled to amend the Labour Code. The relevant provisions stipulated that, when production interruption occurred through no fault of the workers and the enterprise's administration did not provide alternative employment, the worker would receive 80% of their wage (Decree no. 7399, dated July 8, 1990). Characterizing this situation, Ramiz Alia acknowledged that the country was on the extreme brink of an emergency state (Academy, 2009, p. 356).

In early July 1990, several grave events occurred that further shook the communist regime: two massive protests in the city of Kavajë, which were violently dispersed by the security forces, and on July 2, 1990, in the late evening, hundreds of citizens attempted to forcefully enter a foreign embassy in Tirana. The intervention by the security forces led to clashes with them and an overt demonstration against the state. The protest was forcibly dissolved. Meanwhile, the wave of frustrated individuals seeking entry into the embassies swelled considerably, with citizens arriving from other regions of the country. According

to Abrahams, approximately 5,000 Albanians had filled the embassies; 3,199 individuals in the French embassy, 870 in the Italian embassy, about 500 in the French embassy (Abrahams, 2015, p. 67), the overwhelming majority of them (3,407 - 70%) were workers, only 155 were civil servants, and not a single well-known intellectual (Biberaj, 2011, p. 86).

The exodus of people was driven by economic motives, by poverty and misery, towards a dream of a better and more secure life. The political issue came after the economic one and in any case, most of the people who entered the embassies did not possess the cultural and intellectual level to be defined as political dissidents - expresses Brunilda Durici in her doctoral thesis (Durici, 2018, p. 93).

Yet “the attack on the embassies was a true popular uprising and the first real blow to the communist regime”, assesses Prof. Aleks Luarasi (Luarasi, 1997, p. 5).

Confronted with this situation, the leadership of the ALP was compelled to execute personnel changes, replacing several of the older cadre within party and government organs to mollify public opinion. In continuation of efforts to ameliorate the dire state of the nation, Ramiz Alia organized a meeting on August 10th with representatives of the capital’s citizens, followed by a meeting on August 13th with specialists on economic issues. Participants in these meetings generally expressed approval of the initiated reforms and emphasized the need for their acceleration. Concurrently, in foreign policy, several moves were undertaken aiming at opening the country to the world and establishing cooperative relations even with countries and states previously prohibited by the constitution. In late September 1990, Ramiz Alia, in his capacity as the Head of State, participated in the 45th session of the United Nations General Assembly. The rapid developments compelled the ALP leadership to convene a special meeting of the Central Committee in November 1990. Ramiz Alia critiqued the policies of rapid and extensive socializations, the implemented measures for restricting and dissolving the cooperative farm system with a reversion to public sectors of artisanal activities as erroneous. He acknowledged that the adoption of these measures was predominantly driven by “ideological motives, rather than economic factors”. Among the grave errors, he identified the absolutization of the principle of “relying on our own forces”, which had resulted in restrictions on international cooperation (Academy, 2009, p. 359).

On October 13th, 1990, the People’s Assembly deliberated on Ramiz Alia’s proposal for amendments and additions to the 1976 Constitution. In his address,

Alia emphasized the need for “new legal elections in our legislation and primarily in the existing constitution” in accordance with the “current stage of our socialist development” (Zëri i Popullit no. 272, November 14, 1990, p. 1). The principal aspects of the constitution that required alteration or enhancement, according to Ramiz Alia, included: (i) the separation of state activity from party activity; (ii) ensuring the supremacy of legislative over executive; (iii) strengthening the role of the People’s Assembly in legislative activity; (iv) securing the independence of state economic enterprises; (v) permitting the establishment of foreign economic and financial societies and institutions; (vi) revising constitutional norms related to justice; (vii) reevaluating the chapter on the rights and freedoms of citizens; (viii) reviewing articles addressing the stance on religion and religious institutions; (ix) adjustments and additions regarding the rights of national minorities, especially concerning their communication with the nations to which they belong. On the other hand, he highlighted aspects that should remain unchanged in the 1976 constitution, one of which was “the special role of the ALP in the liberation struggle and in the construction of the new life” (Zëri i Popullit no. 272, November 14, 1990, p. 1). That same day, the Assembly decided to create a Special Commission for constitutional review, chaired by Ramiz Alia himself.

The ALP permitted some changes to create the illusion of economic and legal reforms and the allowance of pluralism. The new Law “On the Elections for the People’s Assembly”, along with all amendments to the legislation during 1990, reflected the ALP’s new strategy to avert the impending revolution and to retain power. The new “Law on the Elections for the People’s Assembly” constituted a “facade of pluralism” (Luarasi, 1997, p. 5). According to Article 22 of the Law, each electoral zone was required to vote for at least two candidates. Article 23 stated that the ALP and other socio-political organizations legally defined had the right to nominate candidates (Law no. 7424, dated November 14, 1990). Such organizations did not exist at that time.

Social discontent reached its apex on December 8th, 1990, when the first student protest erupted in the Student City. The students demanded improvements in living conditions in dormitories, addressing several urgent issues, such as the lack of electricity and heating. Following the violent dispersal of the protest the next day, on December 9, several hundred enraged students protested on the main street and in the city square of “Student City”, chanting slogans like “Freedom”, “Democracy”. These demonstrations indicated that the movement was not merely for economic demands but also for political ones. On December 10th, students once

again gathered in the city square of “Student City”, joined by a significant number of Tirana University lecturers, citizens of Tirana, and other regions. The protest organizers declared 11 demands. At their core was the demand for the allowance of political pluralism in the country. Mujë Buçpapaj, a December '90 student, describes December 8th as “a night [that] divided history” (Gazeta Shqiptare, August 12, 2021).

Students sought a meeting with Ramiz Alia, who accepted their request. Ramiz Alia met with a representation of the University of Tirana students. During the meeting, Ramiz Alia indicated that the ALP was relinquishing its role as a state-party, and henceforth, it would be equal to other political entities that were to be established in the country. “The Student City rejoiced. The last communist party in Eastern Europe had surrendered” (Abrahams, 2015, p. 93). On December 12th, Ramiz Alia addressed the populace with a message, highlighting that the state had now officially recognized and sanctioned the allowance of political pluralism and the formation of opposition political parties, considering them significant contributors to ushering the country into a new phase of political and social relations. Among other things, he expressed,

The Party has now publicly articulated its view that it is in favor of the country's further democratization, the establishment of independent political organizations, (...) this prudent stance of the Party represents another significant link in our democratic process, which is now irreversible (Meksi, 2010, p. 75).

The speech continued with calls for restraint and dialogue to avoid, as he put it, “any mistake that could have consequences for the entire country” (Meksi, 2010, p. 76).

On December 12, an initiating commission composed of university students and lecturers announced the formation of the Albanian Democratic Party (DP), the first opposition party in the country. It included students, lecturers, intellectuals, and workers. According to Biberaj, “The DP did not have a clearly defined ideology apart from supporting democracy and took the form of a mass movement that included groups and individuals who, under normal circumstances, would not be in political alliance with one another” (Biberaj, 2011, p. 110). According to Afrim Krasniqi,

the founding list of the DP does not contain any former political prisoners, while it includes more than 30 members of the PLA, (...) If not anti-communists, then their

place would be taken by other groups, with a mixed political and social identity, primarily energetic youths, liberal intellectuals, but also communists dissatisfied with their position within the ALP (Krasniqi, 2014, p. 53).

In the DP program, approved at its founding meeting, it was envisaged: the realization of fundamental human rights, the drafting and implementation of democratic legislation to establish a parliamentary democracy, the strengthening of the rule of law, justice, and social equality, the emancipation of youth, women, and the peasantry, the full integration of Albania into Euro-Atlantic structures, the pursuit of good neighborly policies, deep economic reforms for restructuring towards a market economy, and fostering a pluralistic and tolerant dialogue (Meksi, 2010, pp. 89-93).

At the end of December, other significant events took place. On December 20, Nexhmije Hoxha (the widow of Enver Hoxha) resigned her post as head of the Democratic Front, a mass organization of the Labor Party; on December 21, workmen quietly removed a large bronze statue of Stalin from a central square in Tirana; on December 31, the draft constitution, prepared by the parliamentary commission, was published. It incorporated safeguards for many basic liberties, including freedom of religion, press, conscience and association, the presumption of innocence, and the right to travel abroad and to move about the country freely. The draft constitution was to be subject to public discussion, in the meantime, the limitations on basic rights contained in the existing constitution were increasingly ignored in practice. According to government figures, some 191 political prisoners were released in 1990 and another 202 were released in January 1991 (Human Rights Watch, 1991, p. 3). On January 4, 1991, the publication of the daily newspaper "Rilindja Demokratike", the organ of the DP, began. It was the first opposition newspaper in Albania and became the "voice" of many intellectuals and youths. Subsequently, other political parties were formed: the Republican Party, the Ecological Party, the Agrarian Party, the Party of National Unity, the Omonia Organization, as well as the Forum for the Defense of Human Rights.

Albania's transition from communism to democracy was all but smooth or seamless. The system change shook the country and was all-embracing leaving no Albanian unaffected. The demise of communism began later and turned out to be more disorderly than in other central and eastern European countries, - states Robert Pichler (Pichler, 2014, p. 3).

Thus fell the “last bastion of Stalinism” (Grimberg, 2005, p. 255), the “final domino” in the line of Eastern communist dictatorships (Gumeni, 2011, p. 97). The collapse of communist dictatorships in the USSR and Central and Eastern Europe “exposed Khrushchev’s boasts that communism would bury capitalism as unfounded” (Kissinger, 1999, p. 795).

3. Reflections on the Overthrow of the Communist Dictatorship in Albania

“Through the means the people of Central and Eastern Europe chose to seek democracy, there lies an existential choice; they know they are not merely choosing ‘a way of political organization’, but their very essence” (Feher - Heller, 1998, p. 183). Among scholars, there is debate whether the overthrows of communist dictatorships in Central and Eastern Europe were “democratic revolutions”, meaning a change in sovereignty, or rather reforms, where the monopoly of power was not wrested from those who wielded it but was instead released by them peacefully, through a series of partially open and partially secret negotiations, which also determined the form of concessions. Jacques Rupnik argues that “democratic revolution” remains the most fitting definition, not because the revolution itself was democratic, but because its aim was to bring about democratic changes. He even compares the events of 1989-1990 in Central and Eastern Europe with the revolutions of 1848: “‘The Autumn of Nations’ in 1989 might best be likened to the ‘Springtime of Peoples’ of 1848, due to the rapidity of its effect, its spread throughout Europe, and the way it intertwined democracy and nationalism” (Rupnik, 2014, pp. 9-10). Regardless of the negotiated transfer of power between the old regime's moderate elites and dissident movements, the events which have been labeled as “velvet revolutions” or “re-revolutions” (Timothy Garton-Ash), or “negotiated revolutions” (George Lawson) are acknowledged for their revolutionary characteristics; their rapidity, the massive, powerful, and systematic transformation of society’s key institutions.

Among these debates, there are intermediary positions, such as that of the Hungarian scholar Janos Kish, who describes a “reform-revolution” dichotomy, an intermediate state that emerged as a consequence of what he terms the “inferiority complex” that revolutionaries imposed on reformers; or the viewpoint of Feher and Heller, according to whom these events are neither revolutions nor reforms; “1989 appears to be beyond both reform and revolution” (Feher - Heller, 1998, p. 173). Despite differing opinions, democracies in Central and Eastern Europe were

established, in Huntington's view, by "government and opposition leaders who together found the courage to defy the status quo (...) resisted provocations to violence (...) understanding that in politics, no one holds a monopoly on truth or virtue" (Huntington, 2011, p. 186). Conversely, Albanian analyst and publicist Daut Gumeni believes that neither government officials nor opposition should claim credit for the fall of communism, "communism aged [and fell] more from its own organic and incurable diseases" (Gumeni, 2011, p. 20).

In our view, the overthrow of the communist dictatorship in Albania resulted from the liberalizing reforms undertaken by the state and popular democratic movements, which were a necessity of the time and emerged and spread in the context of the weakening and decay of communist dictatorships in the Eastern Bloc, including Albania. These represented a peaceful transfer of power from the old communist elite to a new, reformist, and democratic political class.

After enduring severe repression and prolonged isolation, Albanians were experiencing freedom for the first time, at a moment when "most Albanians did not know what freedom was: they had instinctively 'deposited' it in the leader" – states Mentor Petrela (IShM, 2019, p. 41). "Free" Albania found itself in dire straits: a dysfunctional economy, a total loss of faith in the state, a traumatized society, and extreme poverty. As described by the lawyer Hekuran Hysa, the Albanian people emerged from communist dictatorship "impoverished, shattered, numbed, astonished, disoriented, and brutalized" (Hysa, 2011, p. 54). Fred Abrahams describes Albania in the early '90s as

gray and decaying (...) the poorest country compared to any other in Eastern Europe, with fewer telephones, unpaved roads, and people living on handouts (...) as if entering a forgotten world, a frozen space, isolated from the 'imperialist West' and the 'revisionist East', which had slipped everyone's mind (Abrahams, 2015, p. 17).

Foreigners visiting Albania during those years "were confronted with Dickensian squalor, senselessly vandalized and filthy – gigantic monuments to Hoxha's distorted vision", Misha Glenny writes (Glenny, 2007, p. 569). Prof. Valentina Duka describes the economic situation in Albania in 1990:

[Albania] seemed as if it had just emerged from a war. Practically everything needed to be built from scratch. (...) the Albanian economy, which was designed to be commanded, was left without command. Thus, while planning no longer existed and

the market had not yet been established, the Albanian economy was engulfed by chaos and anarchy (Duka, 2007, p. 370).

The Albanian economy was experiencing a complex crisis, characterized by a decline in gross social product and national income; a decrease in worker productivity; a significant budget deficit, in the balance of payments and currency; high inflation; a noticeable reduction in the availability of consumer goods; difficulties in monetary liquidity, and an increase in unemployment. However, Albanians were euphoric about their newfound freedom, feeling no nostalgia for the past, looking forward with a strong desire for profound reforms. As in every other former communist bloc country, “democracy was seen as synonymous with peace and economic growth, as a panacea for all social problems, as the only correct answer to a myriad of unrelated questions” (Krastev, 2014, p. 46).

4. Conclusion

The isolation from the external world, which resulted in a lack of information available to the populace; the absence of political dissidents, who were either executed or imprisoned in the early years of the establishment of the communist dictatorship; the man’s ‘othering’ and construction of the so-called “new man” manipulated by communist propaganda, as well as the absence of any form of economic or political liberalism in Albania, contributed to the unorganized and delayed emergence of the anti-communist movement in comparison with other Central and Eastern European countries. This situation emboldened the Albanian communists to believe that they could maintain the status quo; control over the populace and the monopoly of power. They declared that Albania was neither East nor West, socialism in Albania was without problems, and communism in Eastern European countries had faltered due to a deviation from Marxist-Leninist ideology.

The Albanian Labor Party attempted to undertake reforms to alleviate popular discontent and extreme poverty that had engulfed the country. These reforms were extended into the economic domain, aiming at a form of liberalization but without touching the core of the communist system; in the political sphere, intending to separate the state from the party, yet without allowing political pluralism; in the legal aspect, by amending certain laws, codes, and the constitution, but without endangering the ALP’s power; in the realm of human rights, yet freedom remained

restricted; in the diplomatic sphere by breaking out of isolation, but still without granting citizens the opportunity to travel outside Albania.

The reforms were not aimed at altering the political system but rather were intended to salvage communism, control changes, and curb the eruption of popular dissatisfaction. This is evidenced by the actions of state institutions: the Albanian press, controlled and censored by the state, did not reflect any of the events of early 1990 that expressed dissatisfaction with the regime; the State Security “suffocated” these movements in their embryonic stage without allowing them to spread; Ramiz Alia, in his speeches throughout 1990, declared that political pluralism was a harmful action because it would cause division among the population; constitutional changes were initiated, but they aimed to make “cosmetic” adjustments to the existing constitution to carve out necessary spaces for the ALP within the new reality.

However, the communists bore numerous mistakes and shortcomings; the communist political class had lost touch with the people, the economic crisis had deeply entrenched across the country, popular dissatisfaction and protests were escalating daily, international pressure was also mounting, and the effect of democratic movements in Eastern Europe inevitably impacted Albania. Communism could not be salvaged.

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6. Curriculum vitae

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