



# Adversaries to Allies: Albania's Alignment with the United States

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Adversaries to Allies: Albania's Alignment with the United States

Jesse Palmer

A Thesis in the Field of Government  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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## Abstract

This paper examines the reversal of Albanian-American relations following the end of the Cold War until Albania acceded to NATO membership: 1991 – 2009. During Albania's communist era, it considered the United States to be its greatest enemy and greatest threat. After the fall of the communist regime with the collapse of Europe's communist bloc, Albania quickly became one of America's staunchest supporters, eventually becoming a treaty ally by joining NATO in 2009.

By interviewing Albanians who were involved in Albanian government policy and actions and incorporating their comments into a study of Albania's history and geopolitical nuances, this study demonstrates that Albania's pro-American alignment is necessary for the preservation of Albania as an independent state. The international politics of Albania's geographic position, the regional historical record, and internal deficiencies make an American alliance the most logical path for Albania to pursue.



“But above all, the goal of NATO is to turn enemies into friends. Hence, it is a great victory that Albania, which was once regarded as the world’s strictest communist country, becomes a member of the Western Alliance.”

- Sali Berisha, former president and prime minister of Albania, on Albanian NATO accession

## Author's Biographical Sketch

The author, Jesse Palmer, was born in the Bay Area of California. Growing up in California, Arizona, and Utah, he graduated from Davis Senior High School in Davis, California and received his A.A. in Liberal Arts from Golden West College in Huntington Beach, California. He went on to receive his B.A. in Middle East Studies / Arabic (MESA) from Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Jesse serves in the reserve component of the U.S. Army while also working as a consultant/advisor on contract with the US government. During his career, he has spent time working, studying, and living abroad, particularly in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and Southeastern Europe.

## Dedication

Dedicated to my Albanian friends and colleagues who, after intense and lengthy negotiations, allowed me to pick up the tab on Fridays . . . sometimes.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge those without whom this study would not be possible. While acknowledging their support and contributions, I would like to also distance them from any deficiencies or errors, any of which must be attributed solely to me.

Harvard Professor George Soroka was always available and willing to provide feedback, criticism, and assistance. His mentorship and experience with conducting interviews as part of his own research were invaluable.

Harvard Professor Michael Miner who helped me develop the proposal for this thesis. His experience with and courses relating to U.S. national security and intelligence issues were both insightful and enjoyable.

Those who agreed to take part in this study by agreeing to be interviewed. Their input and responses were both enlightening and essential to this project. Their participation is particularly appreciated in light of the potential risks to speaking openly and honestly combined with the large number of those who declined to be interviewed for similar reasons. To show that appreciation, I have agreed to use pseudonyms or only first names when requested.



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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

Diplomatic relations between the United States and Albania were first established in 1912 following Albanian independence from the Ottoman Empire. In 1939, as a result of Axis (Germany and Italy) Powers' occupation of Albania, relations were suspended. This suspension remained in place after World War II, reflecting the rise of the communist regime of Enver Hoxha. It lasted until the collapse of Albanian communism in 1991. Yet over a period of less than two decades, post-communist Albania transitioned from considering the United States (and the West more broadly) as an ideological and geopolitical enemy to becoming a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 2009. Examining this rapid change requires considering several aspects of U.S. – Albania relations.

Albania's history, politics, religion, and culture are all intertwined with its geographic neighbors in the southeastern European region often referred to as the Balkans. The term Balkans, loaded with baggage and used with varying meaning in different spheres, requires definition. The word itself comes from the Balkan Mountains crossing the peninsula which, as a result, is referred to as the Balkan Peninsula. The Encyclopedia Britannica lists the following countries as being typically included in the Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo,<sup>1</sup> Montenegro,

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<sup>1</sup> Albanians prefer to use "Kosova" rather than Kosovo while Serbians prefer "Kosovo and Metohija." This paper will use Kosovo as it has been conventionally spelled when anglicized.

North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia.<sup>2</sup> As the frontier of Southeastern Europe, the Balkans has been part of key migration routes, from Germanic tribes seeking to cross into the Roman Empire and nomadic empires from the steppes challenging the walls of Constantinople, to Middle Eastern refugees seeking to reach the European Union. As a geographical, cultural, and political crossroads, the region has had its share of ethnic, religious, and national conflict. In its report examining the Balkan Wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace summarized the regional situation as:

These peoples, mingled in an inextricable confusion of languages and religions, of antagonistic race and nationality, Turks, Bulgarians, Servians, Serbo-Croatians, Servians speaking Albanian, Koutzo-Valacks, Greeks, Albanians, Tziganes, Jews, Roumanians, Hungarians, Italians, are not less good or less gifted than other people in Europe and America.<sup>3</sup>

The complex history of the Balkans is one of multiple conflicts between religious and ethnic groups and, while a fascinating topic, is beyond the scope of this work. However, a brief survey of historical events in the region as they pertain to Albania is necessary to understand the contemporary context. Examining and understanding this history will illuminate certain trends which continue to directly impact modern behaviors, policies, and attitudes. In a region where historical grievances are keenly felt, history provides a vital view on Albania's transition from viewing the United States as its primary enemy to considering the U.S. as its most vital ally. Aleksandër Stefanaq, who

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<sup>2</sup> "Balkans." 2020. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2019 Washington D.C., 3. This Carnegie Endowment report is extremely detailed in documenting the actions prior to and during the First and Second Balkan Wars. The report's predictive value, however, is undermined by the final determination in 1914 that, "What finally succeeds in bringing armed peace into disrepute, is that today the Great Powers are manifestly unwilling to make war."

worked in Albanian foreign affairs and with Albanian security services from the late 1990s on, best summarized the question this paper endeavors to answer:

In 1946, following Italian and then Nazi German occupation during World War II, Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha broke relations with Washington. Hoxha, an isolationist who despised the United States, ruled his nation with brutality until his death in 1985, and only with the collapse of communism in 1991 were bilateral ties re-established. In the three decades since then, Albania has gone from a fanatically Marxist, North Korea-style international hermit to one of the most pro-American countries on Earth.<sup>4</sup>

### Methodology

This thesis utilizes primary and secondary sources, historical trend analysis, and interviews with Albanians affiliated with their national government and/or those who have maintained connections to key decision-makers during the post-communist period until Albania's accession to the NATO alliance (1992 – 2009). These sources and methods highlight the impacts of Albanian's unique nature as an ethnolinguistic group separate from its geographic neighbors in a region beset with territorial and ethnic conflict. These external pressures and lack of focus on domestic civic institutions, combined with internal issues such as pervasive corruption, require Albania to secure the support of a powerful geopolitical patron in order to preserve its autonomy and maintain a functioning government that would otherwise be unsustainable. A historical examination identifies the results and conditions of an Albania both with and without an international guarantor. Due to Albania's unique circumstances, this thesis will make no

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<sup>4</sup> Stefanaq, Aleksandër. interview by author, March 4, 2023.

argument regarding the feasibility of similar rapprochement with contemporary American rivals.

Many of my interview subjects requested to limit their personal identification in order to speak freely while avoiding potential retribution or repercussions. For those still in government, the fear of reprisal is very real as many of the key political players discussed in this paper are still in positions of power today. Additionally, current Prime Minister Edi Rama's recent purge of officials viewed as too cozy with the United States as a means of protesting the lack of U.S. support for Albania following recent Iranian cyber-attacks (which were a result of Albania hosting the Iranian dissident group MEK at the urging of the U.S. government) further incentivized respondents to maintain a level of anonymity. This situation resulted in many of the principals who had been at the ministerial level declining or ignoring interview requests. To protect those that requested it, pseudonyms have been used and biographical details have been generalized.

### Organization

The study will follow a general chronological order. This is necessary to show the evolution of Albania's relationship with its neighbors, its allies, and, particularly for this paper, the United States. Those living in the Balkans are also keenly aware of their history (or at least their preferred version of it) and how it relates to contemporary issues such as territorial disputes. When conducting interviews for this study, I noted that, to a person, some element of Albanian history was cited as being relevant to the current Albanian – American relationship. The role of President Woodrow Wilson in preserving Albania's territorial integrity and political autonomy after the First World War was

frequently mentioned by the respondents I interviewed. Initially, I noted this but did not give it the importance it deserved. After all, I do not have strong intergenerational feelings when it comes to foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> I don't harbor grudges against Japan or Germany or their people for being enemies of the U.S. in World War II. I do not have fond feelings for the French as a result of their assistance to the American colonies as they sought their independence from King George III. In the Balkans, however, the past is very much part of the present as we can see from contemporary disagreements over the name "Macedonia" or how distinct the Bulgarian language is from Macedonian or how Serbians felt betrayed as they fought on the same side as the U.S. in both world wars but were still bombed by NATO. In a region of generational grudges and conflicts, the goodwill earned a hundred years ago is still paying dividends and I would not have appreciated this importance in the absence of my interview respondents' comments.

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<sup>5</sup> From ethnic conflict in the Balkans and Africa, to tribal and sectarian violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has frequently found itself in the middle of conflicts for which many Americans lack the understanding provided by historical context.

## Chapter II.

### Contemporary Albania and the United States

Since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, American administrations have supported the political, social, and economic development of a pro-western Albania, which has been and continues to be in the process of building a functioning democratic state along with a free-market economy. Albanian-American relations have been critical for key issues, such as: state sovereignty, independence, autonomy, democracy, and economic prosperity.

During the 30 years following the fall of the communist regime it is reasonable to conclude that relations with the United States have been, in a significant and substantial way, quite decisive for the construction of a free democratic Albania and its integration into the community of free and democratic states. The relations between Albania and the United States remain asymmetrical, often controversial, and almost mythical.<sup>6</sup>

While joining NATO was a several-year-long project for Albania, the country continues to be very closely aligned with both NATO and U.S. priorities. In July of 2022, in a joint press conference with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, NATO secretary general Jen Stoltenberg thanked Rama for Albania's support to Ukraine and for the rapid ratification of the NATO bids of Sweden and Finland.<sup>7</sup> In March of 2022, Albania agreed to host the United States Special Operations Command Task Group Balkans, joined in US and EU sanctions on Russia in response to the latter's invasion of Ukraine, and

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<sup>6</sup> Stefanaq, interview.

<sup>7</sup> Ruci, Klara. "Stoltenberg press conference with Rama: I welcome Albania's support to Ukraine and its commitment to humanitarian aid." *Radio Tirana Internacional*, July 13, 2022. <https://www.rti.rts.al/article/stoltenberg-press-conference-with-rama-i-welcome-albania-s-support-to-ukraine-and-its-commitment-to-humanitarian-aid>



offered to host Ukrainian refugees. The mayor of Tirana renamed the street on which both the Ukrainian and Russian embassies are located as “Free Ukraine Street” and, in the initial days of the invasion, regular pro-Ukrainian marches were held in Albania’s capital city.

Albania still contributes to NATO’s Kosovo Force (KFOR), almost two-and-a-half decades after its inception. In August of 2021, Albania agreed to resettle up to 4,000 Afghan refugees that the U.S. had evacuated from Afghanistan but was unwilling to resettle in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Albania’s support for the U.S. Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was extensive and even involved political risk. In 2006, Albania accepted the transfer of eight detainees from the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay to assist the American effort to reduce the detainee population.<sup>9</sup> In December 2003, a German citizen, Khaled El-Masri, was detained in Macedonia after being mistaken for a member of al-Qa’ida with the same name. Macedonian officials turned him over to American custody where he was transferred to a U.S. detainee facility in Afghanistan. By March 2004, U.S. counterterrorism officials realized they had a case of mistaken identity. In May 2004, El-Masri was transferred to Albania and released in an attempt to conceal that he had been in American custody in Afghanistan for five months.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Higgins, Andrew. 2021. “Luxury, Trauma for Afghan Refugees [Corrected 09/16/2021].” Chicago Tribune, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Deliso, Christopher. 2007. *The Coming Balkan Caliphate: The Threat of Radical Islam to Europe and the West*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International.

<sup>10</sup> *Khaled El-Masri v. United States*. US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit - 479 F.3d 296 (4th Cir. 2007) Argued November 28, 2006, Decided March 2, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *El-Masri v. Tenet*, 437 F. Supp. 2d 530 (E.D. Va. 2006)

<sup>12</sup> Kulish, Nicholas. 2012. “Court Finds Rights Violation in C.I.A. Rendition Case.” *The New York Times*, 2012, Late Edition (East Coast) edition.

Another politically fraught favor of the Albanian government on behalf of the United States has recently come back to bite. In 2016, Albania, at U.S. urging, agreed to host the Iranian dissident group People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI/MEK) which had previously been headquartered in Iraq. This action strained Albanian-Iranian relations, leading to threats and saber-rattling from the Islamic Republic.

In 2022, Iran’s bluster about the group escalated to action when cyber-attacks in July and September took down essential components of Albanian government agencies and services.<sup>13, 14</sup> This led to the severing of diplomatic ties between Albania and Iran. Unsatisfied with the level of U.S. support and assistance in response to actions taken on its behalf, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama responded by removing multiple, high-ranking government officials who had particularly close working relationships with the United States. Highlighting Albanian positive feelings towards the U.S., politically resurrected former Albanian prime minister and president Sali Berisha (who had his own dispute with the U.S. after being designated *persona non grata* (PNG) by the American State Department in 2021) publicly attacked Rama for his spat with the U.S. An Albanian politician, coming out of retirement after being “PNG’d” by the U.S., and attacking his opponent for being insufficiently pro-American speaks volumes about the bilateral relationship and its potent significance for the Albanian people, according to former campaign advisor and media consultant, Vasjan Topi.<sup>15</sup> “The Albanian-American people-to-people relationship is always stronger and more stable compared to the government-to-government [relationship]” causing politicians to lean on the relationship for their own

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<sup>13</sup> CNN Wire. 2022. “Albania Blames Iran for Second Cyberattack Since July.”

<sup>14</sup> Microsoft investigates Iranian attacks against the Albanian government. Microsoft Threat Intelligence. September 8, 2022

<sup>15</sup> Topi, Vasjan, interview by author, March 11, 2023.

credibility and to boost their own popularity explained Andi L. who worked as a media editor prior to accepting a position within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>16</sup>

In 2020, Albania became the first Muslim-majority country to open an embassy in Jerusalem, following the U.S. decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem in 2018. This move was a response to the U.S. decision and an attempt to strengthen Albanian ties with the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

To understand how Albanian-American relations have reached their current point, some historical background is necessary. Indeed, to understand almost any issue, current or otherwise, in the conflict-fraught Balkans, an understanding of historical context is required. One American analyst noted that, “My favorite thing about the Balkans is that when you ask someone to explain even a simple issue, they invariably start by going back at least 400 years.”<sup>18</sup>

More specifically, events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were key in establishing a solid foundation for a bilateral relationship. “An understanding of the politics of the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, The First World War and [U.S. President] Woodrow Wilson is needed to understand the friendly relationship between Albania and the U.S.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Lleshi, Andreas, interview by author, March 16, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Topi, interview.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with United States intelligence analyst, February 15, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Stefanaq, interview.

### Chapter III.

#### A Short History

Throughout most of history, Albanians as an ethno-linguistic group have been without a state. The International Commission supported by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace that was set up to examine the Balkan Wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century discusses this trend in the context of the Balkans at large: "... the national idea was not as now closely connected with the State idea. The Bulgar, the Servian, the Wallachian, the Albanian remained Bulgarian, Servian, Wallachian or Albanian, throughout all the successive regimes."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps that is why Albanians have emphasized and continue to feel so strong in their ethnic identity such that Albania is set apart from some of its geographic neighbors as a Balkan country with minimal internal strife between Albanians of different identities: Albanian Orthodox Christians, Albanian Catholics, and Albanian Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a. In contrast, ethnic Albanian populations in nearby Serbia-Kosovo and North Macedonia have seen conflict—including war and genocide—with neighboring religious and ethnic groups. "The main religion of Albania is 'Albanianism.'"<sup>21</sup>

Albania, throughout its history, has been either subject to, or manipulated by, larger geopolitical powers, from the Roman Province of Illyricum when the Romans defeated Gentius, the last king of Illyria (in 168 BCE at present-day Shkodra in northern

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<sup>20</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 1914. Division of Intercourse and Education. Report of the Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars. Washington D.C.

<sup>21</sup> Topi, interview.

Albania),<sup>22</sup> to the *Ishkodre Vilayet* of the Ottoman Empire,<sup>23</sup> to a protectorate of fascist Italy during the early days of the Second World War. While the Albanians being descendants of the Illyrians remains controversial and unproven,<sup>24</sup> it is taken on faith by most Albanians and, even if separate people, they nevertheless occupied the same geographic area.<sup>25</sup> Much of Balkan history and indeed, the eponymous Balkanization of the area is directly related in large part to the region's physical geography: land dotted with mountains and rivers, natural barriers which facilitated isolation and the development of separate identities and made interaction more difficult and less frequent. Even during the brief periods of Albanian independence, it remained subject to the machinations of great powers and a target for the territorial expansion of neighboring powers. An analysis of Albania conducted by the U.S. Central Intelligence Group (the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency) included: "The strategic location of Albania has made that country from the earliest times a theater in which greater neighboring powers have contended against each other for mastery. Since the days of Alexander, the land has been subjected to the domination of first one and then another of these powers."<sup>26</sup> Lacking a history of a strong, independent state, Albania has, throughout history, sought powerful geopolitical patrons to counter external influence even ceding elements of its sovereignty in order to retain what autonomy it could. The last Illyrian

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<sup>22</sup> "Illyria." 2020. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica Inc.

<sup>23</sup> Erickson, Edward J. 2003. *Defeat in Detail: The Ottoman Army in the Balkans, 1912-1913*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

<sup>24</sup> For instance, in his book, *Empires of the Steppes*, Kenneth Harl, professor of Classic and Byzantine history posits the Sarmatians as the most likely ancient relatives of modern Albanians.

<sup>25</sup> With Balkan disputes over land often involving which people have the oldest claim or who inhabited the land first, while many Albanians claim Illyrian descent, Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha went one further to claim direct Albanian descent from the Pelasgi, the inhabitants of Greece and Thrace in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>26</sup> Central Intelligence Group. Situation Report: Albania 15 Aug 1947. P.I-1. Accessed at: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78-01617A001400050001-0.pdf>

kingdoms allied with Macedonia in the face of Roman expansion.<sup>27</sup> During the Communist Era, Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha aligned with, at different times, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and China. After the collapse of communism in Albania, the nation immediately entered the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Partnership for Peace (PfP) program with the goal of eventual accession to full alliance membership with American advocacy for inclusion being key for successful accession in 2009.

### Classical and Medieval Eras

Just as Albania would be under the Ottoman Empire, Illyria was a source of martial strength for the Roman Empire. Illyrians provided capable military forces, with a significant number of Illyrian soldiers entrusted to serve in the Praetorian Guard. Illyrians would even ascend to the emperor's throne itself as several Roman Emperors, including Claudius II Gothicus, Aurelian, Diocletian, and Constantine the Great, would be of Illyrian heritage.<sup>28</sup>

Being on the frontier of the Roman Empire during its decline, Illyria (Albania), with the rest of the Balkan Peninsula, saw repeated invasions by Visigoths, Huns, Bulgars, Slavs, and, ultimately, the Ottoman Empire with the capture of Constantinople in 1453 and the collapse of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire. Woven with geographic barriers such as mountains and rivers, the Balkans were as fragmented and divided during this period as they are today. Albanians, like many of the Balkan

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<sup>27</sup> Ironically, by siding with Demetrius II of Macedon and, later, Philip V, Illyria ensured that Rome would not allow the tribal kingdoms of Illyria to remain separate and independent.

<sup>28</sup> "Illyria," Encyclopædia Britannica.

populations, were dominated by their larger neighbors. Most of the region's inhabitants were Slavs, an ethnic group that was further divided among Bulgarians, Macedonians, Serbs, Bosnians, Dalmatians, Croats, and Slovenes. Unlike most of their neighbors, who typically belonged to one faith as an ethnic group, e.g., Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats, Albanian identity was more ethnolinguistic,<sup>29</sup> as Albanians were divided among the Catholic and Orthodox traditions of Christianity. The first period of Albanian independence was extremely brief, beginning in 1190 with dissolution of the Byzantine Principality of Arbanon and ending in 1216 after being dominated by neighboring Epirus. Albania was granted a measure of autonomy, but not independence, after being conquered by the Angevins of southern Italy, led by Charles of Anjou who was proclaimed King of Albania in 1272. This state collapsed in 1286 after repeated conflicts between the Angevins and Byzantines as the latter attempted to regain some of its lost territories. In 1304, Albania was re-conquered by the same Angevin kingdom which proceeded to grant an even greater degree of autonomy to the vassalized Kingdom of Albania which would be conquered, once again, in the late 1340s by the Serbs and be incorporated into the Kingdom of Serbia under Stefan Dušan. As would be repeated over six hundred years later, this fragile and motley Slavic kingdom collapsed after its leader died in 1355 amid conflicts among his heirs and vassals. Albania fell into a state of anarchy but nevertheless succeeded in defeating an invading army of Hospitaller Crusaders in 1378. This victory was likely aided by the Ottoman Empire which would begin the process of incorporating Albania into its own borders in 1385.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Albanian, being a language isolate likely contributed to this being a significant source of group identity.

<sup>30</sup> Nicolle, David. 2010. *Cross and Crescent in the Balkans: the Ottoman Conquest of South-Eastern Europe (14th - 15th Centuries)*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military: 7-9, 11

It was noted, at the time, that the Albanians “were tribally rather than feudally organized.”<sup>31</sup> Elements of tribal society would continue throughout Albania’s history, contributing to form the modern Albanian state would take.

### Ottoman Period

Albania would be under some form of Ottoman rule for hundreds of years from the initial Ottoman invasion in 1385 until a brief period of independence in 1912. The Ottoman conquest of Albania however, required several decades to complete, ultimately becoming part of the empire of Sultan Murad I in 1481.

### Skanderbeg

Resisting the conquest of the Ottomans over Albania, was the guerilla leader, and now national hero, Gjerj (George) Castriota (variants: Castrioti, Kastrioti), more widely known by his Ottoman name of Iskander Bey or Skanderbeg and often termed the “Braveheart of Albania.”<sup>32</sup>

Skanderbeg was born in 1405 the son of a local Albanian ruler attempting to thread the political needle between Venice to the west and the Ottomans to the east. As part of this effort, young Skanderbeg was sent as a hostage to be raised in the Ottoman court in Adrianople where he converted to Islam and took the name Alexander, or Iskander in its Turkish form. Proving himself a capable military leader at a young age, Iskander was granted the title of chieftain, *bey* in Turkish, giving him the name/title of Iskander Bey,

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<sup>31</sup> Nicolle, *Cross and Crescent*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> Murdarasi, Karen. 2018. “Skanderbeg: A Man for Our Times? Albania's Greatest Military Hero Dedicated His Life to Fighting for His Beleaguered Homeland.” *History Today* 68 (5): 8.



westernized into Skanderbeg. In 1443, Skanderbeg, with a small Albanian force, deserted from the Ottoman Turkish military and, using a forged letter to remove the Ottoman garrison, set himself up in the mountain fortress of Kruje, the former capital of the short-lived Kingdom of Albania. Skanderbeg succeeded in creating a confederation with other local Albanian principalities under his leadership. He then returned to his Christian religious roots, seeking out and receiving assistance from Venice, Naples, and Pope Calixtus III.<sup>33</sup> While Skanderbeg and his small guerilla army delayed and harassed the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the western Balkans for 25 years, the resistance effort was finally defeated a decade after his death in 1468, finally bringing the borders of the Ottoman Empire to the coast of the Adriatic Sea.

In summarizing Skanderbeg's life, one contemporary chronicler highlighted the importance of Skanderbeg to Albanian identity:

George Skanderbeg, a man of noble birth, received his inheritance. He spent almost his whole life in arms, fighting for the name of Christ, King Alfonso often sent soldiers to Albania and, after taking control of the city of Krujë, defended it against the Turks Pope Calixtus, too, sent Skanderbeg much monetary assistance.<sup>34</sup>

#### Another Brief Independence

As the Ottoman Empire began to weaken, beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Albania began to see a rising tide of nationalism. This opposition to Ottoman overlordship was, in part, due to the suppression of the Albanian language and culture by the Turks. Albanian rebels began conducting harassing attacks on isolated villages, local officials, and the railroad system. These were more of a nuisance than a significant military threat but as

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<sup>33</sup> Murdarasi, "Skanderbeg."

<sup>34</sup> Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini. 2013. "Front Matter." *In Europe (c.1400-1458)*, (p. 114). Catholic University of America Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt5hgzhx.1>.

the attacks increased, restrictive laws were passed which banned the creation of political parties that threatened the unity of the empire, banned newspapers that did not support the constitution, and limited public gatherings. In addition, new antiterrorism laws were passed which increased the ability of the government to suppress rebellion and allowed the suspension of civil liberties of accused terrorists. These new laws repudiated the traditional Ottoman principle of minority rights and autonomy, increasing dissent in Albania and, indeed, throughout the empire.<sup>35</sup>

Christian Armenians began to call for the creation of an independent Armenia. The Bulgarians as well as the Greeks in Macedonia began to foment discontent and the Albanians openly revolted. Albanians, in particular, saw the new Ottoman antiterrorism laws as a betrayal since some of the most influential members of the Turkish parliament were Albanian. The rebellion had an ethno-nationalist flavor, attracting both Muslim and Christian Albanians. In the face of widespread discontent and rebellion, in the summer of 1911, the Ottoman government relaxed many of its repressive measures in an effort at conciliation; but combined these with policies aimed at weakening Balkan secessionist movements. One such policy was the confiscation of rebellious territories by the Empire and granting it to loyal populations for their own colonization—becoming a source of generational conflicts over land.<sup>36</sup> The war expanded as further negotiations collapsed and Italy, seeing an opportunity to undermine the Ottoman Empire, began to provide arms to the Albanian rebels.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Howard, Douglas A. 2017. *A History of the Ottoman Empire*. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>36</sup> This policy would add more fuel to the fires of ethnic conflict in the Balkans, playing a role in the wars following the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>37</sup> Carnegie Endowment, Balkan Wars.

Albanian nationalists rebelled against the Ottoman government and created the Provisional Government of Albania in April 1911. The Ottoman government answered by declaring martial law in Albania two weeks later. After four months of conflict, the Ottoman government and Albanian nationalist representatives signed a ceasefire in Podgorica and the Ottomans accepted the demands of the Albanian nationalists a year later in September 1912. A month after Albania separated itself from the Ottoman Empire than, Serbian and Montenegrin forces laid siege to Scutari (present-day Shkodër or Shkodra) in northern Albania. Other Balkan nationalities saw Ottoman weakness and wanted to avoid the creation of a “Greater Albania” that would include regions claimed by Macedonia, Serbia, and Greece. Serbian troops occupied Durres, on the coast of Albania, and Greek troops invaded southern Albania.<sup>38</sup> Within weeks of Albania losing its protection as part of the Ottoman Empire, it was invaded on three fronts by its Balkan neighbors. While politically breaking from the Ottoman Empire, the new Albanian state sought to maintain friendly relations with the Ottomans as a means of preserving its newly won autonomy.

Albanian President Ismail Kemal Bey referred the matter to the Concert of Europe and the ambassadors of the major powers (Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia) who met in London to discuss the issue on December 17, 1912, where they agreed to recognize Albania as an autonomous principality under the Ottoman Empire. For their part, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro all opposed an independent Albania. In the London Protocol of March 22, 1913, the major powers

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<sup>38</sup> Carnegie Endowment, *Balkan Wars*: 47, 150-151; Schurman, Jacob Gould. 2009. *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913*. Floating Press: 8

defined Albania's borders and demanded the withdrawal of foreign troops. Throughout this tumultuous period, those powers seeking influence in, and control of Balkan territory all had designs on Albania. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's report on the Balkan Wars noted that at this point, "Albania erected into a principality, remains the most unhappy and the wildest object of the eager watching of Austria, Servia, Montenegro, Greece and Italy."<sup>39</sup>

### Caught Between Great Powers--The First Balkan War 1912-1913

The Balkan Wars were a series of conflicts in 1912 and 1913. The result of these wars was the weakening of the Ottoman Empire's control over the region and the emergence of several independent states. In the First Balkan War in 1912, an alliance of Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, and Montenegro fought against the Ottoman Empire. The alliance was able to defeat the Ottoman forces and gain control of much of the Balkan peninsula. As a result, new independent states were established, including Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria. Greece also expanded its territory, gaining control of the Aegean islands and some parts of western Turkey.

Victory and peace, however, were short-lived as Bulgaria, feeling that it had been cheated of its fair share of the spoils of war, attacked Serbia and Greece in the Second Balkan War (1913). This time, the Bulgarian forces were defeated by the alliance, and as a result, Bulgaria lost some of the territory it had gained in the first war. Identifying a trend which would continue in later wars in the Southeastern Europe, the authors of the Carnegie Endowment report described the Balkan Wars as "a war of religion, of reprisals,

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<sup>39</sup> Carnegie Endowment, Balkan Wars, 16.

of race, a war of one people against another, of man against man and brother against brother. It has become a competition, as to who can best dispossess and ‘denationalize’ his neighbor”<sup>40</sup>

The Balkan Wars did little to resolve Balkan rivalries or the maneuvering of other European powers for influence in the region, helping set the stage for the tragic carnage the ensuing Great War would bring.

The Balkan Wars deprived the Ottoman Empire of all its remaining territory in Europe except part of Thrace and the city of Adrianople (present-day Edirne). Greece gained southern Macedonia as well as the island of Crete. Serbia gained the Kosovo region and extended into northern and central Macedonia. Albania was made an independent state under a German prince. The political consequences of the wars were considerable. Apart from Turkey, the real loser was Austria-Hungary. The partitioning of the sanjak of Novi Pazar between Serbia and Montenegro made it impossible in the subsequent crisis of June–July 1914 for Austria-Hungary to intervene in the Balkans. This made the subsequent Austro-Hungarian ultimatum to Serbia on July 23, 1914, to appear as naked aggression. The wars likewise altered the structure of alliances in the Balkans. Bulgaria looked to Austria-Hungary for support, while Romania tended to move out of the influence of the Triple Alliance and toward the Triple Entente. The Turks began to put their house in order and with the help of German technical advisers began to strengthen the organization of their army.

The most alarming aspect of the war was the growth of tension between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Serbia had extensive claims upon Albanian territory. Having obtained an assurance of German support, Austria-Hungary delivered an ultimatum on October 17, 1913, to compel Serbia to withdraw from the Albanian borderlands. This, however, did not solve for Austria-Hungary the Southern Slav question, which emerged again in an acute form with the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serb on June 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, Bosnia. Tensions and resentment in the Balkans still ran high, and the result of the Balkan Wars largely determined the behavior of its participants during the First World War.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Carnegie Endowment, *Balkan Wars*: 16

<sup>41</sup> Stefanaq, interview.

Overall, the Balkan Wars resulted in the emergence of several new independent states in the Balkan region, but they also contributed to the tensions and rivalries that would eventually lead to World War I. The Ottoman Empire was weakened by the loss of territory and influence in the region, which made it more vulnerable to further disintegration and collapse. Months before the First World War would begin, ignited by events in the Balkans, Baron d'Estournelles de Constant, French member of the Carnegie Endowment Commission to study the Balkan Wars, predicted that armed conflict would again break out in the Balkans and that European powers would become entangled far more than they had during the Balkan Wars: “Then the Greeks, the Turks, the Servians, the Bulgarians, the Montenegrins and the Albanians, armed to the teeth, provided with all the guns and all the dreadnoughts for which we have no further use, can kill each other once more, and even drag into their quarrel the European governments, who will be as they themselves are, victims of the press and commercial patriotism, or in other words, of the policy of armaments.”<sup>42</sup>

Writing in 1914, Jacob Gould Schurman, who had only recently left his position of U.S. Ambassador to Greece the previous year, stated:

In the aftermath of the war in the negotiations between Austria-Hungary, Russia, and Turkey, the Austro-Hungarians sought to limit Serbia (which was a Russian ally and thus a proxy rival) by preventing access to the Adriatic. The method for achieving this was to propose a state for one of the larger ethnic groups in the Balkans without a home country: Albania. . . The new State has been a powder magazine from the beginning, and since the withdrawal of Prince William of Wied, the government, always powerless, has fallen into chaos. Intervention on the part of neighboring states is inevitable. And only last month the southern part of Albania—that

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<sup>42</sup> Carnegie Endowment, *Balkan Wars*, 17-18.

is, Northern Epirus—was occupied by a Greek army for the purpose of ending the sanguinary anarchy which has hitherto prevailed. Throughout the rest of Albania similar intervention will be necessary to establish order, and to protect the life and property of the inhabitants without distinction of race, tribe, or creed.<sup>43</sup>

## World War I

As a newly independent state Albania remained neutral at the outset of the First World War, but its geographic location in the Balkans made it an important strategic target for the warring parties and it soon found itself at the center of the conflict as Austria-Hungary occupied northern Albania and established a protectorate, while Italy declared war on Austria-Hungary and took control of southern Albania. Albania's strategic location between the Adriatic and Ionian Seas made it a desirable prize for the various belligerents and its people suffered greatly as a result.

In 1914, as the war began, the Albanian government tried to negotiate with the belligerents to respect Albania's sovereignty. However, Albania's neighbors—Serbia, Montenegro, Greece—saw the opportunity to expand their territories at Albanian expense. Serbia invaded in 1914 but would withdraw less than a year later after suffering heavy losses. Shortly after, the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) would occupy Albania but would fare as well as the Serbians had and withdraw less than a year later as well. This withdrawal led to a state of chaos for Albania until British and French forces launched the Salonika Campaign (1915-1918), opening a new front against the

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<sup>43</sup> Schurman, *The Balkan Wars*, 7-8.

Central Powers in the Balkans and gradually extending Allied control over Albania which would last until the end of the war.

After the war ended in 1918, Albania's territorial integrity and independence were eventually recognized by the Great Powers at the Paris Peace Conference. Albania faced numerous challenges in the aftermath of World War I, including political instability, economic hardship, and territorial disputes with neighboring states.

### Woodrow Wilson

“When you look at the world after World War I in 1919-1920 and Woodrow Wilson’s decision not to allow the dismemberment of Albania, the map of Albania would probably not exist.”<sup>44</sup>

In December 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson left for Europe where he spent most of the next six months involved in the negotiations surrounding the Paris Peace Conference. Wilson rejected the idea of secret alliances in his Paris discussions. One of those was the so-called Tittoni-Venizelos of 1919, where Italy and Greece agreed to divide Albania between them. These secret agreements were made without the knowledge or support of the United States to divide Albania, and when President Wilson found out he refused to support it owing to his principle of self-determination as well as from contacts with Albanian-Americans.<sup>45</sup> Following this pivotal moment, the relationship between Albania and the United States proved to be influential if not

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<sup>44</sup> Stefanaq, interview.

<sup>45</sup> Vora, Rovena. 2021. “The American Attitude Towards Albania During the Peacemaking in 1919.” *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research* 8 (2): 48-49. <https://doi.org/10.26417/137cqc92u>; Stefanaq, interview; Dervishi, Erjon. 2020. “THE ALBANIAN QUESTION AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE DURING 1919-1920.” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs (Bitola)* 2 (2): 128–130. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2020123d>. 128



decisive in developing and maintaining democracy and establishing a western orientation for the small state for over a century. Wilson's championing of Albania's independence cemented a positive relationship and engendered appreciation and trust which would weather the diplomatic alienation of the two countries during the Cold War and become a key factor in Albanian geopolitical alignment decades later.<sup>46</sup> The importance, impact, and contemporary relevance of Wilson's actions was repeatedly emphasized by my respondents, including Enis Koçi, an Islamic scholar who represented Albanian interests in the Middle East and directed Albanian information operations throughout Europe and the Middle East.

#### Inter-War Period

Following the end of World War 1, Albania faced a period of uncertainty and instability as it struggled to assert its independence and establish itself as a viable state. The country was plagued by internal divisions, external threats, and economic difficulties, all of which hindered its progress and left it vulnerable to further foreign intervention. In the face of these challenges, its military underwent significant modernization and expansion, and its ties with other European countries grew stronger.

Albania managed to survive this difficult period and maintain itself as a sovereign state, albeit one that was still struggling to establish its place in the world. A major challenge facing Albania during this period was the threat of foreign intervention. Albania was located in a strategically important region, and it was surrounded by powerful neighbors who had long-standing claims over its territory. Italy, in particular,

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<sup>46</sup> Lleshi, interview; Koçi, Enis. interview by author, March 6, 2023.

posed a significant threat to Albania's independence as it sought to expand its influence across the Adriatic into the Balkans. In 1927, Italy signed a treaty with Albania that guaranteed its territorial integrity, but this agreement did little to assuage Albanian fears of Italian aggression.

Another significant development in Albania during this period was the rise of King Zog. Born Ahmed Muhtar bey Zogolli, Zog served as Albanian Prime Minister from 1922 to 1924, then as President from 1925 to 1928, and then as king from 1928 until 1939. Zog was a charismatic and dynamic leader who was determined to modernize and develop Albania, and he embarked on a program of ambitious reforms designed to transform the country. Under his leadership, Albania saw significant improvements in its infrastructure, economy, and military, as well as increased ties with other European countries. Despite these successes, however, Zog's rule, in keeping with Balkan trends and later Albanian leaders, was marked by authoritarianism and corruption. He relied heavily on the military to maintain his power and his government was accused of human rights abuses and suppression of political opposition.

## World War II

In 1939, Albania once again faced invasion, as Italy launched a full-scale attack on the country and established a puppet government under King Zog's nephew after the former was forced to flee the country. The Italian occupation of Albania was marked by widespread human rights abuses, economic exploitation, and cultural suppression. Albanian history during World War II echoed that of pre-First World War: occupation by foreign powers, armed resistance movements, shifting politics, and a struggle for

independence. After the surrender of Italy to the Allies in 1943, Albanian resistance movements continued to struggle against occupying forces of Nazi Germany. These various resistance groups, including a communist faction led by Enver Hoxha, comprised the Albanian National Liberation Movement. Hoxha's communist ideology gained popularity and played a crucial role in organizing the disparate resistance efforts. As the war neared its end, communist forces under Hoxha's leadership emerged as the dominant resistance group in no small part due to the support provided by the sympathetic communist Yugoslav resistance.

After the Second World War, Hoxha's communist regime established a one-party state in Albania. Hoxha's leadership was characterized by an admiration for and adherence to Stalinist ideology, isolationism, and the absolute power of the state. The communist regime implemented radical social and economic reforms, including the collectivization of agriculture and the suppression of political opposition. Albania became one of the most isolated and closed countries in the world, with limited international engagement and labeling the United States as Albania's greatest enemy.

#### Cold War/Communist Era

Albania's Cold War era is influenced heavily by international isolation and domestic repression. Albania's history of being conquered by neighbors, carved up by external powers, and collapsing due to internal rivalries were Hoxha's prime concerns as evidenced by both his actions as well as his extensive writings. Historically incapable of single-handedly preserving its borders, communist Albania, while isolated from most of the world, sought international patrons, acting almost as a client state.

Albania's geopolitical alignment during the Cold War era was with the communist bloc and strongly opposed to the United States and western Europe. The country's international relations are worth consideration as it mirrors earlier Albanian relations by adopting a powerful patron to protect Albania from external and internal threats and to maintain an otherwise unsustainable system.

### Enver Hoxha

The communist era in Albania lasted for several decades until the regime's collapse in 1992. The country faced numerous challenges during this time, including economic stagnation, political repression, and a decline in living standards. The Cold War period of Albanian history has no figure more consequential than Hoxha, who even outlasted his neighboring communist autocrat Josip Broz Tito of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Known for his authoritarian and repressive policies, the establishment of an oppressive secret police system (simply known as *Sigurimi* or "security"), and the use of forced labor camps, Hoxha was born in 1908 in what was then Ottoman-controlled Albania. He adopted Marxist-Leninist ideology during his education in France and in 1936 returned home and joined the Communist Party of Albania, which was then only a small underground organization. After the end of the war, Hoxha (who had been appointed Secretary-General of the party in 1941) and the Communist Party of Albania gained control of the government. Hoxha then began to consolidate his power and eliminate his political rivals. He purged the government and the party of anyone who opposed him, including the leaders of the National Liberation Movement who had fought

alongside him during the war. One of the rooms of Tirana's "House of Leaves"<sup>47</sup> has its walls covered with row upon row of the names of Albanians executed or "disappeared" during the communist era and adorned with pictures of the trials of Hoxha's fellow resistance leaders. While touring the room, Enis Koçi passionately noted, "Imagine if George Washington had tried and executed the rest of the American founding fathers and these were their pictures."<sup>48</sup>

Hoxha also established a personality cult around himself and began to promote himself as the "father of the nation" and the sole leader of Albania. He implemented a system of strict control over all aspects of Albanian society, including the media, education, and religion, while eliminating any form of dissent or opposition.

Hoxha maintained his grip on power through a combination of repression, propaganda, and economic policies. He continued to purge the Communist Party of Albania and the government of anyone who opposed him, and he implemented a system of surveillance and repression that kept the population under constant control. He also implemented policies of self-reliance and isolationism, which further reinforced his control over Albanian society.

Control was absolute, even forbidding travel from one's hometown without prior government approval. As a young *Sigurimi* officer during this era, Kristofor S., had followed the rules and requested permission to travel to his fiancé's hometown in order to get married. After not receiving approval for several weeks and with the wedding date

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<sup>47</sup> Officially known as the Museum of Secret Surveillance, the House of Leaves in Tirana was the headquarters of *Sigurimi*, the Albanian secret police during the communist era. It has been converted to a museum "dedicated to the innocent people who were spied on, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and executed during the communist regime."

<sup>48</sup> Koçi, Enis. comments to the author, August 2022.

imminent, he decided that he would have received approval so boarded the bus to his fiancé's hometown. As the bus was approaching the city limits, the local *Sigurimi* chief, Kristofor's supervisor, stood in the middle of the road, stopped the bus, and pulled Kristofor off, forcing the families of both bride and groom to reschedule the event at the last minute.<sup>49</sup>

Nothing was too minor or small to be policed. Jozef J., then a young boy but now an Albanian security official leading an organized crime task force, recalled that having long sideburns (at the time popular in Western culture) could lead to one being arrested and/or beaten. As a young child, Jozef had a picture of his father, a university professor, with several of his colleagues. As these professors would be imprisoned, executed, or simply disappear, Jozef would cross out that individual's face.<sup>50</sup>

In his first meeting with Stalin, Hoxha bragged that, "We have struck and continue to strike hard at internal reaction . . . We have had successes in our struggle to expose and defeat it. As for the physical liquidation of enemies, this has been done either in the direct clashes of our forces with the bands of armed criminals, or according to verdicts of people's courts in the trials of traitors and the closest collaborators of the occupiers."<sup>51</sup>

As the authoritarian sole ruler for four-decades, Albanian foreign policy was essentially Hoxha's relationship with the leaders of other countries. The closest relationships were, unsurprisingly, with other communist-led nations. With previous

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<sup>49</sup> S., Kristofor. interview by author March 2, 2023.

<sup>50</sup> J., Jozef, interview by author. February 19, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1981. *With Stalin: Memoirs*. Reproduced and accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/stalin/meet1.htm>

periods of Albanian independence ending due to outside aggression or internal conflict, Hoxha, as with previous Albanian rulers, sought the protection and support of powerful patrons.

### Yugoslavia

Due to the cooperation and support the Albanian communist guerillas received from communist Yugoslav partisans during World War II, the two nations and their respective leaders initially had a strong and close relationship based on their shared commitment to socialism and their opposition to imperialist powers. Hoxha and Yugoslavia's Tito saw themselves as leaders of the Balkan communist revolution and advocates for the promotion of socialism throughout the region. Hoxha's personal hero, Josef Stalin, encouraged Hoxha to align with Tito. In memorializing his meetings with Josef Stalin, Hoxha wrote that, "Comrade Stalin asked me, and added, "It is a very good thing that you have friendly Yugoslavia on your border, because Albania is a small country and as such needs strong support from its friends.'"<sup>52</sup>

The relationship between the two Balkan countries, mimicking previous similar arrangements, was unequal with Albania playing the role of junior partner. Before World War II, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia had supported transferring Kosovo to Albania, but Yugoslavia's postwar communist regime insisted on preserving the country's prewar borders. Under pressure from Yugoslavia, Albania's communists agreed to repudiate the prewar agreement and to not challenge restoring Kosovo to Yugoslavia after the war. In January 1945, the two governments signed a treaty

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<sup>52</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1981. *With Stalin: Memoirs*. Reproduced and accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/stalin/meet1.htm>

reincorporating Kosovo into Yugoslavia as an autonomous province. In return, Yugoslavia became the first country to recognize Hoxha's provisional government.

While eliminating domestic rivals and consolidating power in Albania, Hoxha was also concerned with the potential for "imperial invasion" (i.e., an Anglo-American attack). Hoxha claimed that Great Britain had always considered Albania to be a "token of barter" and "the aims of these two imperialist states [Great Britain and the United States] were to get possession of our coastline which dominates the Straights of Otranto, to transform Albania into a bridgehead for penetration into the Balkans, to exploit our natural riches."<sup>53</sup> Yugoslavia also provided money, equipment, and trainers for the Albanian Army and stationed Yugoslav Army units on Albania's territory.

In September 1947, the communist parties of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Poland, France, and Czechoslovakia established the Communist Information Bureau (also known as the Cominform) to coordinate the policies and activities of the respective communist parties across Europe and to promote the spread of socialism. The Cominform was a response to the independence from Stalin that Tito had begun to demonstrate as well as their increasingly divergent views on communist ideology. The absence of Albania at the Cominform founding further highlights Albania's deferential role towards Yugoslavia, which represented Albania at Cominform meetings until Yugoslavia's expulsion from the organization in 1948 at which point Albania became a member in its own right.

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<sup>53</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1982. *The Anglo-American Threat to Albania: Memoirs of the National Liberation War*. Toronto: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin Institute: 5, 11.



Albania was reliant on Yugoslavia in both economic and military terms. Indeed, Albania relied so heavily on Yugoslavia that Tito sought to incorporate Albania into post-war Yugoslavia and deployed Yugoslav Army units ostensibly to defend Greek communist bases in Albania. The pro-Yugoslav faction in Albania wielded decisive political power in Albania well into 1948. At a party plenum in February and March, the communist leadership voted to merge the Albanian and Yugoslav economies and militaries.<sup>54</sup>

Hoxha was outraged by these events and, three days later, Tirana gave the Yugoslav advisers in Albania forty-eight hours to leave the country, rescinded all bilateral economic agreements with its neighbor, and launched a virulent anti-Yugoslav propaganda blitz that transformed Stalin into an Albanian national hero, Hoxha into a warrior against foreign aggression, and Tito into an imperialist monster. Hoxha pinned the blame for any of the country's woes on Yugoslavia and purged the Albanian government and communist party of Tito-sympathizers. Hoxha had Koçi Xoxe, who had served as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior and was the leader of the pro-Yugoslav faction in the Albanian communist government, arrested for "Titoism" and for allegedly working for British and American intelligence. Nine months later, after his supporters had been arrested and tried, he was executed for treason in 1949.<sup>55</sup>

With the growing divide between Tito and both Hoxha and Stalin, Albania chose to align even closer with the Soviet Union with Moscow stepping in to compensate for the loss of Yugoslav aid. In a speech in Moscow in 1960, Hoxha referred to the: "Traitors

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<sup>54</sup> Dranqoli, Albina. 2011. "Tito's Attempt to Integrate Albania into Yugoslavia, 1945-1948." *History Studies International Journal of History* 2 (3): 192-196.

<sup>55</sup> "Xoxe, Koçi." 2009. *A Dictionary of Political Biography*. Oxford University Press.

to Marxism-Leninism, agents of imperialism and intriguers like Josif Broz Tito, try in a thousand ways, by hatching up diabolic schemes like the creation of a third force, to mislead these people and the newly-set up states, to detach them from their natural allies, to hitch them up to U.S. imperialism. We should exert all our efforts to defeat the schemes of these lackeys of imperialism.”<sup>56</sup>

The evolution of communism in Yugoslavia and Albania could not have been more different. Yugoslavia undertook limited pro-market reforms and economic decentralization while the Albanian government maintained its devotion to Stalinist central planning and state ownership of property. While the Yugoslavs pursued the decentralization of the state and progressively reduced the power of the federal government, in Albania the state became an increasingly dominant influence in all aspects of life. Albania became closed and centralized, while Yugoslavia developed a system of market socialism, open to trade and the out-migration of labor. As a leading member of the Movement of Non-Aligned Nations, Yugoslavia acted as a bridge between the opposing power blocs in the Cold War. In contrast, Albania isolated itself from the outside world and pursued a path of autarchy and attempted self-sufficiency.<sup>57</sup>

### Soviet Union

Being led by communist autocrats, the Soviet – Albanian relationship for the first decades after the second world war was essentially an expression of the Stalin – Hoxha

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<sup>56</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1960. “Reject the Revisionist Theses of the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Anti-Marxist Stand of Krushchev's Group! Uphold Marxism-Leninism!” Transcript of speech delivered at Moscow, November 16, 1960. Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/nov1960.htm>

<sup>57</sup> Dranqoli, Albina. 2011. “Tito's Attempt to Integrate Albania into Yugoslavia, 1945-1948.” *History Studies International Journal of History* 2 (3).

relationship. In his own writings, Hoxha is an unabashed admirer of Stalin, seeing the Soviet leader as a revolutionary hero and model for socialist governance. He described Stalin as a “loyal friend of the Albanian people, and the dear friend of the oppressed peoples of the whole world fighting for freedom, independence, democracy and socialism.”<sup>58</sup> With what could charitably be characterized as hyperbole, Hoxha claimed Stalin enjoyed similar admiration and allegiance from the Albanian people: “The Albanian communists and people felt the great role of Stalin very strongly and intimately, at the gravest moments our country experienced during the Italian and German fascist occupation ... Many a time, the last words of the Albanian communists, patriots, and partisans who gave their lives on the battlefield or facing the enemy's gallows, machine-gun or automatic rifle, were: "Long live the Communist Party!", "Long Live Stalin!"<sup>59</sup>

As he had done with Yugoslavia earlier and, indeed, as Albania had done throughout many periods of history, Hoxha was willing to relinquish some elements of autonomy in return for the support of a powerful geopolitical patron. Hoxha requested the creation of joint Soviet-Albanian economic entities, the deployment of Soviet military forces to guard the Albanian coast, and even Soviet “political instructors” or commissars to be embedded in the Albanian Army. Stalin demurred on all these requests but did agree to economic assistance, arms and other military materiel, and allowing Albanian political and military officers to come to the USSR for instruction and training.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Hoxha, *With Stalin: Memoirs*; <sup>58</sup> Selivanov, Igor N. 2017. “Moscow–Hanoi–Tirana Relations in the Context of the Split in the "Socialist Camp".” *Sojourn* (Singapore) 32 (2): 479–514. <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj32-2r>.

<sup>59</sup> Hoxha, *With Stalin: Memoirs*.

<sup>60</sup> Hoxha, *With Stalin: Memoirs*; Marku, Ylber. 2020. “Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960-1961.” *International History Review* 42 (4): 813–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1620825>.

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Soviet-Albanian relationship remained strong, and Albania was included when the Warsaw Pact was created in 1955. Hoxha became increasingly critical of the Soviet Union and its leaders in the face of the de-Stalinization efforts of Nikita Khrushchev, however. This alienation was reinforced by the latter's visit to Albania in 1959 where he left the impression that the Soviets viewed Albania as a source for raw materials and a place to host a Soviet naval base—essentially, as a colony. Hoxha accused the post-Stalin government of being revisionist and abandoning Marxism-Leninism. Hoxha argued that Stalinism was indistinguishable from Marxism-Leninism and by repudiating Stalin, Khrushchev was abandoning communist principles.<sup>61</sup> Still needing a powerful patron, Hoxha began to align Albania more closely with communist China to replace the Soviet Union. The low point in Soviet–Albanian relations came in December 1961 when Khrushchev withdrew the Soviet ambassador from Albania and expelled Albanians from Moscow.<sup>62</sup>

## China

Enver Hoxha's relationship with Mao Zedong, the leader of the People's Republic of China from 1949 until 1976, paralleled his relationships with Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, i.e., initial cooperation which turned to rivalry following Hoxha viewing his fellow communist leaders as apostates who had strayed from the path of true

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<sup>61</sup> Hoxha, *With Stalin: Memoirs*; Hodges, Richard. 2009. "Nikita Khrushchev's Visit to Butrint." Expedition 51 (3): 24; Hoxha, Enver. "The Defense of the Marxist-Leninist Line is Vital For Our Party and People and for International Communism." Transcript of speech delivered at 18th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party of Labor of Albania, Tirana, Albania. September 7, 1960. Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/1960/09/07.htm>

<sup>62</sup> Selivanov, Moscow-Hanoi-Tirana.

Marxism-Leninism. The China-Albanian alliance (1960-1978) would last longer than the Albanian-Yugoslav (1945-1948) and Albanian-Soviet (1948-1960).<sup>63</sup>

Hoxha and Mao first met in 1956 during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where they both criticized Nikita Khrushchev's policy of de-Stalinization. This led to a closer ideological alliance between Tirana and Beijing as Hoxha and Mao distanced themselves from Khrushchev and Albania became one of China's closest allies in Europe.<sup>64</sup>

During the 1960s, Albania and China strengthened their ties through mutual support of each other's revolutionary struggles. Albania was one of the first countries to recognize the People's Republic of China in 1949, and China provided significant economic and military aid to Albania. It was Albania that proposed Resolution 2758 to the United Nations General Assembly in 1971 that would admit the Beijing's People's Republic of China to the United Nations and remove Taipei's Republic of China. The relationship began to sour after the Chinese-American rapprochement and visits to Beijing of US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and, later, US President Richard Nixon. Hoxha accused Mao of pursuing a revisionist policy that deviated from true Marxist-Leninist principles and he criticized China's engagement with the US and

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<sup>63</sup> Marku, Ylber. 2020. "Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960-1961." *International History Review* 42 (4): 813–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2019.1620825>.

<sup>64</sup> Hoxha, Enver. "Reject the Revisionist Theses of the XX Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Anti-Marxist Stand of Khrushchev's Group! Uphold Marxism-Leninism!" Transcript of speech delivered at Meeting of 81 Communist and Workers Parties, Moscow, USSR. November 16, 1960. Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/nov1960.htm>

support for various anti-communist regimes in Africa and Asia. Hoxha also opposed the theory of "Three Worlds,"<sup>65</sup> which he saw as a deviation from communist principles.<sup>66</sup>

In his *Reflections on China*, Hoxha offers his critical analysis of China's communist revolution and its policies under Mao Zedong, accusing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of deviating from the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Hoxha's primary critiques centered around the CCP's promotion of Chinese nationalism, Mao's cult of personality which, with no hint of irony, Hoxha denounced as suppressing dissent within the party, and the revisionism that led to Mao's teachings and philosophy supplanting the writings of Marx and Lenin. Hoxha condemned this "Cartesian theory of wiping off the past in order to build the new culture, and this will be achieved only through the 'ideas of Mao,' by reading his works and quotations which have now replaced everything in China."<sup>67</sup> Mao's territorial ambitions and claims against his neighbors smacked of imperialist expansionism and contradicted China's supposed dedication to anti-imperialism and national liberation.

Despite these tensions, Hoxha and Mao continued to maintain limited contact and communication until Mao's death in 1976. After which, relations between Albania and

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<sup>65</sup> The theory of Three Worlds was put forward by Deng Xiaoping, Mao's successor, as a framework for understanding world geopolitics. In this theory, the world was divided into three major spheres: The First World representing the developed and dominant capitalist countries, primarily led by the United States and its Western allies; The Second World comprised the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies with centrally planned economies and were in competition with the First World; The Third World referred to the developing and non-aligned countries, who were often struggling against colonialism, imperialism, and economic exploitation. They sought to maintain their independence and establish a new international order. This theory portrayed China as the leader and advocate for the Third World.

<sup>66</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1979. *Reflections on China: Extracts from the Political Diary*. Tirana: Nentori Pub. House.

<sup>67</sup> Hoxha, Enver. "Some Preliminary Ideas about the Chinese Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Transcript of speech delivered at the 18<sup>th</sup> Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party of Labor of Albania, Tirana, Albania. October 14, 1966. Accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/nov1960.htm>

China improved somewhat, and the two countries continued to maintain economic and cultural ties.

### United States

During the Cold War, the relationship between Albania and the United States was marked by tension and hostility with Hoxha's pursuit of an extreme isolationist and anti-Western foreign policy. In 1946, the United States withdrew its ambassador from Albania due to increasing Soviet influence and Albania's alignment with the Eastern Bloc. American support for anti-communist movements led Hoxha to believe that the U.S. intended to remove him from power and remake Albania into a capitalist satellite state. This fear was validated by U.S. and U.K. covert paramilitary programs intended to overthrow Albania's communist government.

Declassified operational cables reveal that U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS or MI-6) trained and deployed expatriate Albanian agents to subvert the communist regime in Tirana. The American operation, designated BGFIEND,<sup>68</sup> "authorizes a coordinated program of political, psychological, and economic warfare designed to render Albania useless to the Soviet Union as a base for operations."<sup>69</sup> To bring about this result, the operation consisted of

a country project for the purpose of selecting, training, and infiltrating indigenous agents into Albania to effect and support resistance activities for the purpose of overthrowing the Communist controlled government in Tirana. This project also included the support of the National Committee for a Free Albania which consisted of a group of Albanians in exile who represented various political

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<sup>68</sup> BGFIEND is also sometimes referred to as Operation FIEND, with the BG digraph removed or as Operation VALUABLE FIEND when combined with Operation VALUABLE which was the British operation to subvert Hoxha's communist regime.

<sup>69</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. 9/Jan/1951. "BGFIEND Status Report." Accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>

factions, but who were all dedicated to the liberation of their country from Communist control. In this connection the project included the support of propaganda activities, i.e., leaflets, publication of an Albanian newspaper (Shqipëria) and support of Voice of Free Albania. Crypt changed to OBOPUS in 1953.<sup>70</sup>

Operation VALUABLE was the complementary yet separate British operation with similar goals. The two operations were closely coordinated at both the policy and operational levels.<sup>71</sup> VALUABLE and FIEND were some of the earliest paramilitary operations of the Cold War and, from the get-go, appear to have been a total failure. It appears that none of the teams sent to Albania were successful and likely every single team was captured shortly after infiltration. The teams were doubled back at the US and UK intelligence services so quickly and completely that Harold Adrian Russell "Kim" Philby (the SIS officer who spied for the Soviets beginning in 1934 and continued for the next three decades) likely compromised the operations from the beginning by passing the information to the Soviet Committee for State Security (*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* or KGB) who, in turn, passed it on to the Albanians. Philby's posting to Washington during this era<sup>72</sup> and the close coordination between the British and American intelligence services puts Philby in a key coordinating role for the operations and in a position to be fully familiar with both operations.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. Jan/1952. [Title Redacted]. Accessed at [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2013%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29\\_0056.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2013%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29_0056.pdf)

<sup>71</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. 25/Sep/1951. "Fiend-Valuable." Accessed at: [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29\\_0073.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29_0073.pdf)

<sup>72</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. "BGFIEND/VALUABLE – Exchange of Intelligence." 17 September 1951. [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29\\_0058.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29_0058.pdf);

<sup>73</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. "Liaison with the British in Washington on Projects FIEND and VALUABLE." 26 Aug 1951. Accessed at [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29\\_0037.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/OBOPUS%20BGFIEND%20%20%20VOL.%2018%20%20%28BGFIEND%20OPERATIONS%29_0037.pdf)



BGFIEND/OBOPUS and Operation VALUABLE were failures<sup>74</sup> that further alienated Albania and the West and validated Hoxha's concerns of Anglo-American aggression. While the US went through multiple different Cold War-era foreign policy paradigms, with no change in Albanian leadership, rapprochement was simply not possible, and the two nations had essentially no relationship until the 1990s.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Other contemporary anti-communist paramilitary operations which were failures include Ukraine, Poland, China, and Tibet; these were followed a few years later by the larger and more visible failure of Cuba in the "Bay of Pigs."

<sup>75</sup> Lucas, Peter. 2007. *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co.

## Chapter IV.

### Post-Cold War/Contemporary Era

In 1990, as protests, demonstrations, and revolutions were beginning to take place behind the Iron Curtain, American intelligence predicted that Albania would shortly follow suit. “Despite the Albanian regime’s readiness to use brutal repressive measures to suppress dissent, it is likely that revolution and reform will come to Albania within five years.”<sup>76</sup>

The collapse of communist-led countries in Europe signaled the end of the Cold War. In June 1989, Hungary dismantled its border fence with Austria. The same month partially-free elections were held in Poland with the anti-communist Solidarity Party emerging victorious with a parliamentary majority. Then in November 1989, the Berlin Wall came down, signaling the downfall of the communist regime in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), though German unification would not take place for another year. Albania’s communist government was removed after being forced to allow the country’s first multi-party elections. Albania’s transition from communism was not orderly or peaceful, however. After the fall of communism, Albania experienced a period of intense political and social upheaval. This was characterized by widespread protests, political unrest, and the appearance of armed gangs and militias which were often organized along familial lines, reflecting the resiliency of Albania’s tribal roots. This period of instability continued into the early 1990s and was marked by violent clashes between different political factions and criminal groups. Albania lacked the kind

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<sup>76</sup> Central Intelligence Agency. *National Intelligence Estimate 12-90: The Future of Eastern Europe*. April 1990. Accessed at: [https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000265644.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000265644.pdf)

of civic institutions that would have been necessary to support a process of reconciliation and that could have preserved some semblance of order as political change was being wrought. The government was keen to establish a democratic system, a market economy, and to integrate Albania into international institutions like NATO and the European Union. These goals took priority over the idea of confronting the communist past.<sup>77</sup>

When it emerged from its era of isolation, Albania was the third poorest country in the world and was also the first former communist state in which the United States established a military base.<sup>78</sup> This set the stage for the bilateral relationship which the two nations enjoy today. Denis Pietri, a managerial-level security official during the Berisha era explained that limited European support helped drive Albania towards the US:

Post-Cold War Albania needed a patron and Europe wasn't interested in some country that was a relic of the Cold War with this archaic language and Muslim religion. And, as you know, the country would not exist without Woodrow Wilson keeping it from being partitioned after WW1 so after communism the Americans became the patron.<sup>79</sup>

### Ramiz Alia

Enver Hoxha was in power for so long that the second leader of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania would also be its last: Ramiz Tafë Alia.

As communist regimes in Eastern Europe began to crumble, Alia faced increasing pressure for political and economic reforms. Alia initially undertook limited and measured reforms, an Albanian version of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. However, as

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<sup>77</sup> Abrahams, Fred C. 2015. *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

<sup>78</sup> Van Egeraat, Lily. 2016. "From Isolation to Integration – Albania's Extraordinary Trajectory of Change." *Human Security Centre*. <http://www.hscentre.org/europe/isolation-integration-albanias-extraordinary-trajectory-change/>

<sup>79</sup> Pjetri, Denis, interview by author, April 3, 2023.

with the USSR, these reforms were not quick or extensive enough to satisfy those demanding change. In the face of widespread protests and demands for democratic reforms, Alia agreed to hold multiparty elections, relinquishing one-party communist rule. Elections were held in March 1991, and the Communist Party of Albania (officially the Albanian Party of Labor – the name the Hoxha had adopted as recommended by Stalin<sup>80</sup>) was soundly defeated by a coalition of opposition parties, leading to the end of communist rule in the country. Alia, after serving as president for just under a year, was replaced by the leader of the Democratic Party of Albania, Sali Berisha. Later attempts to prosecute Alia for his actions under the repressive communist regime would result in him being placed under house arrest with a sentence that was shortened multiple times.

### Sali Berisha

Sali Berisha is an Albanian politician who played a prominent role in the political landscape of Albania in the post-communist era. He served as the President of Albania as well as Prime Minister and was the opposition leader when not in power.

Berisha became the country's first non-communist leader in over four decades and began implementing reforms to transition the country from a centrally planned command economy to a market economy. Born in 1944, he studied medicine and was a highly regarded cardiologist before entering politics. Berisha served as president until 1997 when he was forced to resign and then, after a period in the political wilderness, returned to the national stage as prime minister from 2005 – 2013.

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<sup>80</sup> Hoxha, Enver. 1981. *With Stalin: Memoirs*. 2nd ed. Tirana: "8 Nëntori" Pub. House.

Berisha, often referred to by the unflattering nickname ‘Dracula,’ proved to be problematic on many levels. He viewed any policy disagreement from within the government as an act of disloyalty and he took international disagreements as personal attacks. He consolidated power in his office and undertook autocratic actions such as removing members of the judiciary which disagreed with him. While *Sigurimi* had been replaced by the National Informative Service (*Shërbimi Informativ Kombëtar* or SHIK), its primary function under Berisha was to police internal dissent. In the transition away from communism, 98% of *Sigurimi* personnel had been fired. While this removed those complicit in communist-era abuses, SHIK replaced these numbers with those politically loyal to the regime in power.<sup>81</sup>

Corruption under and involving Berisha as well as his family members was extensive and included contact with Albanian organized crime.<sup>82</sup> The US State Department designated Sali Berisha and four of his family members *persona non grata* in May of 2021. In his statement announcing the designation, Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed, “Berisha was involved in corrupt acts, such as misappropriation of public funds and interfering with public processes, including using his power for his own benefit and to enrich his political allies and his family members at the expense of the Albanian public’s confidence in their government institutions and public officials.”<sup>83</sup> In July of 2022, Berisha announced that he had received a letter from the British Interior Secretary informing him that he had also been banned from travel to the UK “on the

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<sup>81</sup> Kristofor, interview. Pjetri, Denis, interview by author, April 3, 2023.

<sup>82</sup> Jozef, interview; Pjetri, interview.

<sup>83</sup> Blinken, Antony. 2021. “Public Designation of Albanian Sali Berisha Due to Involvement in Significant Corruption.” U.S. Department of State. Accessed at: <https://www.state.gov/public-designation-of-albanian-sali-berisha-due-to-involvement-in-significant-corruption/>

grounds that I have connections to criminals and are [sic] ready to use these connections for politics.”<sup>84</sup> For his part, Berisha has issued public denials of corruption, human rights violations, and criminality.

Berisha was a retail politician who never seemed to be viewed as charismatic or visionary, and Albanians with their limited experience with democracy, were naïve (“let’s invest in a pyramid scheme!”). He was educated in France and so had European credentials and ran on a campaign of privatization. He was just the man of the moment who promised integration with Europe, and, like Boris Yeltsin, he knew what his countrymen wanted to hear but instead delivered unbridled corruption and eventually fostered disillusionment.<sup>85</sup>

As president, Berisha pursued an agenda with ambitious reforms aimed at transforming the country’s economy. He also immediately declared his intent for Albania to join NATO and entered its Partnership for Peace program to facilitate the military reforms required for alliance accession. Like many nations navigating the post-communism transition, the rapid pace of reforms, inadequate civic institutions, pervasive poverty, and weak rule of law led to widespread corruption and economic instability. These problems reached a climax in 1997 and led to a period of intense unrest referred to as the Albanian Civil War.

### Pyramid Schemes and Civil War

While it is commonly called the Albanian Civil War, the 1997 unrest was marked by widespread violence, looting, and political instability rather than a conventional conflict between two sides seeking control of the central government.

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<sup>84</sup> Kote, Kristo. 2022. “Berisha Confirms Public Designation by UK.” *Albania Daily News*. Accessed at: <https://albaniandailynews.com/news/berisha-confirms-public-designation-by-uk>

<sup>85</sup> Pietri, interview.

The ‘war’ was precipitated by an economic crisis that threatened the viability of the country’s economy. After the transition to a market economy, companies throughout the country were promising investors unprecedented rates of return. At their peak, the pyramid schemes’ liabilities equaled approximately half of the country’s GDP with an estimated two-thirds of the Albanian population invested, some with their entire life savings. When the pyramid schemes collapsed in 1997, the economic devastation was widespread. The government collapsed, Berisha resigned,<sup>86</sup> uncontrolled rioting broke out, and armed militias and gangs controlled many parts of the country as police and military forces faced mass absenteeism and desertion.<sup>87</sup> This led to the looting of military armories and stockpiles, resulting in an angry and heavily armed populace.

The international community was keen to restore order to prevent another bloody conflict in the Western Balkans. However, after the “inglorious end of UNPROFOR in Bosnia”<sup>88</sup> the United Nations was neither keen nor capable of committing to another peacekeeping operation, particularly when there was not yet any peace to keep. NATO was already heavily involved in nearby Bosnia and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was only involved in facilitating negotiations between the different political parties. A multinational effort led by neighbors Italy and Greece saw some 6,500 to 7,500 peacekeeping troops deployed to Albania. Order was restored and

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<sup>86</sup> Berisha felt that he was unjustly scapegoated for the pyramid scheme debacle and robbed of the office that he should have rightly continued to hold. He would often repeat these claims in public comments and this belief was likely a significant motivating force behind his subsequent *coup d’etat* attempt the year following his resignation of the presidency.

<sup>87</sup> Jarvis, Christopher J. 1999. “The Rise and Fall of the Pyramid Schemes in Albania.” *Finance & Development*, 37(1). International Monetary Fund; Hoxha, Rakip, interview by author, February 23, 2023.

<sup>88</sup> Kostakos, Georgios, and Dimitris Bourantonis. 1998. “Innovations in Peace-Keeping: The Case of Albania.” *Security Dialogue* 29 (1): 51.

new elections were held in June of 1997.<sup>89</sup> Estimates of those killed during the Albanian unrest range from 1,600<sup>90</sup> to 2,000.<sup>91</sup>

### Another Transition

In June of 1997, Albania held parliamentary elections as well as a referendum on restoring the monarchy. The referendum was a simple question asking which type of government the voter would prefer, a republic or a monarchy.<sup>92</sup> The attempt to restore the Kingdom of Albania was soundly defeated by 2 to 1 ration of those voting against. Zog's son, crown prince Leka, unsuccessfully sought to reverse the election, claiming that the real vote was two-thirds in favor and only one-third against.<sup>93</sup>

In the parliamentary elections held alongside the referendum, the Socialist Party defeated the Democratic Party leading to Fatos Nano becoming Albanian Prime Minister. During this period, Albania adopted a new constitution, making it a parliamentary democracy. In 1991, when Albania had begun the transition to a post-communist government, parliament had simply amended the constitution of 1976 which had been adopted by the Hoxha regime. These marginal reforms had resulted in a chief executive with significant power and few checks. The new constitution transferred many powers from the president as the head of state to the prime minister as head of government. Nano

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<sup>89</sup> Kostakos and Bourantonis, 49–58.

<sup>90</sup> Abrahams, Fred C. 2015. *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

<sup>91</sup> Jarvis, Christopher J. 1999. "The Rise and Fall of the Pyramid Schemes in Albania." *Finance & Development*, 37(1). International Monetary Fund.

<sup>92</sup> International Foundation for Electoral Systems. 1997. "Albania Referendum Ballot 1997." Image accessed at: <https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/election-materials/albania-referendum-ballot-1997>

<sup>93</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Service. 1998. "Resource Information Center: Albania." Accessed at: <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/resource-information-center-albania>



would serve only briefly, deciding to resign after an unsuccessful September 1998 *coup d'état* attempt by the recently defeated Berisha. Nano would be succeeded by Pandeli Majko who would also only serve for a year before resigning. Ilir Meta would succeed Majko but only serve for two years before being replaced by Majko for his second term. In less than 6 months, Majko would be moved to the Defense Ministry and be replaced as Prime Minister by Fatos Nano for his second term. For his part, Nano would be replaced by Sali Berisha, the man who had attempted to overthrow the government during Nano's first term. From the 1997 elections up to the 2013 elections, the list of Albanian prime ministers is: Fatos Nano, Pandeli Majko, Ilir Meta, Pandeli Majko (again), Fatos Nano (again), Sali Berisha (sort of again). The short terms and quick succession were due to internal politicking within the Albanian Socialist Party. Meta and Nano were aggressive and polarizing while Majko was the party's consensus candidate.<sup>94</sup>

The incestuous musical chairs of Albanian premiership resulted in a relatively consistent and stable foreign policy. On the domestic front, consistency was also demonstrated by the universal allegations of corruption, election irregularities, restrictions on media freedom, and use of government institutions for personal gain and to target political rivals.<sup>95</sup>

For a nation that had suffered under the oppressive and unaccountable *Sigurimi*, the reform of SHIK was a significant milestone of this period. Renamed the Albanian State Intelligence Service (*Shërbimi Informativ Shtetëror* or SHISH), the organization was directly answerable to the prime minister rather than the interior ministry and, as an

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<sup>94</sup> Koçi, interview.

<sup>95</sup> Pjetri, Denis. Interview with author; Jozef, interview; Marku, interview.

intelligence service primarily focused domestically, was not given any powers of arrest or detention. These changes made the organization less attractive as a tool of partisan political repression though powerful officials were keen to limit investigations into corruption or, at least, direct those investigations towards their political opponents.<sup>96</sup>

In the subsequent years, Berisha served as the Prime Minister of Albania from 2005 to 2013. During this period, his government focused on further economic reforms, infrastructure development, and integration efforts with NATO and the European Union (EU). However, his tenure—mimicking his time as president--was also marked by allegations of corruption, election irregularities, and concerns over media freedom and authoritarian consolidation of power.

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<sup>96</sup> Jozef, interview; Kristofer, interview.

## Chapter V.

### International Relations

After the end of the Cold War, Albania pursued a political strategy to develop bilateral relations with another superpower, as it had during the Cold War and earlier periods of Albanian independence. Key to forestalling any attempts to seize Albanian territory was membership in NATO, the North American-European alliance which was expanding to include former Eastern Bloc nations. The 1990's were a tumultuous period in the Balkans. Not only did communist governments fall, but the disintegration of Yugoslavia led to open war among and within multiple Balkan states. Mihailo Crnobrnja, former Yugoslav Ambassador to the European Commission, summarized the various conflicts. Croatia was engaged in open conflict with Serbia as well as internal conflict with its Serb minority. Bosnia, fragmenting among Serbs, Croats, and Muslims<sup>97</sup> was engulfed in a particularly brutal civil war rife with atrocities including genocide and ethnic cleansing. Montenegro and Croatia were in a territorial dispute over the small but strategic Prevlaka peninsula. Greece was hostile to the very name of the nation that had just emerged to its north and, while the Macedonian state was recognized by neighboring Bulgaria the Macedonian people were not, signaling that Bulgaria viewed Macedonians as displaced Bulgarians. Meanwhile, Macedonia's ethnic Albanian minority comprised 20% of the population but had a birthrate triple that of the majority, leading to increased demands for Albanian autonomy and aspirations for a "Greater Albania." Serbia was

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<sup>97</sup> Under Yugoslavia, and continued in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the Dayton Accords, Muslims were designated as an ethnic community as opposed to members of a religious community. Today, the term Bosniak is often used and preferred to describe Bosnian Muslims.

involved in various stages of conflict with its neighbors, having claims on Croatian and Macedonian territory while also supporting minority Serb populations throughout the region. Finally, Kosovo was seeking its independence from Serbia with both sides pushing for armed confrontation.<sup>98</sup> These ethnic rivalries and territorial disputes presented the real possibility of dragging the new Republic of Albania into war while the nascent state was at its most vulnerable. NATO membership would be the surest way for a European nation to ensure the integrity of its borders and the support of the US would be the surest way to join the alliance.

## NATO

“The accession of Albania to NATO means greater freedom and a safer future for Albania. It’s a dream come true,” Berisha told AFP on April 1, 2009. “The accession of Albania to NATO is the most important act in the history of the country after its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. Since the fall of its hardline communist regime in the early 1990s.”<sup>99</sup> In emphasizing the importance of Albania achieving NATO membership, Berisha was touting the success of his administration.

Since he put Albania on the path to NATO membership and was in power when NATO accession was granted, understanding Berisha’s motivations and intentions is key to understanding the post-communism geopolitical realignment of Albania.

During his tenure as president and as prime minister, Berisha was a strong advocate for Albania's integration into Western institutions, including NATO. He worked

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<sup>98</sup> Crnobraja, Mihailo. 1996. *The Yugoslav Drama*. 2nd ed. Montreal; Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press. 22 – 34.

<sup>99</sup> Berisha, Sali. Interview transcribed by AFP, April 1, 2009.

to modernize Albania's military and bring it in-line with NATO standards. He made some progress in areas such as defense reform, anti-corruption efforts, and rule of law, which were key areas of focus for NATO membership. In many cases, however, the reforms were only nominal, such as passing a particular law with no intention of enforcing it. Albania's efforts to reform its military, including the reduction of its armed forces and the modernization of its equipment, were particularly important in its bid for NATO membership. Berisha clearly thought NATO membership to be in Albania's best interests for long-term stability, security, and prosperity. Being good for Albania, it was good for him while he was in charge. After the oppressive communist years and the initial chaos of the post-communist era, and with ubiquitous corruption, Albanians have limited faith in their national institutions, creating a low trust society where external validation often drives domestic approval. Berisha realized this (and arguably had a hand in creating it) and portrayed Western support for Albania, such as American support for Albania's NATO bid, as Western approval for him personally and his policies.<sup>100</sup> While history demonstrates the need for external support to maintaining an independent Albania, aligning with the United States clearly also involved an element of following and coopting Albanian popular opinion.<sup>101</sup>

To validate Albania's bid for NATO membership, Berisha offered Albanian troops for NATO missions and reached the expected defense expenditure of 2% of GDP. In 2009, the year Albania was granted NATO membership status, its defense expenditures were exactly 2% of GDP, with only the U.S., the U.K., Greece, and France

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<sup>100</sup> Thaçi, interview.

<sup>101</sup> Lleshi, interview; Topi, interview.

spending more on defense as a percentage of GDP.<sup>102</sup> Since accession, Albanian defense spending has fallen to 1.6% of GDP, following the trajectory of many NATO members.

Albanian became a full NATO member on April 4, 2009, at the Strasbourg-Kehl summit. At the ceremony for the accession of Croatia and Albania to NATO, Berisha spoke of the reforms undertaken to comply with NATO requirements, the tackling of organized crime, and making Albania a safe and attractive place for foreign investment and tourism. His remarks focusing on these issues seem out of place when joining a military alliance but belie one of his primary intentions for joining NATO as a means to promote Albania's economic development.<sup>103</sup> "Albania's NATO membership can be considered Albania's greatest achievement in terms of security, even more important than EU membership (if it will happen). Being a member of NATO has saved and continues to save Albania a lot of income, considering that until the 1990s, approximately 60% of the budget went to defense and security."<sup>104</sup> Reduced defense expenditures put less pressure on the Albanian military and defense industry, blunting the impacts of corruption in a sector well known for its lining the pockets of the politically connected as portrayed in the movie and documented in the book *War Dogs*.<sup>105</sup>

Albania sees its membership in NATO as a step towards closer integration with the West and a way to enhance its economic and political ties with other member countries. NATO membership is also seen as a way to support Albania's aspirations to

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<sup>102</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. 2010. "Financial and Economic Data Relating to NATO Defence." Accessed at:

[https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2010\\_06/20100610\\_PR\\_CP\\_2010\\_078.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2010_06/20100610_PR_CP_2010_078.pdf)

<sup>103</sup> Berisha, Sali. 2009. Remarks. North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Accessed at:

[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_52922.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_52922.htm)

<sup>104</sup> Koçi, interview.

<sup>105</sup> Lawson, Guy. 2011. "The Stoner Arms Dealers: How Two American Kids Became Big-Time Weapons Traders." *Rolling Stone*.

join the European Union. The Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs identifies Albania's reasons for join the transatlantic alliance: "As a NATO member, Albania is in the best position to confirm its national interests and to increase national prestige and reputation."<sup>106</sup>

### United States

With NATO membership being the key to preserving Albanian autonomy, a close relationship with the US was the surest and quickest way to be accepted into the Western alliance. Viewing partnership with the US as key to NATO membership is also in keeping with Albanian culture where familial relations, friendships, and patronage networks, are the most reliable ways to achieve one's goals. Further, in many low trust societies, American influence is often overrated, creating the perception that everything that happens is because the US wills it. In Afghanistan, a common belief was that the US was secretly supporting the Taliban because if the Americans really wanted to defeat the Taliban, they would be able to do so quickly and easily. This same conspiracy was reiterated years later and was repeated in the Balkans as well as the Middle East.: the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) was a creation of the US in order to justify further American presence in the region. With this perception, alignment with the US is not just the best way to join NATO but the only way.

Emphasizing the American role in the process, two months before Albania's NATO bid was ratified, Berisha stated, "This process would be totally impossible without

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<sup>106</sup> Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. "Albania in NATO." <https://www.punetjashtme.gov.al/en/shqiperia-ne-nato/>

the extraordinary support President Bush and the US Government have provided.”<sup>107</sup> A month later, in an interview Berisha described the support of President Bush as the “decisive factor” in securing Albania’s NATO membership and that “without US President Bush’s unwavering support, we would be unable to join NATO now.”<sup>108</sup>

The outsized role of the US in approving new members for the transatlantic alliance has even been a friction point with NATO allies who have criticized the Membership Action Plan (MAP) concept as being a creation of the US and that decisions on whether MAP requirements have been met are principally made in Washington.<sup>109</sup>

Albania began its NATO aspirations with Croatia and Macedonia as the three formed the Adriatic Charter. The purpose was for these three to work together to ensure their collective acceptance into NATO. All three nations had issues that would likely prevent them from being accepted into the transatlantic alliance.

In 2001, a former Croatian General, Ante Gotovina, was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes committed during the Yugoslav wars as Croatia sought its independence and then fought to consolidate Croatian territory. After his indictment, Gotovina went into hiding and would not be captured for four years.<sup>110</sup> While Croatia was pursuing NATO membership, the US wanted Gotovina to stand trial at the Hague and made it clear that Croatia could not count on an invitation to join the alliance until the Gotovina case was resolved.

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<sup>107</sup> Marini, Maela. 2009. “Berisha: Albania Enjoys Trust of NATO Member States.” *Albanian Telegraph Agency*.

<sup>108</sup> Schmiess, Wulf. 2009. “Albania’s NATO Accession is a Victory of the West.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine*.

<sup>109</sup> Morelli, Vincent. 2008. *NATO Enlargement: Albania, Croatia, and Possible Future Candidates*. Congressional Research Service: 3.

<sup>110</sup> Clark, Janine Natalya. 2013. “Courting Controversy: The ICTY’s Acquittal of Croatian Generals Gotovina and Markac.” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11 (2): 399–423. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/mqt009>.



Washington also suggested to its European allies that the same issue should also preclude Croatia's EU membership. Gotovina was eventually arrested in 2005 and Croatia joined NATO alongside Albania in 2009.<sup>111</sup>

Macedonia, on the other hand, was unsuccessful in its bid. Greece objected to Macedonia's accession due to its opposition to Macedonia's name. The US facilitated discussions aimed at a compromise but other than public statements of support, a coordinated campaign to facilitate Macedonia's accession.

Many observers believe that Albania had not met the requirements of its NATO Membership Action Plan.

It is difficult to see how Albania could help, and more likely, could even harm NATO as the alliance struggles to adapt to new security concerns and challenges. Although Albania has made great strides in moving closer toward the transatlantic community, these steps are small when compared to the ongoing challenges it faces before it could truly become a security producer for the alliance<sup>112</sup>

This was also echoed by the Congressional Research Service's report on NATO Enlargement. "In interviews with allied officials, they confided that both Macedonia and Albania have problems of government and internal political issues. . . Albania has significant legal and institutional shortcomings."<sup>113</sup> Validating the critiques of some of its NATO allies, the US decided that Albania had met the requirements and should be extended an invitation to join the alliance.

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<sup>111</sup> Pavlakovic, Vjeran. 2010. "Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and General Gotovina as a Political Symbol." *Europe-Asia Studies* 62 (10): 1707–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2010.522426>; Gotovina would be convicted in 2011 at the ICTY and sentenced to prison for 24 years. This conviction was reversed on appeal by the ICTY Appeals Chamber in 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Hendrickson, Ryan C., Jonathan Campbell, and Nicholas Mullikin. 2006. "Albania and NATO's "Open Door" Policy: Alliance Enlargement and Military Transformation." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19 (2): 257. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518040600697779>.

<sup>113</sup> Morelli, *NATO Enlargement*, 5-6.

The utility of maintaining a strong Albanian-American alignment in pursuit of NATO membership was far from the only factor pushing Albania into the US orbit.

As the victor in the Cold War, the U.S. was, rightly or otherwise, credited with helping end the repression and isolation of the Albanian communist era, earning the gratitude of the Albanian people. In addition to the goodwill engendered by American support for Albanian independence in the past, the U.S. was also viewed as an “honest broker” after the end of the Cold War. Other powers in Albania’s neighborhood, such as Greece, Turkey, and Italy all have a history of attempting to control Albania or seize its territory—relatively recently in the cases of Greece and Italy. Even more distant European powers such as France and Great Britain have carved up the Balkans at times, drawing borders based on their own politics without taking local interests into account. This historical baggage made many Albanians suspicious of aid from these countries and distrustful of their intentions. In contrast, the U.S. had sought to preserve Albania’s national autonomy and borders and had not (at least yet) advanced its own national interests at Albania’s expense.<sup>114</sup> This echoes the calculus of the Albanian delegation to the post-World War I peace conferences who decided to throw their lot in with the US.<sup>115</sup>

The visit of U.S. President George W. Bush to Albania in June of 2007 was the peak of Albanian-American relations. Finally, Albania felt like it was getting its due and being treated like the staunch U.S. ally it had proved itself to be. In fact, it reportedly was the pervasive pro-American sentiment of the Albanian people that put Albania on the list for its first ever visit from a U.S. president. Late in President Bush’s second term, his approval numbers were “in the basement” but in Albania he was treated “like a rock

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<sup>114</sup> Koçi, interview.

<sup>115</sup> Vora, “The American Attitude Towards Albania.”

star.”<sup>116</sup> As part of his visit, President Bush was taken to visit Kruje, the fortress that Skanderbeg had tricked the local Ottoman garrison into ceding to him. Outside the fortress, on the road back to Tirana, Bush’s convoy stopped in the village of Fushe Kruje where a large crowd quickly gathered. Bush exited the vehicle and engaged with the crowd. Fushe Kruje now has a statue of George W. Bush, near the George W. Bush bakery which is located on the George W. Bush roundabout. According to one of the president’s briefers, the Bush administration wanted to acknowledge Albania’s support to combatting terrorism, Bush being told that the Albanians will do anything the U.S. asks and are more Catholic than the Pope when it comes to being pro-American. In contrast, at this time many Western European allies demonstrated declining support for and even outright hostility to the United States in its conduct in Global War on Terror and the wars in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) and particularly in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom).<sup>117</sup> During his visit to Albania, President Bush was accompanied by Prime Minister Berisha who had, incidentally, also been invited to meet President George H.W. Bush in 1992 when Berisha was first elected President of Albania.

Albanian Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta spoke to both the importance and scale of American-Albanian cooperation, in a media interview.

It is well known that our relations with the United States are exceptionally important for us. We have made a very specific assessment: the United States is a strategic ally, particularly concerning the issues of regional and global security policy. Increasing economic cooperation and cooperation in other domains remains a key priority in our relations so that the political relations in the security domain parallel economic cooperation.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Stolberg, Sheryl. 2007. “Bush Gets Respite in Albania, Where Thousands Hail Him.” *New York Times* (1923-), 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Discussion with a U.S. intelligence analyst, May 2023.

<sup>118</sup> “Meta: These are Our Strategic Allies.” *Gazeta Koha Jones*. November 1, 2009.

Albert Rakipi, scholar with the Albanian Institute for International Studies, and interview respondent Denis Pietri both listed similar reasons for the overwhelming support for the US displayed by the Albanian people. “The Americans have been a strong partner, helping to sustain the country after World War I and after the Cold War, during the Kosovo conflict, sponsoring Albania for NATO membership, and simply treating Albania with more respect than the countries of Europe. The affinity of Albanians for America, not only politically but culturally, makes a lot of sense.”<sup>119</sup>

American economic assistance, security cooperation, and support for Albania’s NATO bid, provided Albania with the powerful patron it needed. Alignment with the US also provided domestic political benefits for those in power. By portraying American support to Albania as American approval for himself and his party, Berisha could coopt those positive feelings. A newspaper supportive of Berisha’s Democratic Party explicitly portrayed the US-Albania trade agreement and George W. Bush’s visit to the country as American support for Albania’s Democratic Party: “It is not accidental that these two culminating moments in in the history of the Albanian-US relations have occurred at moments when Albania has been under Democrat rule.”<sup>120</sup> The public affairs effort grew so explicitly partisan, that the US Embassy in Tirana asked the Albanian government to take down a television commercial showing Berisha meeting several American officials with Berisha doing a voiceover. “The American side wants the message to be that President Bush comes to Albania for the Albanians, not for Berisha or Moisiu.”<sup>121</sup> Still

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<sup>119</sup> Pietri, interview; Rakipi, Albert. 2007. “Albania-US, Between Myth and Reality.” *Shekulli*.

<sup>120</sup> Rama, Halil. 2007. “Starova: Bush’s Visit Means Acknowledgement of Reforms Carried Out by Government.” *Rilindja Demokratike*.

<sup>121</sup> *Gaazeta Shqiptare*. 2007. “Berisha Withdraws Bush Spot from TV Casts.”

beating the same drum, just last year in a speech Berisha emphasized that the greatest achievements in relation to the US are related to his Democratic Party.<sup>122</sup>

An examination of the other limited alternatives to alignment with the US further solidify the argument that Albanian leaders considered the US to provide the only viable path forward for a secure and independent Albania.

### Russia

Moscow has long sought to play a balancing role in the Balkans by supporting its Serbian allies. This objective dates back centuries, as the Russian Empire developed close cultural, political, and religious ties to the Balkans. With control of the region contested by the Catholic Western powers and the Islamic Ottoman empire, Russia positioned itself as the ally and patron of the Orthodox Christian Slavs, especially in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia.

In the modern era, Russia saw Western interventions in Yugoslavia, particularly in the case of the 1999 NATO air campaign in Serbia/Kosovo, as a sign of Russia's diminished influence and international stature. For current Russian President Vladimir Putin, who came to power less than a year after the end of the operation (designated Operation Allied Force by NATO and Operation Noble Anvil by the US), the campaign epitomized his concerns and grievances against NATO, specifically that Russian interests would no longer be considered, and the alliance would cast aside any respect for national sovereignty in order to act as it saw fit. In 2022, Putin would accuse NATO of hypocrisy for its willingness to use military force to protect Kosovo as a breakaway province in

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<sup>122</sup> Berisha, Sali. 2022. *Tirana Radio Televizioni Shqiptaer*.

1999 and its support to Kyiv in order to prevent the secession of the Ukrainian breakaway provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk.

In the Balkans, history is never in the past and Russia's support for Belgrade while the Yugoslav Army was accused of genocide in ethnically Albanian Kosovo will not soon be forgotten by Albanians. Though Russia has a history of backing its client states to the hilt (see: Bashar al-Assad), its track record of attempting to exert control over the Balkans<sup>123</sup> and the side it has taken in previous Balkan conflicts were and remain significant impediments to a geopolitical alignment of Albania with Russia.

### Turkey

Turkey has a long history in the Balkans through the Ottoman Empire's control of the region for hundreds of years. Turkey remains involved in the Balkans politically, economically, and culturally. The artificial lake in the center of Tirana was built with Turkish economic assistance for instance. However, during the 1990s, Turkish influence remained questionable. In November 1992, Turkey held a conference of Balkan countries to address the war in Bosnia. While this showed Turkish interest in the region, the lack of any result also showed the limitations of Turkish influence.

Culturally, national hero Skanderbeg is a key component of Albanian identity, and his notoriety is centered on his opposition to the Ottoman Turks. When Turkey refused to allow American military forces to invade Iraq from Turkish territory, Albania

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<sup>123</sup> Recent efforts include an attempted *coup d'etat* in Montenegro, attempts to scuttle North Macedonian NATO accession, and fomenting increased conflict between Greece and North Macedonia. The latter effort caused Greece, which has generally maintained good relations with Russia to expel a number of Russian diplomats.

sided with the US and agreed to deploy a small force as part of the “Coalition of the Willing.”<sup>124</sup>

## Italy

Italy and Albania have been close in recent history, and the cultural and political ties remain strong. However, Albert Rakipi notes that Italian foreign policy towards Albania in the 1990s was counterproductive to a close partnership between the two nations. Italian policy relating to the Balkans focused on a strong Serbia as the guarantor of regional stability, even supporting the Yugoslav regime under Slobodan Milosevic. After the influx of thousands of Albanian refugees, Italy began to treat Albania primarily as a potential source of threat. The relationship between the two governments was further soured when Italy, perceiving Berisha’s Democratic Party as too friendly to the US, publicly backed Albania’s Socialist Party in the 1992 elections.<sup>125</sup>

## The Kosovo Issue

An in-depth examination of the issues and conflicts over the status of Kosovo would require its own study beyond the scope of this paper. However, a brief explanation is required in the context of Albanian foreign relations due to the extensive historical, economic, and ethnic ties between Albania and Kosovo.

The Kosovo issue surfaced when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic revoked

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<sup>124</sup> Pietri, interview.

<sup>125</sup> Rakipi, Albert. 2006. “Albania: How Close Is Italy? Albanian-Italian Relations in the Post-Cold War Environment: Managing Threats or Opportunities?” *East European Quarterly* 40 (3): 349–66.

Kosovo's status as an autonomous province within Yugoslavia in 1989. Milosevic and members of the Serb minority in Kosovo had long objected to the fact that Muslim Albanians were demographically controlling an area sacred to Serbs.<sup>126</sup> Between 1990 and 1992, as the Milosevic regime consolidated its power around Serbian nationalism, the government restricted the use of the Albanian language and symbols, transferred policing responsibility to the Serbian Ministry of the Interior, dissolved Kosovo's autonomous government and judicial agencies, placed the local media under Belgrade's control, and instituted a uniform education system.

Tensions between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs eventually devolved into armed conflict. Almost 20% of Kosovar Albanians migrated to neighboring Albania and Macedonia to escape the bloodshed. The large number of refugees, accusations of human rights abuses, and the potential for the conflict to engulf the Balkans finally forced the international community to take notice and seek a resolution.

A pipeline of arms, many taken from Albanian military stores during the 1997 unrest, flowed from Albania to Kosovo while the Albanian government followed a political approach through which it supported the intervention of the United Nations and NATO. The civilian deaths and accusations of brutality concerned the United States and Europe because of its resemblance to the Bosnian civil war, for which the international community had been subjected to considerable criticism due to its slow response.

Remembering that the First World War was sparked by a local event in the Balkans, many Western leaders worried that the conflict could escalate and spread. After the

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<sup>126</sup> Kosovo is approximately 95% Muslim (the vast majority of whom are ethnic Albanians) but is the location of the Battle of Kosovo of 1389 between the Kingdom of Serbia and the Ottoman Empire which is one of the foundations of Serb identity. The town of Peć (Serbian) or Pejë (Albanian) in Kosovo was the chief see of the Serbian Orthodox Church for over 500 years, from 1253 to 1766.



failure of multiple attempts at diplomacy,<sup>127</sup> NATO threatened military action against Belgrade. In the face of an overwhelming force that it had no hope of defeating, Serbia followed in the footsteps of its army in Kosovo in 1389 and engaged in a battle it would lose but which it would also use to portray itself as a victim.

The administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton had received international and domestic criticism for its slow to response to the atrocities of the Bosnian war and its lack of action in the face of the Rwandan genocide. Enduring the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare, Sarajevo suffered for just shy of four years and over 100 days. In Rwanda, more than half a million Tutsis were massacred. As a result, quicker, more decisive action was taken in regard to Kosovo.<sup>128</sup> Knowing that no NATO action to address the conflict would be taken without American leadership, Albanians view U.S. involvement as critical to forestalling the potential deaths of thousands of Kosovar Albanians. Two years before Albania erected a statue of George W. Bush, in 2009 Kosovo unveiled a statue of President Clinton located on Bill Clinton Boulevard in Pristina.

In the case of Kosovo, the United States used its military might in the defense of ethnic Albanians. While other allies and friends have provided support to Albania in the past, here was the world's sole superpower actively employing its armed forces at a time when no other single nation had both the political will and martial capability to prevent a more catastrophic and brutal conflict. It is difficult to overstate the impact this action had

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<sup>127</sup> The sticking point for the Kosovar delegation was independence which the Serbs would not agree to. For their part, the Serbs refused to accept the deployment of NATO troops within Serbia's borders while the Kosovars would not agree to an agreement without an international peacekeeping force.

<sup>128</sup> Power, Samantha. 2002. *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*. New York: Basic Books.

on Albanian perceptions of the US, and is the only factor mentioned by every interviewee that participated in my research, eclipsing the impact of Woodrow Wilson's actions regarding Albania during the Paris Peace Conference.

### Neutrality/Non-Alignment

As a small, vulnerable nation, Albania has sought to maintain positive relations with the rest of the world even while, as has been shown, unabashedly aligning with the United States. By following the US lead so closely, however, Albania opens itself to being caught up in the reactions to polarizing American actions and policies. As a global superpower which views the entire planet as its sphere of influence, US actions will inevitably cause backlash among some groups and states. With this reality, a Yugoslavia-style non-alignment or a Swiss-style neutrality might present a tempting possibility.

Neutrality is a comfortable position for states with great economic power such as Austria, Sweden, Finland, Israel. Neutrality for Albania has been fatal throughout history, even in ancient times (we remember the Illyrian-Roman wars and its occupation by Rome, or the stubbornness of the Albanians to remain independent from the Ottomans, while Serbia and Greece (Byzantine), Bulgaria accepted vassalage and saved their countries from destruction and religious conversion.<sup>129</sup>

During the 1990s, the conflicts in the Balkans over borders and statehood could easily have spread to Albania which would be at the mercy of territorial land grabs from stronger nations in the absence of a powerful and willing ally. At this time, the US was inarguably the dominant world power and had demonstrated a willingness to use military

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<sup>129</sup> Koçi, interview.

force in the defense of threatened ethnic minorities, making the US the best and most reliable guarantor for an independent Albania vice a position of neutrality.

## Chapter VI.

### Domestic and Regional Issues

#### Albanian Diaspora

“And my interest in Albania is deepened, as the interest of all Americans must be deepened, by the fact that a large number of Albanians have now found a home in the United States.”<sup>130</sup> Schurman commented on the large number of Albanians immigrants to the US in 1914, and since the fall of communism and the re-opening of Albania to the world, that number has only increased.

Extensive Albanian emigration has led to more Albanians living outside of Albania than inside. This trend has created an unofficial international lobby as Albanian expatriates continue to maintain ties to and frequently travel to their homeland. The amount of influence of the diaspora on the Albanian-American relationship is difficult to measure and assess. Interview respondent Vasjan Topi, believing that economics form the foundation of most foreign policy decisions, considers the primary impact of the diaspora to be related to the remittances sent back to family in Albania. This has made Albania keen on ensuring that Albanian expatriate workers are welcomed throughout the Western world in order to keep the money flowing. As the largest economy and with a large number of ethnic Albanians, maintaining a strong and positive relationship with the US is vital to the Albanian economy.<sup>131</sup> World Bank statistics show the importance of

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<sup>130</sup> Schurman, *Balkan Wars*.

<sup>131</sup> The number of Albanian-Americans depends on how they are defined. According to Nedelkoska and Khaw, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated there were 214,000 Albanian-Americans in 2012 based on the census' criteria. Using a different definition, another study estimated the number to be between 250,000

remittances to Albania's economy as they accounted for 9.4% of Albanian GDP in 2021 (the most recent year for which data were available). As high as that figure is, that is the lowest it has been since Albania re-opened to the world, peaking in 1993 at 28%.<sup>132</sup>

While Albanian economic interests clearly lie with agreement with the policies of economic heavyweights, the domestic influence of the Albanian diaspora is intentionally limited as they are outside of local patronage and corruption networks, making their votes “unreliable.”

A lot of space is dedicated to the Albanian diaspora in the West. In reality, the Albanian diaspora has not even played and for a long time will not be able to play any role in Albanian politics, starting from the simple fact that today more than 2 million Albanian citizens live in the diaspora without the right to vote. Giving the right to vote to Albanians in emigration has been a promise of Albanian politics, but it has never been realized. The arguments for its non-realization have been mostly technical, but in reality, it is their fear of the vote of the diaspora living in countries with consolidated democracies.<sup>133</sup>

Stefanaq argued that the influence of the Albanian diaspora in the US played a vital role in Woodrow Wilson's decision to stand firm on supporting Albania's status as a sovereign, independent state.

The other factor that should be kept in mind is the role of the Albanian diaspora, especially that in the United States and its leaders like Faik Konica and especially Fan Noli. Faik Konica was abroad during most of war, but Fan Noli was in the United States at this time, as well as other well-known people like Kostë Çekrezi and Kristo Dako.

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and 500,000 as early as 2000. With Albania's population estimated to be approximately 3 million in 2023 according to the CIA World Factbook, however the Albanian-American community is defined it represents a significant percentage of the worldwide Albanian population.

<sup>132</sup> World Bank. 2022. “Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP) – Albania.” Accessed at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=AL>

<sup>133</sup> Koçi, interview.

Albanians undertook a massive propaganda campaign to preserve the independence of Albania and its territorial integrity. Two days after the position expressed by America in 1920, Dielli newspaper evaluated the role of the United States and Košte Çekrezi made it clear that the United States had saved Albania, in an interview in the New York Times newspaper.<sup>134</sup>

In reconciling these views on the impact of the Albanian diaspora on the American-Albanian relationship, the conclusion is that the economic benefits to Albania from its expatriates encourage pro-American/pro-Western views and policies. On the other hand, the Albanians living in the US exert some political influence to advocate for American policies in support of Albania.

#### Corruption and Organized Crime

The region has a long history of authoritarianism, conflict, and weak governance. This has created an environment in which corruption can thrive. Weak governance leads to weak rule of law which allows legal institutions to be prone to political interference and corruption themselves. This creates an environment where corrupt officials can act with impunity and avoid being held accountable for their actions.

Albanian organized crime poses problems worldwide. It includes facilitating the smuggling of illicit drugs from South America into Europe, smuggling people from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe, or simply the arrangements and relationships between organized crime and political power in Albania. This overlap is made possible by the prevalence of corruption throughout the region. While there are anticorruption efforts and police/security agencies targeting organized crime, these are often used by

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<sup>134</sup> Stefanaq, interview.

those in power to target their rivals. This selective enforcement provides a veneer of the rule of law while investigations, arrests, and prosecutions are directed away from the corruption and criminal networks associated with those in power towards those associated with the political opposition.<sup>135</sup>

Berisha, who, as noted, has been sanctioned for corruption, boasted about the rule of law improvements made during his government.

Albania has changed faster than ever before. Once a country of the most notorious organized crime in Europe, Albania is today one of the safest and most secure countries of Europe where indices of criminality are clearly below the NATO and EU average. 2.7 million tourists, from all over the world, visited Albania last year in the most secure environment. From one of the 24 most corrupted countries in the world, today Albania fights corruption with zero tolerance and has already left behind 95 countries.<sup>136</sup>

Unfortunately, the prevalence of Albanian organized crime has led to the stereotype of Albanians being criminals. Frequently, when arriving in Vienna or Frankfurt on a flight from Tirana, I would see the local police meet the plane at the jetway or on the tarmac and pull aside everyone with an Albanian passport for secondary or additional screening.

There is quite a hierarchy of ethnicities in Europe, made quite tangible to them today by how many countries they can travel to on their passport without a visa, and Albanians are at or near the bottom. And I think that what really galls Albanians is knowing the reputation for being criminals is justified. It is a tribal and patronage culture where you are expected to take care of your tribe. I do not think you can examine these issues without mapping out the criminal networks that control the region.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Jozef, interview; Kristofer, interview.

<sup>136</sup> Berisha, remarks.

<sup>137</sup> Pietri, interview.

Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perception Index ranks Albania 101 out of 180 countries with a score of 36 out of 100. In 101<sup>st</sup> place. Albania is tied with Ecuador, Kazakhstan, Panama, Peru, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Turkey, putting it one rank ahead of Bosnia-Herzegovina and one rank behind Lesotho. 25% of public service users reported paying a bribe in the past 12 months.<sup>138</sup>

Under a corrupt system, Albanian leaders find it personally lucrative to be on the receiving end of economic aid and foreign investment. As the largest economy in the world and the largest contributor of foreign aid, the United States is naturally the most desirable nation to align with (or the most desirable “mark” to put it in a more cynical perspective).

Albania’s communist economy was foundationally weak and unsustainable in the absence of outside support, forcing Enver Hoxha to seek the assistance and support of larger communist powers. Albania’s market economy is plagued with corruption which also requires ongoing outside support, causing modern Albanian leaders to seek the assistance and support of Western powers, particularly the United States.

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<sup>138</sup> Transparency International. “Corruption Perceptions Index 2022 – Albania.” Accessed at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022/index/alb>



## Chapter VII.

### Conclusion

The Balkans, Albania in particular, is a geographic, ethnolinguistic, and religious crossroads. The pull between East and West, future and past, tradition and modernity, has created a sort of identity crisis. And identity, however defined, has been at the root of many of the conflicts in the region over the centuries. That nature has led to those conflicts being particularly brutal and violent. Albania, comprised of an isolated people encircled by southern Slavic nations (Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia) induces a sense of being under siege. As any Albanian will remind you, their national hero, Skanderbeg, in their view, halted the Ottoman Empire's expansion into Western Europe and saved Christian Europe. This from a Muslim majority surrounded by Eastern Orthodox rivals. Not being given what they consider their historical due, having their borders and territory determined by external powers with no thought for local concerns, and being ringed with neighboring states who have taken advantage of any opportunity to seize their territory, Albanians have formed a nation with a strong identity but a weak geostrategic position.

The nations of the Balkans are keenly aware of their history and maintain a strong connection to their past. This creates a long, intergenerational memory with past grievances and past support influencing contemporary actions. The history of efforts to create and maintain an independent Albanian state ended with either external invasion or internal collapse or a combination of the two. The lesson then is that for Albania to remain a separate, autonomous nation, the support of a patron state, militarily strong enough to deter outside aggression and willing to provide assistance to forestall any

internal collapse is essential. In the period of unipolarity following the end of the Cold War, the United States would naturally be the partner of choice. The distrust of European powers, based on their historical willingness to ignore or sacrifice Albanian interests, further cemented this the only viable option.

The affinity of the Albanian people for the Americans was fueled by the actions of Woodrow Wilson to protect Albanian independence during the post-World War I negotiations in Paris. This was reinforced by the United States, by virtue of “winning” the Cold War, being given a measure of credit for freeing Albania from its oppressive and authoritarian communist government. Albanian leaders, Sali Berisha in particular, sought to follow popular opinion by aligning the nation as closely as possible with the U.S. Seeking NATO membership would garner American support during the years-long process and ultimately result in the world’s largest military alliance being the guarantor of Albanian autonomy and territorial integrity. Support from the U.S. on NATO accession was portrayed to the Albanian people as American approval of the current Albanian government. While it is unsurprising that politicians would use external support for partisan and personal gain, the lack of faith in domestic institutions made this effective among Albanians.

Pervasive corruption and the weakness of the Albanian economy result in a delicate system that could collapse into anarchy as it did in different periods of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries and, most recently, in 1997. In return for its close affiliation with the United States, Albania receives direct economic and military aid, remittances from Albanian expatriates, and government-to-government support. As with the

unsustainability of the hermit-style communist system, this external support is used to continue a system that might be otherwise unsustainable.

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