



European  
University  
Institute

DEPARTMENT  
OF POLITICAL  
AND SOCIAL  
SCIENCES



mobilizing  
for democracy



centre on  
social movement  
studies

---

# COSMOS WORKING PAPERS

**Mass Migration, Student Protests and  
the Intelligentsia *Popullore* in the  
Albanian Transition to Democracy**

Luisa Chiodi -  
*Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*

COSMOS WP 2012/2

COSMOS-Centre on social movement studies  
Mobilizing for Democracy – ERC Project  
Department of political and social sciences  
European University Institute

Badia Fiesolana

Via dei Roccettini 9, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole, Firenze • Tel. +39 055 4685 036 • Fax +39 055 4685 201 • [www.eui.eu](http://www.eui.eu)

---

This paper has been sponsored by the ERC Advanced Grant for the project Mobilizing for democracy.

It can be downloaded for personal research purposes only. Any additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copy or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper or other series, the year, and the publisher.



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE  
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
COSMOS CENTRE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENT STUDIES  
“MOBILIZING FOR DEMOCRACY:  
DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESSES AND THE MOBILIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY” PROJECT  
EUROPEAN RESEARCH COUNCIL (ERC) GRANT



centre on  
social movement  
studies

## **Mobilizing for Democracy: Democratization Processes and the Mobilization of Civil Society**

The project addresses the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in democratization processes, bridging social science approaches to social movements and democracy. The project starts by revisiting the “transitology” approach to democratization and the political process approach to social movements, before moving towards more innovative approaches in both areas. From the theoretical point of view, a main innovation will be in addressing both structural preconditions as well as actors’ strategies, looking at the intersection of structure and agency. In an historical and comparative perspective, I aim to develop a description and an understanding of the conditions and effects of the participation of civil society organizations in the various stages of democratization processes. Different parts of the research will address different sub-questions linked to the broad question of CSOs’ participation in democratization processes: a) under which (external and internal) conditions and through which mechanisms do CSOs support democratization processes? b) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms do they play an important role in democratization processes? c) Under which conditions and through which mechanisms are they successful in triggering democratization processes? d) And, finally, what is the legacy of the participation of civil society during transitions to democracy on the quality of democracy during consolidation? The main empirical focus will be on recent democratization processes in EU member and associated states. The comparative research design will, however, also include selected comparisons with oppositional social movements in authoritarian regimes as well as democratization processes in other historical times and geopolitical regions. From an empirical point of view, a main innovation will lie in the development of mixed method strategies, combining large N and small N analyses, and qualitative comparative analysis with in-depth, structured narratives.



---

*Mass Migration, Student Protests and the Intelligentsia  
Popullore in the Albanian Transition to Democracy*

Luisa Chiodi

Cosmos Working Paper 2012/2

---

**Abstract:** After decades under a Stalinist regime, the latecomer transition in Albania began thanks to the large-scale exodus of hundreds of young people which stimulated the mobilization of university students. In turn, the student movement became the catalyst of a wider social mobilization once fear faded away from December 1990 onwards.

These experiences were nevertheless short-lived as they ended up absorbed and marginalized by the new political elites that had emerged from the intellectual milieus once 'organic' to the system. Furthermore, such late-in-coming protest waves occurred in a situation of economic and institutional breakdown that constituted a considerable encumbrance for the re-organization of Albanian civil society.

**Keywords:** student movement – labour movement - intellectual elites - mass migration - anarchy

Albania was the latecomer in the 1989 wave of democratization in Europe. Predictably, it was not easy for the country's civil society to re-emerge after decades of a Stalinist regime that had successfully eliminated every alternative source of social power through the considerable use of coercion and achieved total control of the population through the party-state organization.

The unexpected outcome of the Albanian regime's collapse was the state's collapse, an unlikely context for the flourishing of civil society. In addition, the Albanian case is one of a transition driven by the transnational context, that is by 'democratic contagion' from the other 1989 revolutions, and where social contention exploded but social forces found it hard to reorganise. Even though protests played a role in regime change in Albania, fundamental factors explaining the Albanian transition and its characteristics were: repeated episodes of the mass emigration and the diffusion of anarchy, looting and other forms of violence on state property connected with the economic breakdown.

The scholarly literature available on the Albanian transition is still scarce

and focuses mostly on political events. The country's main cultural institutions have not yet overcome the deep crisis of transformation that started 20 years ago. In addition, the post-communist context has been dominated by the same actors that were the protagonists of the regime's collapse and therefore every account available is affected by the political affiliation of the analyst (Qesari 2011). Added to this is the limited interest of international scholars in the country, unless in connection to major political crises or issues such as migration and transnational crime. The parallel disintegration of the former Yugoslavia overshadowed events in the peripheral Balkan country (Vickers 1997:76).

### **Transition: periodization**

The periodization commonly used to describe the democratic transition divides it into:

- a first period when the regime still had a strong hold on the country and attempted to initiate limited reforms to remain in control of the liberalization process (*December 1989 – November 1990*);
- a second phase when two short waves of street protests dominated the political arena, leading to the formation of the first non-communist political parties and the organization of the first pluralist elections (*December 1990- March 1991*);
- the period of instability, widespread protests and state disintegration (*April 1991 – February 1992*);
- the last phase when the first non communist government was elected, democratization and economic liberalization started and a degree of political stabilization was achieved after the turbulence of the regime change (*March 1992-1994*).

The country had been under the iron fist of the Secretary General of the Albanian Party of Labour (PLA), Enver Hoxha, from 1945 until his death in 1985. When his successor, Ramiz Alia, was elected, changes were extremely gradual. At the 9<sup>th</sup> Communist party Plenum on 22<sup>nd</sup>-23<sup>rd</sup> January 1990, the dramatic economic conditions of the country were publicly admitted but the measures announced to face the situation were very limited. The country's economy remained thoroughly collectivized and the ruling party showed no intention of introducing political pluralism. Information about the 1989 Velvet revolutions and the collapse of the Berlin wall had reached the country. Regardless of tight censorship, the population was informed of the changes in the communist bloc thanks to Italian, Greek and Yugoslav television. However, after more than four decades of a totalitarian regime, fear continued to

dominate.

The first half of 1990 was characterized by attempts at organizing protests, but the regime was still capable of strict control and responded with hundreds of arrests in Shkodër, Kavaje and the capital Tirana. Alia showed some timid signs of opening with a few basic liberalizing measures such as the reopening of the Ministry of Justice and the reintroduction of legal practice. By late spring telephone lines to the West, closed since World War II, were opened and the issuing of passports was allowed. A modest liberalization of the press took place: many taboo topics could now be discussed, and works by a few authors, previously forbidden, were allowed to circulate. However, these late and limited reforms taken to address the situation by controlling change from above instead encouraged anti-government feeling to come to surface.

In an ever tenser political atmosphere, about 400 people - growing to 5,000 - sought refuge in foreign embassies in the first mass attempt to flee the country on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990. Police fired on them only occasionally, but the government declared a partial state of emergency. Although the regime explained the episode as the work of thugs, this first massive flight marked the beginning of transition as it was the first consistent outbreak of discontent that encouraged later popular revolts. Indeed the episode was a sign not of political organization but of long standing and deeply hidden discontent. Indeed, it had a tremendous impact on a population that had not been allowed to exit the country for decades as it showed that the state security apparatus was no longer invincible.

Ramiz Alia reacted to the crisis by forcing a few hard liners in the Party to resign, by increasing state salaries and by arranging demonstrations in support of the regime against 'vagabonds and traitors'. He did not accept to introduce political pluralism until the end of 1990, introducing only what was then defined a "pluralism of ideas". Since the summer, disorder had spread in the country, becoming endemic in many provincial towns. Material conditions were harsh and, as the winter began, food and power shortages became the rule. Troops were moved to the cities to guard public buildings and frequently engaged in small clashes with isolated protesters. Their intimidating power was still considerable and the secret police was greatly feared.

In November 1990 the Central Committee made its last attempt to define a political strategy for the country. Albania was now the only remaining communist state in Europe and university students had rising expectations as to the democratization of the country and were growing impatient with worsening living conditions (Vickers 1997:33). Up to December, the regime had managed to avoid significant street protests. Decades of repression and the political control of all institutions had reduced the population to silence and boycott was the only way to express profound and widespread discontent. Finally, spaces for an opposition movement grew with the weakening of the state apparatus,

worsening economic conditions and rising expectations.

The stage was taken first by the university student community on December 6<sup>th</sup> (Vickers 1997). The first protests focused on living standards in student houses, but quickly moved to the political sphere to include the introduction of political pluralism. Ramiz Alia repeatedly met with the students and on 10<sup>th</sup> December he convened the Central Committee to make it declare the introduction of political pluralism (Abrahams forthcoming). The students had brought up the issue but Alia wanted to take credit for it. During his last meeting with the students, Alia informed them of the introduction of political pluralism rather than accept the request coming from the streets. With this strategy of gradual concession Alia hoped to remain in control of the political process.

The day after, the first non-communist political party was established: the Partia Demokratike e Shqipërisë (PDsh) or Democratic Party of Albania, formed by a few members of the student movement and the emissaries sent by Alia to mediate with them, in particular the cardiologist Sali Berisha, a trusted member of the Communist party. The first free elections were announced for the following February, then postponed to March 31<sup>st</sup> as a new wave of protest exploded. Liberalization from above had introduced political pluralism but Albania was still defined as a “Socialist Republic”. Major protests started around a student hunger-strike with thousands of workers and citizens pulling down the statue of Enver Hoxha that stood in the capital’s main square on February 20<sup>th</sup>. The government resigned and an 8 member Presidential Council was formed.

On February 22<sup>nd</sup> the Army was the protagonist in a bloody episode of repression against citizens demonstrating in front of its headquarters in Tirana (see below). Party hard-liners were stirring up fears of a coup and rumours that Nexhmije Hoxha, the widow of the dictator, was behind the conspiracy enraged the crowds that had mobilized. However, according to Abrahams (forthcoming) Alia was in a position to avoid a *coup d'etat* from the Army and conservative elements in the Party of Labour. The latter, particularly deep-rooted in the provinces, did not have sufficient strength to organize a reactionary response.

Rather, the state appeared weaker and weaker as a result of the deepening economic crisis. In March rumours spread that it was possible to flee to Italy as visas would be issued. People jumped onto buses, trains, trucks, and horses or walked to the coastal town of Durres. Overall about 25,000 Albanians left for Italy in those weeks. Similarly, a wave of illegal crossings of the Albanian-Greek mountain borders began. The communist party lost its monopoly on power on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1991 when the first pluralist elections were held. However, the Party of Labour of Albania (PLA) won the consultations. The literature debates whether these should be considered the first free elections however. The period of time was indeed too short for the opposition to prepare after decades

under the Stalinist regime. They had neither the experience nor the funds to organize an adequate campaign, in particular to reach the countryside where the majority of the population resided as result of the regime's policy of limiting internal migration. Rural areas were dominated by fear of the security apparatus but also of losing what little they had with the radical reforms announced by the Democratic Party (DP). Wide urban support had led the DP to underestimate the situation in the countryside. As the opposition leader Berisha commented: "it was the village troika that defeated us: the major, the president of the cooperative, the party secretary kept a terrorized population under control" (Champseix 1992:184).

In the days following the elections the main urban centres were hit by a number of violent demonstrations. In protest against the killing of four people on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, the DP boycotted the first meeting of the parliament, but in the following weeks, despite being the official opposition, the new party politically led the battle in the country and the parliament (Abrahms forthcoming). As the economic situation deteriorated to reach, in May 1991 a general strike was called by the new independent trade unions, asking for salary raises and investigations into police violence in Shkodër during the April protests.

After weeks of the strike the government resigned and a Stability Government was formed on June 4<sup>th</sup>. Still led by the Party of Labour, it included opposition members and was formed to guide the country to new elections in March 1992. Alia would remain president until fresh elections three years ahead of schedule. On June 12<sup>th</sup> the PLA changed its name and symbols and became a Socialist Party; the young Fatos Nano was nominated its new leader. Some foreign aid now began to arrive but the country's economic situation was dramatic and in August a new wave of refugees reached Italy. Thousands of people arrived at the ports of Bari, Brindisi and Otranto on board the tugboat Vlora and other fishing boats, floating craft and barges (Abrahams forthcoming) while violent clashes took place around the port of Durres when the police tried to prevent the seizing of ships (Vickers 1997:70).

The Autumn was characterized by a new wave of strikes and by November 29<sup>th</sup> 1991 the DP withdrew from the stability government. The country collapsed into a spiral of lawlessness and dozens of people died during street riots in the following months as private violence also spread. During the dramatic winter of 1991-92, the first foreign military intervention to placate food riots and lawlessness took place. This was *Operazione Pellicano* consisting of 1,000 unarmed Italian soldiers distributing humanitarian aid in various parts of the country, especially in the remote mountain areas where people risked starvation.

The regime change could be considered achieved when a non-communist political party won the elections for the first time on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1992. This was the second time that multi-party elections had taken place, but the first time a

change in power occurred with the Albanian Democratic Party (DP) winning the consultation and the leader of the opposition, Sali Berisha, becoming the Albanian president. This time the West, and the USA in particular, provided wide support to the DP campaign. Voter turnout was very high at around 80%. The DP won with 62% of the votes and gained 92 of the 140 seats in parliament. Together with the Republican party and the Social Democrats, the anti-communists held 100 seats. The Socialist Party won 25.7%, 38 seats.

Whether these were the first free elections or not, they were indeed the first whose results were not contested in Albania's post-communist history. Since that point Albania has performed poorly in terms of the quality of democracy. As observed by Elbasani (2008:5) the new democratic institutions "failed to achieve either a degree of stability or a sufficient level of legitimacy" in the years to come. The former president Ramiz Alia was first placed under house arrest charged with the misappropriation of state funds, and later he was imprisoned for two and a half years. The paradox for a country where political repression had been so harsh was that those high-ranking officials prosecuted were not charged for human rights abuses but for economic crimes such as the misuse of funds, and no investigations into the secret police that terrorized the population for decades, the Sigurimi, were carried out (HRW 1992).

The new post-communist leadership absorbed the short-lived social movements that emerged in the struggle against the regime, in particular the student movement, and marginalized its members. Grown within the communist party apparatus and not within a dissident movement, it soon showed authoritarian inclinations. It used the old party-state tools to repress discontent and in 1992 even used secret police and paramilitary forces to demobilize workers and crack down on union independence. Finally, due to the harsh economic situation at home, the great majority of people simply demobilized or sought new opportunities abroad.

## **Protests**

The first signs of a small student protest took place in a student house in the northern town of Shkodër only at the beginning of December 1989 (Champseix, 1990: 310). The first timid attempts at organizing a public protest against food shortages and in favour of democratic reforms on the streets of Shkodër started on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1990. In this traditionally anti-communist centre, troops were brought from Tirana to immediately silence discontent (Vikers 1997:20).

Abrahams (forthcoming) highlights the difficulties for widespread discontent to emerge in public, to build a movement, overcome the prevailing fear and face police control and power in repressing the first signs of protests. In Tirana the information about arrests in the northern city arrived but fear continued to hamper the capacity to organize and protest publicly for months.

Similarly, in spring 1990 the town of Kavaje saw episodes of symbolic protests by individuals that remained isolated due to widespread fear. A turning point was July 1990, when the mass emigration of thousands of people described below took the shape of a contingent opportunity rather than a protest, even though the nature of the situation could be considered to bridge the two categories. The embassy crisis showed breaches in the repressive power of the state apparatus and opened up the way for months of growing instability.

The first significant political protests occurred in December 1990. They started as student protests but achieved wider support; what is more, they managed to obtain the concession of political pluralism. The first non-communist party originated here. The mass protests quickly spread from the capital to the main cities, including the Shkodër in the north, the port of Durrës and the industrial centre of Elbasan. Everywhere the demonstrators demanded an end to one-party rule, multiparty elections, and major changes in the country's economic structure (Keesing 1990). The days following the student protests were characterized by riots in cities like Shkodër, Kavaja, Durres and Elbasan. Young men expressed their rage by destroying signs, busts, and books by Hoxha, looting shops and clashing with police (Abrahams forthcoming). As stressed by Vickers (1997:34) the opposition had “a random and anarchic character (...) attacks on a public building at night by a few people who would then rapidly disappear into the darkness was a much more typical expression of the public mood than the kind of large-scale organized meeting and street demonstration that had developed elsewhere in Eastern Europe”.

Later on February 5<sup>th</sup> a new wave of protest started among students at the Institute of Agriculture on the outskirts of Tirana. They were soon joined by their colleagues from the Student City in the city centre. Their request was for the resignation of the dean and improvements in living standards. In two days the Student City mobilized not only around economic issues but also political issues such as the compulsory study of Marxist-Leninist theory and the ruling Party history, and the name of the Enver Hoxha university. Alia predictably rejected these requests, suggesting the issues would be solved after the political election by the new parliament or with a national referendum. It should be noted that the Democratic Party leaders proved very cautious to the students' demands, as they were focused on organizing the first free elections to be held later that month. However, it was thanks to the students' uncompromising approach that things started to move faster. As their protests continued and grew, a referendum was held among students and professors concerning the university name change. In just a few hours around 8.000 signatures from a total of 11.000 students and professors at the university were collected to support the request. The consultation was held under the supervision of the official commission of students, but was considered illegal (Mustafaj 1993:124). As a consequence, on February 18<sup>th</sup> the students announced the beginning of a hunger-strike and seven hundred and twenty-three people placed their names on

the strikers' list, including a handful of professors (Abrahams forthcoming). The hunger-strike continued for the next three days. New people joined and held speeches: ordinary citizens from all over the capital and workers from the Kombinat Enver Hoxha factory in Tirana and the mines in the mountains near the capital city.

By February 20<sup>th</sup> thousands of people had rallied at the university campus to support the students. To disperse the demonstrators, the police fired warning shots - further angering the protesters who started to march towards the city's main Skanderbeg Square. Hardly able to contain the people the police could not prevent Hoxha's statue being pulled down amid chants of "Enver-Hitler". 20 people were injured in the clashes but eyewitness accounts stressed that members of the security forces sympathized with the protesters (Abrahams forthcoming). Once again hoping to keep the control of the reforms, Alia announced that the university's name would be changed in line with its reorganization into 4 parts a few hours later. That night the government resigned and an 8 member Presidential Council was formed. The next day, more monuments were toppled in various towns including Gironkaster, Hoxha's birthplace.

On February 22<sup>nd</sup> rumours spread that the Army was conspiring to restore Hoxha's monument in Tirana. Barricades were built and flying bullets shot in the air around the Military Academy. During the confrontation with the special police forces sent to disperse the protest four people were killed, including one member of the police (Abrahams forthcoming, see below). The regime's idea of controlling the liberalization process from above worked in controlling the two protest waves, but it was illusory and the communist electoral victory at the first pluralist elections in March 1991 turned out to be a pyrrhic one. In the weeks following the elections, workers and students participated in a series of scattered protests asking for badly needed economic reforms. On April 1<sup>st</sup> the police killed a fourteen-year-old boy in Tirana. The same day Shkodër became the epicentre of the protests. High school students organized a sit-in in front of the PLA headquarters (Champseix 1992:184), and on April 2<sup>nd</sup> four more people were killed by unidentified shots and 60 people injured during a protest denouncing electoral fraud. The crowd then stormed the Labour party premises and set them on fire (Lawrence 2011).

On May 16<sup>th</sup> a general strike called by the recently legalized Union of Independent Trade Unions (BSPSH) involved 250.000 workers in particular from the industry and transportation sectors, paralysing a country where almost no private cars circulated as ownership had been prohibited until very recently (Champseix 1992:186). The BSPSH presented a list of seventeen economic demands, calling for a 50% wage increase for all workers, better working conditions, and police prosecutions for the April 2<sup>nd</sup> killings. In Lawrence's account: "The BSPSH's strike committee instructed essential service workers in

the water, electrical, medical and food production industries to keep working while expressing solidarity with their fellow workers. This accommodation allowed an ample supply of bread to be available throughout the strike” (Lawrence 2011). A further step was taken on May 25<sup>th</sup> 1991 when two hundred miners from the coal mines in Valias began a hunger strike deep in the pit. In solidarity with the Valias miners, hundreds more workers across the country begun their own hunger strikes and protests in cities including Durres, Shkodër, Vlora, Korçë and Tirana (Mustafaj 1993:109). The protest movement paralyzed the country and led to the resignation of the communist-led government.

During the summer there were new mass attempts to leave the country. By October a series of protest rallies took place in Tirana together with country-wide strikes. Strikes protesting about living conditions included those by teachers, miners and Tirana's transport workers, as well as a general strike in the copper mining district of Puke in support of its demand to become a free economic zone (Keesing 1991). In November 1991 the government expressed concern over the breakdown in public order in the Tropojë and Shkodër districts due to shortages of food and energy (Keesing 1991b). In December 1991 20.000 people gathered in Tirana to celebrate the first anniversary of the democratic movement and protest against food and fuel shortages. In the town of Lac two people were killed in food riots, but many other parts of the country were also affected by disturbances before the elections in March 1992, and dozens of people were killed during the winter (Vickers 1997:72). Another major strike was organized in Tirana in January 1992 by the Union of Independent Trade Unions and garnered 20,000 supporters (Keesing 1992).

The first non-communist government inherited the problems of public order and for a while had to confront the new independent trade unions. On 26<sup>th</sup> August 1992 the workers at the Polican munitions complex surrounded the town of Berat, took two public officers hostage, and set fire to the factory's office building. Violence spread in the streets and six people were injured. The government was forced to accept economic concessions to calm the situation. As stressed by Vickers (1997:86), the conflict showed “the unpredictability of outbreaks of violence in urban centres, and the fact that trade unions were still an independent force”. The reaction of the new government was to crack down on trade union independence shortly after. In December, the government reacted to a prolonged hunger strike and occupation at the Bulquize chromite mine by sending in paramilitary units that intimidated workers by placing dynamite around the top of the mine shaft. Similarly, a few weeks later, paramilitary units were sent to Kukes to face workers asking for the land compensation they had been promised (Vickers 1997:86).

Problems with public order were not only due to violent strikes, looting and food riots connected with the economic collapse: the breakdown in state authority also resulted in a crime wave between 1991 and 1992. A few protests

were organized to denounce the mounting violence. The government reacted by channelling resources to improve policing and by frequently applying death penalty. In 1993 there were 15 executions in Tirana alone (Vickers 1997:132).

## **Structural conditions**

### The type of regime and its development

Albania remained a Stalinist regime until its end. While other communist regimes de-stalinized their systems after 1956, Albania preferred to break its relationship with the Soviet Union and establish a new alliance with China until 1978. In order to avoid any liberalizing influences after the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington, the Albanian communist regime completely isolated itself from the external world, choosing economic and political autarchy or self-reliance and thus keeping total control over its small population. Occasionally, Albania is described as belonging to the category of sultanistic regimes, introduced by Linz & Stepan to discuss cases such as Ceaucescu's Romania. The unpredictable and despotic intervention of the communist leader Enver Hoxha did indeed form a permanent threat against all individuals, groups and institutions in Albania. In addition, the Albanian regime used the local traditional clan culture and customary repertoires, generally known as Kanun, in order to impose its control. For instance, it was common to punish an entire family for anti-socialist crimes attributed to one member, thus hitting strong family allegiances. However, it is fundamental to underline that total power was organized around the communist model of the party-state in its totalitarian Stalinist version. The country was fundamentally modernizing during the 45 years of authoritarian rule through the extraordinary use of coercion and repression. Quoting the data of the Association of Former Political Prisoners, Abrahams stresses that “34,135 people were imprisoned for political reasons during the four decades of communist rule, and 59,009 internally exiled. 5,487 people were executed after bogus courts” (Abrahams, forthcoming).<sup>1</sup>

The late reforms introduced by Ramiz Alia were far too limited to bring significant results in terms of liberalization. What was announced in the spring of 1990 was the release of political prisoners who had spent more than twenty-five years in prison. In April six Albanian citizens, members of the Popaj family that had been political refugees at the Italian embassy in Tirana since 1985, were finally allowed to leave the country. In May imprisonment and the death penalty for anti-socialist propaganda were abolished. The illegal crossing of state borders was reduced to a criminal offence and no longer considered a

---

<sup>1</sup>Vickers (1997: 255) quotes instead the Helsinki Committee with 4.800 executions of political prisoners between 1945-91 but stresses that these figures are conservative estimates. As a reference point in terms of population, Albania had 1.1 million inhabitants in 1945 and according to the last census, the population in 2011 was 2.8 million.

counter-revolutionary act. The Ministry of Justice, closed since 1968, was reopened and private legal practice was reintroduced. As recalled by Elbasani (2008:5) “for the viability of the democratisation agency, the communist total hold of power until the very end of the regime” had heavy long term implications. Not only had the party-state hampered the formation of any independent civil society organization, but also, given the total control exercised by the communist party until the very end, the birth of the first opposition party, the Democratic Party, should be attributed to the manoeuvres of the communist apparatus in power. Indeed, all relevant public figures that emerged in the opposition, with the exception of students, had previously been members of the communist party and were sent by Alia as mediators during the student protests. In addition, the student component was soon marginalised in the newly established Democratic Party. After the collapse of the regime, the DP leadership continued the communist practice of the political appropriation of state institutions and established a new one-man rule, limiting democratic participation and mismanaging the economic transition (Elbasani 2008).

Internally, very few voices were able to speak out against the authoritarian practices of the new democratically elected government. The socialist party was heavily hit by various measures, from the incarceration of its leaders to the firing of thousands of public employees that refused to change their political affiliation (Abrahams forthcoming). These practices were not used in a context of totalitarian control and therefore the formation of public opinion did gradually occur, despite the poor quality of democracy. Foreign accounts of the first half of the 1990s were filled with enthusiastic praise for the country's democratization until a new state-society collapse in 1997 confronted western donors with a new emergency (ICG 1999).

### *Economic conditions*

The Albanian communist regime had thoroughly collectivized the economy and individuals could not privately own even an animal or a car. Ramiz Alia was as prudent in reforming the economy as he was in the political realm. The catastrophic economic crisis was certainly a fundamental structural condition enabling regime change in Albania, as it helps explain the profound disaffection with the regime in the country, the mass emigration that contributed to its fall, and the months of anarchy that accompanied the transition. Indeed, the risk of famine during the winter of 1991-1992 in the mountainous areas in the north of the country distinguished the Albanian transition from any other regime change in the region. In the last few years of communist rule, the shortage of spare parts and fuel, as well as absenteeism at work had reduced production to half its capacity, and once factories and mines were abandoned, the economy was barely functioning. While the regime procrastinated over the need for economic reforms, by late 1990 the people started to de-collectivize the land

spontaneously, abandon factories and destroy state properties.

When the anti-communist mobilization increased from early 1991 onwards, the economy was basically paralysed. On the one hand the economic crisis during the transition was so severe that almost everything came to be seen as a possible source of income, pieces of public buildings included. Literately anything was seized for this purpose: windows, chairs, tables, manhole covers from the streets. Everything that could be taken from public properties was dismantled and taken home. On the other hand, the political meaning of such acts should not be underestimated: the looting and the attacks on state properties also expressed rage against the regime. Some interpretations suggest that the mass departures of people in 1991 were a tool used by the communist elite to put pressure on foreign donors whilst attempting to avoid conflict at home by finally allowing some people to escape from the country. In this line, the regime hoped to use the first migration flows to obtain aid from western countries, but the situation was impossible to control due to the extreme economic crisis and the related legitimacy crisis of the system.

Economic liberalization consistently took off only with the elections of March 1992 and the first Democratic Party-led government. Up to that point, and for the long and economically desperate months of the transition, the communists had dragged their feet over the reform process, making the transition even more painful. The deep transformations which occurred after with so-called shock therapy were highly traumatic but, considering the tragic condition of the economy, did at least stimulate some kind of growth. Indeed, in the first few years after the transition, Albania appeared and was described by all international reports as an economic tiger for its consistent growth rates. However, the economy's new start was based on foreign aid, migrant remittances and illegal trafficking favoured by the country's proximity with the former Yugoslavia, hit by international sanctions during civil wars.

### *Social conditions*

The Albanian communist regime was particularly harsh in the field of social control: all mass organizations set up by the communist party-state, such as trade unions, youth organizations, women's unions, artists' associations and the like constituted instruments for mass mobilization, control and the preservation of power (Biberaj 1998). As underlined by Baruti, the Albanian communist regime imposed a ban on all independent organizations from 1956 onwards, when a law restricted the activities of all associations created in the country since the beginning of the century, effectively closing them down: "the only organisation that survived was the Red Cross that existed until 1964. From 1964 to 1990 the only non-governmental organisation working in Albania was the association of Hunters" (Baruti 1996).

Many intellectuals later observed that in the 1990s citizens could speak only of the construction of civil society, not of reconstruction since the Party and society were indistinguishable under the old regime. Not only that: the very concept of civil society was unknown until that point: in the Albanian dictionary published in 1980 the term “civil society” does not appear (Krasniqi 2004:19). 45 years of totalitarian rule had profoundly transformed Albanian society through industrialization, collectivization, mass literacy, and the struggle against religious institutions and faiths as well as deeply rooted customs. The Albanian communist regime, just like any other, was based on a modernizing ideology that aimed at profound changes in a very short period of time in an attempt to challenge western capitalist modernization by imposing a radically new project of economy and society.

Among the products of such changes was a young population, as high birth rates had almost tripled the population since 1945. One of the PLA's main concerns in the late 1980s was how to deal with a youth that, as stressed by Vickers (1997:120), was seen as “apathetic, unruly and undisciplined (...) increasingly exposed to foreign influences” due to widespread access to foreign TV programmes. Retrospectively, the only predictable drive for political change lay with the young Albanians, that is with the student movements as well as with massive exit from the isolated country.

### *International relations*

Albania had been a totally isolated country, choosing autarchy as its political and economic model at the end of the 1970s. In the first decades of communist rule, international relations were oriented eastward and shaped by three main alliances with other regimes in Yugoslavia, Russia, and China.<sup>2</sup> These alliances shaped the different periods of the regime until the last phase, when Hoxha imposed complete isolation in a bid to maintain power. The country suffered considerable consequences from this isolation, not only in relation to its population - whose freedom of movement even within the boundaries of the state was strictly limited well before complete autarchy – but also due to the economic consequences of this choice. De facto the industrial base of the country started to break down well before the collapse of the regime when foreign support and technology was withdrawn (Lohmel 1996).

The first sign of the regime’s intentions to abandon autarchy came in 1987 (Vickers 1997), but the effective return to the international political arena

---

<sup>2</sup> The Albanian communist party received Yugoslav support during the Second World War to organize the resistance and in the early post-war years; with the break between Tito and Stalin in 1948 Tirana sided with Moscow and relied considerably on Soviet financial aid until 1961. As Ever Hoxha did not accept the idea of the de-stalinization Albania broke the relationship with the Soviet Union and from half 60s it established a new alliance with China. The latter as well was central in term of financial and technical support. However, the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington could not be tolerated by Hoxha who imposed the autarchic turn to the country from 1978 onwards.

took place in February 1988 with the country's participation in a Balkan conference in Belgrade. The political and cultural proximity to the 1989 revolution could not be ignored as change swept through the Eastern Bloc to which Albania had first belonged and later isolated itself from. Geographical proximity allowed information and influence to reach Albania via ordinary radio and TV programmes with no need for neighbouring countries to invest in anti-communist propaganda as the USA did. More than direct foreign interference, what mattered for Albania was its European belonging.

For more than a decade from the turn of the 1980s, the dissolution of Yugoslavia had emerged as a problematic aspect of Albanian politics. The Kosovo issue in particular became a quasi-structural element in Albanian political development. Western powers pushed local elites to keep a low profile and abandon any revisionist rhetoric around the idea of a Greater Albania incorporating Kosovo. US-Albanian relations were resumed just two weeks before the first multiparty elections in 1991. As Abraham (forthcoming) stresses, the first DP statements in 1991 about Albania-Kosovo national reunification in the Balkans alarmed Washington, and caused the Americans to postpone political support for the opposition party until after the 1991 elections. During the spring of 1991 the US government chose a more proactive role in the country, supporting Berisha's leadership, limiting his extremism, and using him to persuade the Kosovans to maintain a non violent stance in the Yugoslav conflict.

In addition, the consequences of the war were particularly visible in terms of the impact of international sanctions against the former Yugoslav countries and the flourishing illegal market, particularly in fuel and arms, until the Dayton agreements of 1995. As for Europe, Albania was soon considered a predominantly Italian and Greek affair, with migration flows becoming the main element shaping Tirana's foreign relations. However, the two neighbouring EU countries were not prepared for the transition in Albania. Fearing more waves of refugee, Italy organized foreign military intervention during the winter of 1991-92 as food riots and lawlessness spread throughout the country. *Operazione Pellicano* involved 1,000 unarmed Italian soldiers who distributed humanitarian aid to various parts of the country. As it was not involved in the historical conflicts over nation-state borders that haunt the region, Italy's interposition in Albanian affairs was better accepted than any Greek effort would have been. In following years a few conflicts over minority issues emerged in Albanian-Greek relations.

Paradoxically for a country that defended its sovereignty to the point of autarchy, the most extreme form of protectionism, after the collapse of the communist regime Albania ended up extremely dependent on foreign aid and repeatedly avoided falling apart only thanks to foreign military interventions: the first occasion was during the winter of 1991-92; the second in 1997 due to

internal political and civil strife; and finally in 1999 during the Nato war in Kosovo as a result of the massive refugee flows from the neighbouring country.

### **Contingent political opportunities**

The third wave of democratization should be considered as the most important contingent political opportunity to stimulate the first timid protests in 1990, the massive emigration wave in summer 1990, and later the regime change.

In 1988 a series of articles attacking Perestroika and Gorbachev appeared in the Albanian press, highlighting a growing awareness of the changing international context. Yet until the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe in 1989, changes in the Albanian system had been very marginal (Vickers 1997:14-17). The 1989 “contagion” had a fundamental role to play in generating the regime’s collapse, and in many respects regime change was similar to other countries in the bloc. In particular, the death of Ceausescu on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1989 was relevant for the Albanian nomenclature and for the social movements fighting against the regime in December 1990. According to many accounts, the Romanian example frightened the Party leaders and, at the beginning of 1990, they consequently initiated a series of concessions with the idea of controlling the inevitable liberalization from above (see Langer 1996:231; Kola 2003:1994; Mustafaj 1993:27-30). The embassy crisis in July 1990, when thousands requested asylum at western embassies, marked another turning point in the transition to democracy as the people proved stronger than the security forces for the first time. By July 1990 about 5.000 people had besieged western embassies: the first case was submitted on June 20<sup>th</sup> and the crisis peaked on July 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Echoing the regime’s view of these events, many accounts describe the protagonists of these mass exoduses as emerging from semi-criminal and alienated sub-cultures (Vickers 1997:34). Among others, the future DP member Mustafaj (1993:31) stresses that only a few dozen of the 5 thousand people who succeeded in entering the western embassies had a school diploma, and no political slogan was heard at the time. As described by the most important and recent work available on the transition (Abrahams forthcoming), just as in the failed protests and riots in early 1990 in Shkodër, Kavaje and Tirana, the protagonists of the embassy crisis were deeply dissatisfied, often unemployed young men that saw no future in Albania and were drawn by strong myths of the West. They did not have a clear political orientation apart from their dissatisfaction with the regime. Yet their mass migration was a fundamental chapter of the struggle against the regime. Their actions reproduced the German example of the previous year when thousands of citizens showed their opposition to the regime by “voting with their feet” (Hirschman 1993). The collapse of the Albanian regime was the product of a similar positive relationship between exit and voice as identified by Hirschman in the case of

the DDR: as in Honecker's East Germany in 1989, the "exit" of thousands of people encouraged others to "voice" their protest and bring down the regime.

With a few exceptions, there was limited response from the regime to the mass emigration, probably indicative of low morale among soldiers and police. Even though the Albanian authorities denied requests for food and tents and cut off the embassies' water, in the end they broke the deadlock by allowing the first group to leave the country on July 10<sup>th</sup>. Two days later all the people had gone (Abrahams forthcoming).

There were a few other important similar episodes during the transition, leading up to July 1992 when a new wave of 6000 people reached Italy (Vickers 1997:84). All were relevant in the internal political struggle in various ways, including the fact that, when Italian and Greek authorities deported people back to Albania and put pressure on the authorities to police their border posts and harbours, they contributed to the escalation of disorder and chaos in the country (Elbasani 2008). One event considered important in the Albanian transition that gives a sense of the central role that intellectuals used to occupy in the country is the flight to France of the renowned writer Ismail Kadare in October 1990. His decision to ask for political asylum was traumatic for the nascent public opinion, which interpreted it as a sign that the reform process had reached a dead end (Champseix 1992:215). Kadare's words could not be found in the Albanian press but they reached the population through the Voice of America radio programme. The literature on transition considers this episode central to the further stirring up of the situation, and to pushing thousands of university students onto the streets of Tirana to ask for the dictatorship to end. Finally, another turning point is generally considered to be the visit of the US Secretary of State James Baker on June 22nd. In Tirana a mass of 300,000 people had gathered waving small American and Democratic Party flags. The unprecedented public support that welcomed the American officials prepared the ground for the strong support Washington provided to the country and its newly formed Democratic party. With strong American backing over the next two years Berisha was able to build his new career.

## **Actors in the transition**

### *A. Elites*

#### *Domestic actors*

Due to previous political experience and the concomitant developments in the former Yugoslavia, the fear of a civil war was strong both in Albania and abroad. Therefore, most of the literature sees the Albanian regime change as

relatively peaceful and non-bloody. Many observers highlight the moderation of the two opposed political leaders, Ramiz Alia and Sali Berisha, at crucial moments (e.g. Devole, 1998:31; Morozzo della Rocca, 1997:25).

The communist elite initially sought to limit the breadth of the political transformation, but when it realized the impossibility to control change from above it renounced state violence. As for the opposition, during the first few months after the introduction of the multiparty system, the uncertain political context and the fear of losing the achievements secured made the DP leaders cautious. Abrahams (forthcoming) identifies the reason for the initial absence of violence in the continuity of political elites. Indeed, the first leaders of the Democratic Party of Albania had been drawn by the Communist regime from its own trustworthy members in the local intelligentsia to become interlocutors with the mobilized students. The new political elite soon developed its own agenda and proved more inclined to confrontation than conciliation after the regime change.

What is certain is that the DP party founders were not dissidents who had struggled for years against the regime. They did not emerge from the traditional source of Albanian anti-communist movements, that is the nationalists and monarchists. As highlighted by Abrahams (forthcoming), the communists and the democrats agreed to release the most sensitive political prisoners less than two weeks before the first free elections in 1991, meaning they were ineligible to run for parliamentary seats. Fatos Lubonja stresses that the DP considered them a potential menace but, by turning political prisoners into a tool of political propaganda, was able to exhibit them during public events (in Bazzocchi 2004:99-101). As these were people who had spent years in prison it was generally difficult for them to start a new life, while it was easy for the new party leadership to marginalize them.

Due to the Stalinist nature of the Albanian regime, there was no other important actor on the scene apart from intellectuals who, as discussed further on in this paper, had gained some kind of status. Since there was no freedom in any sphere, and the economy had reached such a level of paralysis by the turn of the 1990s, not even the managers of the state factories or collective farms were potentially relevant social actors, either then or later. In addition, once the reforms began in 1992, people from every social group, including the most skilled and professional strata of the population, saw their social statuses change dramatically and were obliged to reinvent their lives to cope with the drastic fall in living standards (Vikers 1997:8).

The novelty that followed the collapse of the system was the arrival of foreign funds to establish NGOs. In Albania independent social organizations did not pre-exist these donors, as all organizations were controlled by the party. Western donors invested resources to form new civil society organizations and contribute to the democratization of the country. In a situation of profound

uncertainty and extreme economic impoverishment, NGOs become a fundamental safety net and later a job market for elites, especially intellectuals. In the Tirana area particularly hundreds of think-tanks, women's and youth associations, human rights groups and environmental organizations were established (Vaso, 1998; Romano 2000; Ruli 2003, Sampson 2006). A few gradually structured their goals and strategies, developed some experience in the field and carried out a significant number of projects. Yet they did not achieve much reputation in Albanian public opinion, nor did they ever become civil society actors in the full meaning of the term (Chiodi 2007b). The relationship between Albanian NGOs and the population remained weak, with low public awareness and trust in their activities (ICG 1999). The lack of previous experience of independent civil society organizations made the Albanian NGOs' relationships with donors very close, and the struggle to gain social legitimacy particularly difficult.

### *The Army*

The Army had been reduced to complete silence after the far-reaching purges of the 1970s, when Hoxha eliminated all potential rival centres of power from the public administration as a whole (Biberaj 1998). Until the final crisis of the system, the army was an important tool to enforce ideological conformity, but totally subordinated to the party's Secretary General. The result of Hoxha's policy of total party dominance over the security apparatus was that neither the Army nor the Ministry of Defense could really challenge Alia's power during the regime crisis (Vickers 1997: 212).

The Army was the protagonist during a critical moment on February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1991 when a group of military students and officers at the Academy and the Military School expressed their concern over the toppling of Hoxha's statue and threatened to attack the state television centre if no explanation for the lack of defence of public order were provided. Outside the Academy, improvised barricades were built by ordinary citizens to prevent the replacement of the statue. As the special police forces tried to disperse the crowds four people died, including one member of the police. The day after the Military Academy was attacked with Molotov cocktails, stones and metal rods. The water and electricity supplies to the building were cut. A tank full of military students was blocked outside the Academy while someone blew up the building walls using dynamite (Abrahams forthcoming). Once again a crucial role was assumed by a Democratic Party delegation who mediated between the Academy students, defenders of the regime symbols, and the infuriated protesters. It was evident then that the Army could not threaten Alia's role in the transition nor the liberalization process.

Rather, the Army's weakness was among the reasons behind the state's collapse and the situation of chaos that reigned in 1991-92. In August 1991

president Alia held a meeting with the Defence Chief to request that the Army restore its internal order after episodes of discipline breaking down and looting in Kukes (Vickers 1997:71). The military apparatus was reformed by the end of 1991 under the coalition government, but a more radical transformation was carried out by the new DP government, which rapidly reduced its size and sought foreign assistance for its modernization.

### *Religious institutions*

Traditionally Albanians belong to four major religious traditions: the Sunni majority and the Bektashi Muslim minority, and the Orthodox and the Catholic Christians. Under the communist rule, all religious institutions were annihilated following the decision to make Albania the first atheist country in the world, taken in 1967 following years of anti-religious campaigns that had already led to the closure of churches and mosques and the killing or imprisonment of members of all clergies.

It was May 1990 when the offense of religious propaganda was removed from criminal law and churches and mosques were gradually reopened. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1991 a delegation from the Vatican visited Albania. Right before the first multi-party elections, on the occasion of the Easter festivities, the Tirana cathedral, once transformed into a cinema, was reopened. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, an ethnic Albanian from Macedonia, participated in the holy Saturday Mass. In the same period, the Orthodox Church also reopened and the Tirana mosque posted the dates for Ramadan (Champseix 1992:186). However, religious institutions were not available to support or stimulate protests and only a few individuals emerged as significant public figures in the last stage of the regime's crisis, such as the Catholic priest Simon Jubani (see below).

### *Intellectuals*

The long experience of the repression of dissent did not allow intellectuals in Albania to play a role similar to that of their Central European counterparts: no dissident groups were tolerated in Albania. In addition, the isolation of the country was such that the European dissident debates could not include the local cultural elite in any form. For instance, in the years before the regime collapsed, debates were not even framed in the language of civil society used by central European intellectuals. Right up until its final days, the regime's apparatus of repression was very successful in preventing the emergence of open criticism, and not even those few people who could, under the strict control of the secret services, travel abroad dared to openly challenge even the language of the system. Therefore, debates were shaped by the mummified language of the communist apparatus with the party leader Ramiz Alia arguing in favour of the "pluralism of ideas" but against real political pluralism.

In a country where 80% of the population was illiterate in 1945, there were no universities until 1957 and that which did open in Tirana was shaped around the regime's ideology. Most of the pre-communist intellectual elites were killed during the first few years of communism. A second dramatic period followed with the Maoist anti-intellectual propaganda of the 1970s, fortunately less violent than the Chinese Cultural Revolution, but still effectively discouraging any public intellectual resistance (Blumi 1997). This notwithstanding, the *intelligentia popullore* (intellectuals of the people) emerged as a specific social category during communist rule. The socialist rhetoric described a society based around the revolutionary class, the working class, with peasants holding revolutionary potential, and its *intelligentia popullore* in charge of educating the workers engaged in the edification of socialism (Chiodi 2007). The communist regime did not tolerate any form of intellectual freedom and the choice for the *intelligentia* was either silence or coexistence in some form.

When the grip of repression finally loosened, some intellectuals 'organic' to the system worked for its democratization. The first timid requests for intellectual freedom emerged in the beginning of 1988, but the kind of intellectual liberalization that took place in the literary field was the official approval of a few novels written by the internationally renowned Ismail Kadare in an unreal socialist style. In 1989 Kadare criticized political interference in the artistic realm, saying it limited creativity, at a literary conference. In September 1989 a novel entitled *Knives* by Neshat Tozaj, which attacked the dreaded Albanian security forces, the Sigurimi, was published. The author was an employee of the Interior Ministry and even though the plot referred to an officially disgraced period a couple of decades before, the denunciation of police abuses of power was unprecedented (Champseix, 1990: 310). The publication of Tozaj's novel marked the timid beginning of intellectual dissent and the possibility of mentioning human rights violations.

From the spring of 1990 onwards, encouraged by the regime, the press started to explore taboo topics, and the wave of public discussions swept through the major towns and the university of Tirana (Vickers 1997: 23). Alia's strategy was to allow trusted public figures to prepare the ground for his limited reforms. Many writers, scholars and journalists then started to organize. Among these were a group of journalists who gathered around the periodical *Bashkimi*, requesting independent editorial choices, while the first organization for human rights was formed around the historian Arben Puto. Every public figure who expressed critical stances of any kind was under terrible pressure, receiving menacing phone calls or other intimidation, and the course of political transformation was slow and unpredictable.

Indeed, Alia looked for the intellectuals' support to balance out the hardliners in the Party and on a few occasions during those months he invited some

to privately debate the reforms he envisaged. In August 1990, the Secretary General discussed the possibility of introducing political pluralism in the country with a number of leading intellectuals. As stressed by Abrahams (forthcoming) the information we have about these meetings shows the complex relationship intellectuals entertained with the state a few months before its collapse. Kadare was one of these public figures, members of the Communist party who were co-opted by the regime to assure a process of limited opening in the country. His choice to seek asylum in France in October 1990, as already mentioned, was particularly traumatic for the nascent Albanian public sphere. Many interpreted it as a betrayal at the moment of utmost need, others in retrospect stressed how his move encouraged students to protest. It certainly demonstrates the centrality of intellectual elites in the country.

Later, during the political upheaval against the regime in December 1990, some professors supported the mobilized university students against the old guard of party militants. Among the public figures that played a role during those days, the most important was Sali Berisha, a respected cardiologist and Tirana Hospital party chief who later became the leader of the opposition. From May 1990 on a few of his articles had appeared in the press asking for democratization, the end of international isolation, and support for Albanians in Kosovo. He was among the few intellectuals to meet Alia in August. But above all, Berisha was chosen by Alia as a mediator with the students during the protests and turned into an opposition leader within a few days. However, he did not hand in his Communist Party membership card until February 1991. His cautious attitude was abandoned once and for all after the first multi-party elections and his rise to power culminated a year later in December 1991, at which point he ousted all possible competitors from his own party.

The *intelligentia popullore* retained its central role in communist Albania, where public debate was very constrained, until 1990. Once the regime change occurred there was not enough time or space to debate what kind of social, political and economic institutions would be preferable for post-communist Albania. In addition, the depth of the economic crisis wiped out state funds for any kind of intellectual production or expression for the whole decade. The problem of having missed the opportunity to imagine the country's future was repeatedly stressed by Fatos Lubonja, who had been imprisoned for 17 years and who became one of the leading public intellectuals after 1991. Later, the situation gradually improved, but many of the fundamental choices had already been taken during the dramatic first few years of the transition (Bazzocchi 2004).

### *International actors*

The role of foreign interference aimed at accelerating regime change in Albania should not be overestimated. Indeed, the Summer 1990 “embassy crisis” was

backed by western governments (Abrahams forthcoming). Germany, Italy, France and Greece supported this protest they though would weaken the regime. Indeed, the first person to attempt the move was contacted by a Greek emissary. In the following years, Italy and Greece were deeply involved in the Albanian transition due to issues ranging from military-diplomatic affairs to migration.

However, what mattered most for the regime change was the “contagion” both from the democratic transitions in central Europe and the new awareness of the life people could live abroad. A crucial role was played by the US programme Voice of America, as once telephone lines were opened the Albanian-language radio service broadcast cautious internal criticism by interviewing economists, writers and professors (Abrahams forthcoming). Equally important were the TV and Radio programmes from the neighbouring Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy. Simply by addressing their respective public opinions these programmes informed and influenced Albanians' perceptions. By the end of the 1980s everyone ready to risk it could access these alternative sources of information on world events with the most rudimentary home-made antennas. While Albania was facing a devastating economic crisis, TV images of an unknown prosperity were easily accessible and much sought (Chiodi & Devole 2007).

Later, a few American and European foundations were among the international actors that played a role in the Albanian transition. After the extraordinary success of Baker's visit to Albania in June 1991, the American International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) actively supported the Democratic Party, financing its campaign for the 1992 political elections, providing expertise and giving generous aid. The American embassy was particularly outspoken in campaigning for the DP with the ambassador appearing on the podium during electoral rallies (Abrahams forthcoming). Similarly, the British and the German conservative parties assisted the Democratic Party from 1991 onwards. With the collapse of Yugoslavia nearby, Albania had a strategic role to play for a few years. Finally, a significant role was played by international NGOs, as they contributed by providing humanitarian aid during the worst period of the economic transition and, later, at the political level once the regime change was complete (Sampson 1996).

## B. Civil society

### *Democratization movements*

The most important collective actors to openly challenge the regime were the student movement and the workers' movement, with the latter staging strikes to demand better living conditions and political liberalization. As the mobilization

of society turned out to be ephemeral, the relevance of these events has been played down in most of the literature focusing on the political elite or, if looking at grassroots, on the large-scale exodus and the cultural origins of the myth of the West that spread in Albania before the collapse of the regime.

It was certainly very difficult for social movements to emerge in the country, as the totalitarian regime had eliminated or controlled all potential mobilizing structures, strove to manipulate the liberalization process and continued to dominate the population through the secret services. Once the student movement emerged in December 1990 it became a catalyst for other civil society initiatives: the birth of the first independent trade union organization, journalists' struggles for editorial freedom, the establishment of the first human rights group etc. These experiences were nevertheless short-lived and many of the leaders soon joined the political parties that were re-emerging in the same period. Many of the participants in the mobilizations emigrated with the hundreds of thousands of people that left the country in the following years.

### *Student movement*

The student movement was the first and most important non-elite actor in the Albanian transition. A few episodes of protest occurred in Shkodër at the beginning of 1990, but the movement that catalysed change took place in Tirana in December 1990.

The students started with economic requests, since the protest originated in frustration against another power cut in the Student City, but they quickly put political demands to the communist regime. In the Student City's open space, renamed Democracy Square, the student leaders elaborated the first list of nine points on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1990, outlining both economic and political demands including the acceleration of democratic reforms, political pluralism, the punishment of police officers who had beaten students in previous days and the legalization of the Organization of Students and Young Intellectuals created during the protest and soon to become the first opposition party (Abrahams forthcoming).

The organizing committee held a first meeting with two of Alia's officials, the Minister of Education and the Head of the Communist Youth. Four other leading northern Albanian intellectuals participated in the discussions: one was the cardiologist Sali Berisha, who soon became the unchallenged leader of the Democratic Party for the following 20 years. He was among those that insisted on interrupting the protests in order to hold a meeting with the Secretary General. Tension was high at the meeting as the students vehemently refused the idea of moderation, fearing the protests would lose momentum. Contrary to expectations, Alia accepted to meet the students at the presidential

palace the next evening, even with the ongoing protests.

On the fourth day of protests the students were joined by professors, workers and common citizens demanding political and economic reforms. By the afternoon, 80,000 people had gathered in the Student City square. The delegates to meet with Alia were chosen from the various faculties in the first democratic consultation ever held in the country. They accepted Alia as interlocutor in his role of President of the Republic but not as Secretary General of the Communist party. At the meeting Alia announced the decision by the Central Committee to introduce political pluralism (Abrahams forthcoming). The students had in fact brought up the issue of political pluralism but Alia wanted to take credit for it.

During the months between December 1990 and March 1991, along with a few former political prisoners, the mobilized students pushed the newly formed Democratic Party towards a more confrontational approach to the regime. They criticized the conciliatory and obedient approach that the intellectuals and the new DP leadership had chosen. The latter, in fact, focused on the upcoming elections and was afraid of allowing the conservative members of the Party to interrupt the democratization process. Finally, with the strengthening of the DP, the student leaders were marginalised within the new party. Among the communist intellectual protagonists of these events, Mustafaj (1993:61) stresses the importance of their leading role, as the students lacked experience and a clear political view. However, as he also notes, there was disappointment among the students once they realized that these intellectuals sent by the Communist party to mediate with them were taking over the leadership of the movement by ousting them. Few of the protagonists of the student struggles that took place between December 1990 and March 1991 remained politically active later on, and many emigrated.

### *Labour movement*

As in any Stalinist country, the Albanian trade unions served as transmission belts for political power in workplaces. They controlled workers in terms of both productivity and political behavior rather than protecting their rights or working to improve their conditions. They had their “golden age” in 1991-1992 after the first independent Union was legalized (Chiodi 2007:225). Thereafter they faced a sharp decline due to the economic catastrophe of the following years, suffering under the new authoritarian turn and marginalized by the new emerging private sector (Vaughan-Withehead 1999). Accounts describing workers' participation in the democratization movements in Albania are rare. One of the few foreign witnesses, MEP Alexander Langer who took part in a diplomatic mission to Tirana during the crucial weeks of December 1990, gives a sympathetic and emotionally strong account of the events in his travel notebook: “One hears talks about a number of factories in which workers would

have sympathized with the students, the printers were on strike and even sent their representatives to the join them, as well as in other factories there would be support for the students' cause”(Langer, 1996:227).

The first independent trade union, the Free and independent syndicate of miners, was established in February 1991. The creation of the Union of Independent Trade Unions of Albania (BSPSH) followed the days of mobilization in Tirana. Its foundation entailed a dramatic membership loss for the communist-led United Trade Unions of Albania (BPSH), which had a hard time freeing itself from the reputation of being a tool in the hands of the ruling party even after reorganizing as the Confederation of independent workers unions of Albania (KSSH) in April 1991.

The Union of Independent Trade Unions of Albania (BSPSH) was the protagonist of the May 1991 general strike already described. This, as well as previous strikes, aimed not only at securing better economic conditions, but also political liberalization. The demands of 50% pay rises and six hour working days were probably unrealistic requests with the country facing economic disintegration, but they obtained the government’s resignation. When the miners joined the protests with their hunger strike it was clear that the communists, despite keeping the majority in parliament, had lost the country (Vickers 1997:65). This first large-scale mobilization showed growing intransigence at street level. Even though the economic situation worsened, becoming downright dramatic, the protest waves continued during the months following the general strike. The major opposition party stood back, but was gradually losing its influence over the social movement (Abrahms forthcoming). The winter of 1991-92 was characterized by a situation of breakdown in labour force organization and discipline in the factories; many enterprises never again resumed production (Vickers 1997:66).

In the first few months after the 1992 elections, the first DP government was confronted with independent trade unions and unpredictable labour protests. From April 1992 the resumption of widespread strike activities saw the BSPSH under pressure to continue to represent the radical demands of the workers while the new government expected it to stabilize the political and economic situation. As the protests continued, the DP reacted by crushing them with the use of paramilitary forces as described above (Schmidt-Neke 1992:6). The new DP government continued the old practice of controlling the media; as Vickers (1997:90) observed: “*In a nation plagued with strikes the media only transmitted news of workers agreeing to go back to work.*” In fact, the many social and economic conflicts taking place at the time were seldom reported, and people learned about important protests such as a two-week strike in the railway sector only when they found the stations closed in May 1992 (Vickers 1997:90). The combination of local media manipulation and foreign media neglect explains the limited availability of analyses of social movements in the

Albanian transition.

In the following years the two main trade unions identified themselves with one of the main political parties, that is the Socialist or Democratic parties, and remained trapped within the harsh political battle between them. They thus lost the autonomy and credibility they had achieved in the eyes of the public during the transition.

### *New social movements*

New social movements could not generally emerge in a context of widespread economic deprivation and the lack of basic individual freedoms, but with the exception of initiatives around fundamental human rights issues. It was a university professor, the historian Arben Puto, who became the leader the first Forum for the defence of human rights (*Forumi për Mbrojtjen e të Drejtave të Njeriut*), established to monitor the release of political prisoners (Vickers 1997:38).

Albania in 1990 still had the highest number of political prisoners in Europe. It was late 1990 when a significant number were released. A Human Rights Watch report from the time describes the situation well: *“According to the government, 191 political prisoners were released in 1990, another 202 in January 1991, and 126 on March 17. On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, President Alia signed a decree granting amnesty to all prisoners convicted of espionage, sabotage, diversion and terrorist acts, as well as those convicted of slandering high state organs; approximately ninety prisoners were released following the decree”* (HRW 1992). In August 1991 the released prisoners set up the Association of former political prisoners to help their reintegration into society. Many not only had to find a job, but also had neither housing nor documents and continued to suffer the consequences of their years in detention. On September 21<sup>st</sup> 1991 a group of political prisoners went on hunger strike in Tirana, asking for rehabilitation, the restitution of confiscated properties, economic support and housing assistance, the identification of the graves of prisoners who died in detention and the return of their bodies to their families. By September 30<sup>th</sup>, an Amnesty Law was approved for political prisoners and compensation foreseen for all those who had been convicted, deported or sent into internal exile for crimes of conscience (HRW 1992). The association continued but the political prisoners never really achieved political relevance in the country, as already discussed above.

As for gender issues, the Albanian regime, like other communist systems, promoted women’s education and participation in its labour intensive modernization process and organized women in mass organizations. Contrary to other countries in the bloc, however, female participation coexisted with the prohibition of abortion and the discouragement of divorce in Albania due to its

Stalinist course, maintained until the regime's end. In the account of a march held on February 20<sup>th</sup> 1991, Abrahams (forthcoming) recalls an episode involving the actress Rajmonda Bulku, who incited women in the rally to lead the march in favour of the student strike, and how it was a group of women that set forth while men followed suit. Besides this occurrence, no other major female mobilization was evident in the Albanian transition. Many women's NGOs formed later on and often with a clear party affiliation, such as the Democratic League of Albanian women, linked to the Democratic Party, or the Forum of Republican women linked to the Republican party. As stressed by Young (2000:150) such women's groups aimed fundamentally at mobilizing women to vote for their political party of choice.

The first environmental party was established in 1991 but with its small constituencies it never achieved any real political relevance in the country (Vickers 1997:56). Nothing resembling a gay, lesbian or queer movement played any role in the Albanian transition. Twenty years after the collapse of the regime, homosexuality is still taboo and hardly any organization is visible in the Albanian public sphere, although the first association named 'the Gay Club' announced its existence in 1994 (Vickers 1997:139). At that time the communist law on homosexuality was still in force and members of the group were beaten heavily by police in October 1994 (HRW 1996). Decriminalization was obtained only in 1995 thanks to substantial international pressure.

Once the regime had collapsed, the severe public order problems that troubled the country provoked a number of citizen protests focusing on security issues. Of the few records available on these movements, Vickers (1997:129) recalls how teachers and pupils, organized around the Independent educational union of the Shkodër district, boycotted lessons and organized a rally calling for order against vandalism and violence at school in February 1992.

### *Ethnic movements*

At the turn of the 80s, Ethnic Albanians made up around 95% of the population. The law used to divide ethnic minorities into three national minorities: Greeks, Macedonians and Montenegrins; and two linguistic minorities: Roma and Vlachs/Aromanians.<sup>3</sup> Of these small ethnic groups, the Greek minority constituted the biggest, numbering 59,000 citizens according to the 1989 Census, and growing political relevance due to the role of neighboring Greece. In the first few years of transition the ethnic Greeks emerged as a relevant political actor despite the ban on forming ethnic parties. They established the organization Omonia to represent the minority and created the predominantly Greek Union for the Defence of Human Rights political party that gained five representatives in the 1991 electoral competition and two at the second general

<sup>3</sup> At the time, the Egyptians, as they call themselves, were not recognized as a different group but considered part of the Roma minority (Krasniqi 2010).

elections in 1992. However, the situation began to deteriorate soon after the democratization process started due on one hand to President Berisha's authoritarian turn and strong political interference from Athens on the other, reaching the lowest levels in 1994 with the arrests of five Omonia political activists.

Besides national minorities and the religious cleavages discussed below, the identification of Albanians with their territorial belonging and language, which varies between the northern Ghegue speech and the southern Tosk, has considerable political relevance. Even though the last communist leader, Ramiz Alia, was a northerner, the communist regime was shaped by southern elite, since Enver Hoxha originally came from the southern town of Gjirokastra. Apart from elite selection, the North perceived itself as discriminated against in many ways, including the linguistic choice made in the 1970s of standardizing the official language around the southern variation.

The organizing committee of the 1990 student movement was constituted by a majority of northern origin and Alia's delegation was made up of northerners like Berisha and Mustafaj (Abrahams forthcoming). In post-communist Albania, the new leadership selected a consistent number of government employees among fellow northerners, especially in the police and secret services. Finally, the Catholic community, predominantly based in the North, also turned out to be a relevant anti-communist actor as discussed below. One cannot speak of social movements here, but social cleavages mattered in the regime change dynamics.

### *Religious movements*

If no religious movement was central to the regime change in Albania, some kind of religious cleavage came to be relevant in 1990. The Northern city of Shkodër, where the largest Albanian Catholic community was based became one of the strongholds of the opposition movement. The secret police viewed the Catholic community in Shkodër as the 5<sup>th</sup> column of the Vatican. Here the small group of people that had attempted a first failed protest on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1990 decided to organize another demonstration on January 14<sup>th</sup>, asking a Catholic priest, Simon Jubani, released from prison just a year earlier after twenty-six years behind bars, to lead the protest following the Romanian example. At the time Jubani cordially refused (Abrahams forthcoming) but a month later, on November 4<sup>th</sup>, when a few thousand people gathered at the city's Catholic cemetery, they finally convinced him to hold a mass in open violation of the atheist prescriptions of the Albanian communist state. A few days later, on November 11<sup>th</sup>, tens of thousands gathered to celebrate a mass at the cathedral that had been converted into a sports hall. Among the participants were not only Catholics but also Muslims and Orthodox Christians (Abrahams forthcoming). Later, the Catholics supported the mufti as they reopened the

main city Mosques.

These episodes in Shkodër were limited but powerful signs of the rebirth of civil society. However, the dependence on foreign aid in the post-communist years provoked tensions among the Albanian religious communities: the Sunni Muslims were targeted by competing foreign influences, especially from Saudi Arabia and Turkey; and many evangelical Christian groups were struggling with all traditional groups to convert Albanians. Finally, the Orthodox Christians remained trapped within Greek-Albanian tensions as Greek nationalists tend to consider all Albanian Orthodox to be Greek (Vickers 1997: 96-117).

### **Concluding remarks**

The turbulent Albanian transition was not a velvet revolution, but after the long years of the Stalinist regime no one expected a smooth regime change. The communist elite endeavoured to use its power to limit the breadth of the political transformation, but only managed to postpone the regime's collapse for a few months. However, when it realized it was impossible to control change from above it renounced state violence. Thus, the Albanian transition was not characterized by bloodbaths, but rather by a steady stream of violence provoked by the economic and institutional breakdown. After decades of totalitarian rule, the first signs of the deep hidden discontent emerged during the so-called embassy crisis of July 1990 which saw the first mass flight of Albanians from the country. As in the German case, it was the exit choice of hundreds of people that strengthened their voice. Albanian civil society had been annihilated by the regime, but the velvet revolutions stimulated hundreds of young people to try to escape the country where they had been confined and isolated for decades. Their choice had a tremendous impact on nascent Albanian public opinion facing the exasperating slowness of political reform and the degenerating economic situation. University students were the first to mobilize and stimulated the birth of a wide protest movement from December 1990 on, a year after the revolutions in the Communist bloc. After the students, workers took to the streets and established the first independent trade union, journalists struggled for press freedom and the first human rights group was established.

These experiences were nevertheless short-lived and soon marginalized by the new political elites that emerged from the intellectual milieu once 'organic' to the system. Few of the protagonists of the struggles that took place between December 1990 and March 1991 remained politically active, and many emigrated abroad after being hit by the harsh economic situation in the country. Retrospectively, the centrality of youth in the Albanian transition was predictable for a country whose population had tripled in just a few decades under a modernizing system. Similarly, one could expect the intelligentsia to have played a role, given the centrality attributed to it by a communist regime that had managed to annihilate all other sources of social power. Finally, once

the fear of protesting faded, the intransigence of the workers' protests mirrored as much as they worsened the economic deadlock already reached in the country.

The peculiarity and the paradox of the Albanian transition was that its late-in-coming protest waves occurred in a situation of state disintegration. The totalitarian state that had profoundly transformed Albanian society for 45 years fell under large-scale exoduses, the spontaneous de-collectivization of the land, the abandonment of factories and the widespread destruction of public property. This situation of state collapse, unprecedented for a European state, constituted a considerable encumbrance for the re-emerging Albanian civil society.

## References

Abrahams Fred (forthcoming), *Untitled*, New York University Press.

Baruti Fasfi. (1996) "A General Outlook on Albanian NGOs '96." *NGO Bulletin*, no. 12, December : Special Issue.

Bazzocchi Claudio (2004) *Fatos Lubonja. Intervista sull'Albania. Dalle carceri di Enver Hoxha al liberismo selvaggio*, Bologna: Il Ponte.

Biberaj Elez (1998) in Sabrina P- Ramet, *Eastern Europe. Politics, Culture and Society since 1939*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp.251-283.

Blumi Isa (1997) "The Politics of Culture and Power: the Roots of Hoxha's

- Postwar State." *East European Quarterly* XXXI, no. 3, pp. 379-98.
- Champseix Elisabeth & Champ Jean-Paul, (1992) *L'Albanie out la logique du désespoir*, Paris: Édition la Découvert.
- Champseix, Elisabeth and Jean-Paul Champseix (1990) *57, Boulevard Stalin*. Paris: Editions La Découverte.
- Chiodi Luisa (2007) *Transnational Policies of Emancipation or Colonisation? Civil Society Promotion in Post-Communist Albania* PdH dissertation, Florence: European University Institute, [cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/7036/2007\\_Chiodi.pdf?sequence=1](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/7036/2007_Chiodi.pdf?sequence=1).
- Chiodi Luisa (2007b) "The Profession of Civil Society in Post-Communist Albania," *Albanian Journal of Politics*, vol. IV, issue I (June).
- Chiodi Luisa e Devole Rando (2006), 'Conflicting memorie and mutual representations: Italy and Albania 1989', *Occasional Paper* n.2 gennaio, Rovereto (TN): Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso.
- Devole Rando (1998) *Albania. Fenomeni Sociali e Rappresentazioni*. Roma: Agrilavoro Edizioni.
- Elbasani Arolda (2008) 'Political transformation and implementation of the EU's democratic requirements in Albania', In Elbasani, Ristani, Vurmo, *Integration Perspectives and Synergic Effects of European Transformation*. Budapest: Centre for EU Enlargement Studies.
- Hirschman Albert (1993) "Exit, Voice and the Fate of the German Democratic Republic. An Essay in Conceptual History." *World Politics* 45, no. January pp. 203-41.
- Human Rights Watch (1992) *Human Rights Watch World Report 1992 – Albania*, 1 January, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/467fca541e.html>.
- Human Rights Watch (1996) *Human Rights in Post-Communist Albania*, 1 March <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3ae6a7f30.html>.
- International Crisis Group Report (ICG) (1999) *The State of Albania*, January.
- Keesing's Record of World Events (1992) *Public order bill-Postponement of elections*, Volume 38, February.
- Keesing's Record of World Events (1991) *Wave of strikes and protests Economy*, Volume 37, October.
- Keesing's Record of World Events (1991b) *Economy - Continuing strikes*, Volume 37, November.
- Keesing's Record of World Events (1990) *Unrest—Foundation of opposition party Government and party—changes*, Volume 36, December.
- Kola, Paulin. (2003) *The Search for Greater Albania*. London : Hurst & Co.

- Krasniqi Afrim (2004) *Shoqeria Civile Ne Shqiperi. Historia e Lindjes, Shivillimit Dhe Sfidat e Saj*. Tirana: Shtypur Geer.
- Krasniqi Gëzim (2010) *Citizenship in an emigrant nation-state: the case of Albania*, CITSEE Working Paper Series n.13.
- Langer Alexander (1996) *Il Viaggiatore Leggero. Scritti 1961-1995*. Palermo: Sellerio editore.
- Lawrence William (2011) 'Albanians force out Communist government, 1991', *Global Non Violent Action Database* <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/albanians-force-out-communist-government-1991>
- Lohmel Edith (1996) "Le Défis De L'Autarchie Économique." in *Albanie Utopie. Huis Clos Dan Les Balkans*. eds. Sonia Combe, and Ivaylo Ditchev, 68-79. Paris: Edition Autrement.
- Morozzo della Rocca Roberto (1997) *Albania. Le radici Della Crisi*. Milano: Guerini e Associati.
- Mustafaj Besnik (1993), *Albania. Tra crimini e miraggi*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Qesari Eldon (2011) 'La storiografia contemporanea albanese e lo studio della storia recente. Gli anni del "passaggio epocale" (1985-1992)', in Antonio D'Alessandi e Armando Pitassio, (a cura di) *Dopo la pioggia. Gli stati della ex Jugoslavia e l'Albania (1991-2011)*, Lecce: Argo, pp.51-64.
- Romano Onofrio (1999). *L'Albania Nell'Era Televisiva. Le Vie Della Demodernizzazione*. Torino: L'Harmattan Italia.
- Ruli Genc (2003) "Albania. The Weakness of the State." in *Southeastern Europe: Weak States and Strong International Support*. ed. Wim van Meurs Vol. vol 2. Opladen: Leske & Budrich.
- Sampson Steven (1996). "The Social Life of Projects: Importing Civil Society to Albania." in *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. editor Chris Hann, 121-42. London: Routledge.
- Schmidt-Neke Michael (1992) 'Albania', in Joan Campbell, *European Labour Unions*, Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Vaso Adrian (1998) *Assessment of NGOs Situation in Albania*, Aquarius for the World Bank. World Bank, Tirana.
- Vaughan-Withehead (1999) *Albania in Crisis: The Predictable Fall of the Shining Star*. Cheltenham:UK, Northampton: MA, USA: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Vickers Miranda, and James Pettifer (1997) *Albania. From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Young Antonia (2000) *Women who become men*. Oxford: Berg.

