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**Title: The Albanian transition to  
Democracy as a path to European Integration (during the years  
1990 – 2000)**

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**Abstract**

Albania, like other post-communist East Central European countries, has been undergoing a multiple transition: a political transition from one party to many, an economic transition from command to market economy, and a social one, from rural society to an urban. For nearly half a century one of the most repressive communist dictatorships in the world, economically impoverished, and lacking a democratic political culture, Albania was considered one of the least likely countries in the region to complete the transition to a stable and prosperous democracy.

This paper examines Albania within the context of regional changes and focuses on the trials of Albania's efforts to create a democratic political order. It assesses the degree and significance of changes since the early 1990s and exploring Albania's prospects for democracy and a market economy after forty-seven years of highly centralized rule. Given political instability in the Balkans, the considerable risk of further regional conflict, and Albania's importance to regional stability and peace, the outcome of the transition in Albania must provide efficiency.

**Kew Words:** communism, transition to democracy European Integration

**1. Albania under communism**

Albanians are one of Europe's most ancient peoples, but their modern statehood dates only from 1912 when the country became independent as the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the region since the later fifteen century, collapsed. The modern history of Albania has left its mark on the country's standing in the world and its people's culture. Without an understanding of the peculiar impact of the Inter - War period and the 45 years of extreme Stalinist regime, today's Albania cannot be judged in a proper perspective.

In contrast to the experience of other East European countries, Communism in Albania was *homegrown*; it was not installed in power by an outside force, but won on its own, admittedly with some assistance from the Yugoslav Communists<sup>1</sup>. Thus, Albanian Communists enjoyed a higher degree of *legitimacy* than their colleagues in other countries did. From 1944 until 1991, the Albanian Party of Labor, led by Hoxha until his death in 1985, ruled Albania. He created the most long-lasting Stalinist regime in Europe. Hoxha's regime proliferated into a fantastic *system of paranoia*, which justified repression on a massive scale<sup>2</sup>.

The long period of communist rule may be better understood through the observance of significant foreign relations developments throughout the early and middle phases of Albanian communism. With the intensification of the East-West conflict, Hoxha's regime closely allied itself with the Soviet bloc<sup>3</sup>. Albania adopted the Soviet system of *centralized economic planning*, emphasizing *the rapid development of heavy industry*<sup>4</sup>. While Soviet block members improved political and economic ties with the West, Albania moved in the opposite direction becoming almost totally isolated, developing only with China. China considered Albania an important ally, actually its only true ally in the 1960s. The breakup of this alliance two years later removed Albania's last and only source of foreign assistance and placed it in a precarious position. Rather than opening the country to the West, Hoxha's regime turned into a policy of self-reliance. The result was that Albania's overall economic development stagnated, resulting in a widening gap between the country and its immediate neighbors. Within a few years, the disastrous consequences of this policy were evident, as the economy entered a phase of a rapid decline.

By the mid 1980s, Albania was confronted with serious problems, which were reflected by a sharp *economic decline*, *low productivity*, *pervasive shortages of basic foodstuffs*, *an ailing infrastructure*, and *huge subsidies*<sup>5</sup>. The

hard-line communist regime under Hoxha sought to create a united country under the socialist system, and to overcome the heritage of regional and religious differences that affected the development of the national independence movement during the time of the Ottoman Empire<sup>6</sup>.

The government offered its citizens a sort of social contract for basic welfare, but also supported a *hierarchical nomenklatura system* for party officials. The Albanian Communist Party, with the characteristics of a totalitarian state controlled all levels and branches of government: the People Assembly, the Council of Ministers, the courts, the mass organizations and the local administration. The predominance of the leader in all matters, one ruling party, extensive police/army repression, economy under state, subservience of all intermediary state and non-governmental organizations to the Party, and the direct control of the mass media were applicable in Communist Albania. The rule of law was absent, and violations of citizen's rights became normal.

## 2. Albania and the East European Revolution

The year 1989 was seen as one of the most important years in the twentieth century. Never before have had so many countries undergone such dramatic changes in regime in such a short space of time. Albania had followed with great concern economic and political developments in Eastern Europe in the wake of Gorbachev's rise to power. Gorbachev and Alia inherited similar problems, a political system insensitive to the population's needs and demands, and an economic decline. Albania had remained the most rigid and Stalinist regime, in self-imposed isolation under the very personalized leadership of Hoxha. Economically it was the most underdeveloped countries in Europe.

Despite the country's isolation, Albanians were well informed about developments in the region. The symbolism of the execution of Ceausescu, whose brutal methods of rule used in comparison with those used by Hoxha, could not escape either the Albanian nomenclature. In contrast to its negative stand on previous developments in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Bulgaria, the Albanian leadership was quick to distance itself from any identification with Ceausescu. Albania was among the first countries to recognize the post-Ceausescu government and to denounce the late regime.

However, following the events in Romania, the Albanian government came under increased foreign and domestic pressure. In April 1990, the leaders of the ruling party decided to make tentative steps towards democratization. In order to avoid the mass violence, which had already occurred in other Balkan states, a multi-party system was established. But anyway, these attempts neither could nor prevented a violent mass protest. This protest took two forms: first, mass demonstrations were staged in the capital, Tirana and other major cities. Second, tens of thousands of Albanian fled to Italy and Greece. On 31 March 1991 the first multi-party elections in Albania since 1923 took place, with the Communists gaining a two-thirds majority, thanks to their success in the countryside.

Within this period, developments were much less violent in Albania than in Yugoslavia and Romania because of the efforts made by Alia for peaceful reforms. But it was still much violent than in Bulgaria because both the government and the masses had much less democratic tradition and experience.

In the approach to this events, the West played a key role and operated as a catalyst in the revolutionary process, directly within the filed of human rights and Helsinki process, and indirectly via globalization of political and economic relations<sup>7</sup>.

## 3. The fall of Communism

Albania has had the misfortune of being ruled by one of the most repressive Communist regimes in the world and for a longer period than any other East European state. In the process of collapse of communism, some factors can be isolated as having played a role in the fall of communism as: economic decay, the loss of support from pro-regime intellectuals, the break in the surface unanimity of the system, the role of the crowd, and the international dimension<sup>8</sup>.

*First*, the political ruling system was introduced by Stalinism, in which it was the nomenclatura was in its center<sup>9</sup>. The model represented an extreme form of centralism. Its main aspects included the adoption of a highly centralized planning system, the complete abolition of the private property and activity, and heavy industry.

*Second*, in contrast to other East communist countries, where in the late 1970s and 1980s dissident communities had emerged, the development of a democratic elite in Albania was impossible. The lack of a well-developed liberal elite was both the most significant political legacy of Albanian communism and had great obstacle to the creation of new democratic institutions.

*Third*, Soviet-type system relied the maintenance of power on the party's control of the language of public discourse. All ideologically derived systems place great emphasis on ideological conformity. The Party carried out the greatest social experimentation in Eastern Europe, imposing its total control over all aspects of life. Through a spy network, and relying on the military, the secret police, and the mass organizations, the Party ensured the population's obedience through its political power.

*Forth*, Soviet-type regime spent a great deal of time and effort in keeping society atomized and preventing it from integrating themselves. Consequently, demonstrations were a major threat to these systems. When authoritarian

regimes are faced by mass action, as which happened in Albania, they can no longer control and tend to disintegrate rapidly.

*Fifth*, the international situation has a major impact on the changes in Albania. The fact that the Soviet Union was no longer a force had its impact. The coming to power of Gorbachev in 1985 and the signal that change was back on the agenda was a first step. The overthrow of Ceausescu's regime also sent shock waves throughout the Albanian ruling elite.

*Sixth*, the international factor also underline the significance of the spread of information through the modern media. It was no longer possible to seal off the country from the rest of the world. The spread of the change was influenced by the visual nature of information, far more vivid than the written word, to which communist censorship had no answer.

All these events concerned the nature of what happened. The usual way to the transfer of power is called "revolution". Rather than a revolution, the events more closely resembled a peaceful transfer of power. The political system was fundamentally transformed, together with its legitimization. The events of 1989 resulted from a bargaining process which produced a far-reaching transfer of power and a redefinition of political legitimization<sup>10</sup>.

One of the greatest challenges facing Albania was a pervasive *moral and spiritual crisis*, a direct legacy of the Communist regime. Hoxha's regime had engaged in gross violations of human and political rights, causing great trauma and incalculable psychological damage to the population. Large segments of population appeared to have lost confidence in them, in their country, and in their government and institutions.

#### **4. Characteristics of Albanian Transition**

The transition faced by the Albanian government officials in 1990 was a multiple transition: the politic transition from dictatorship to democracy is related the economic transition, from centralized planning economy to market economy; the transition from a rural society to an urban one; great uncontrolled demographic shifting; and a transition from a close society to an open one<sup>11</sup>. These counteractions have influenced in the complication of the transition process, which makes it as a clear distinction in comparison with other post-communist countries.

The existence of this kind of regime affected the nature of Albanian transition. While in many cases transition from authoritarianism to democracy have been rapid, nonviolent, and definitive, in Albania this process was lengthy, conflictual and inconclusive. These reasons have made Albania seen as a special case of study of regime change, compared with other Balkan countries.

East Central Europe with its Hasburgian legacies of the rule of law and Western-style institutions, is often opposed to Balkans, in which the democratic values and institutions were more vulnerable, and the Balkans are opposed to Albania due to political, economic and social backwardness. It includes various effects of long Ottoman rule over five centuries, belated national independence, the absence of democratic traditions, the experience, habits and mentalities of communist rule, the lack of pre-authoritarian democratic traditions, chronic political instability, lack of socio-economic modernization and a limited civil society.

Albanians are experiencing democracy for the first time in their history; therefore the transition is likely to be exceptionally difficult. Albania's political tradition and social and economic conditions have not been conducive to a democratic order. Albania was confronted with the simultaneous challenges of instituting a new democratic order and creating a market economy. But unlike the other European countries, Albania had to operate in a regional context that was particularly unfavorable to its democratic transition. The external threat from Serbia remained unchanged. Albania found itself guiding the transition to democracy under the ever-present threat of their country's becoming entangled in the Yugoslav war<sup>12</sup>. In the context of regional, tribal, and religious conflicts, continuing external threats from Yugoslavia, and a state of societal breakdown, the lack of democratic preconditions was sorely felt in Albania<sup>13</sup>.

To contemplate the possibility of democracy means to confront the problem of understanding this regime. The Communist era in Albanian history was in fact a complicated epoch in the life of the peoples, who brought a specific set of characteristic features to it. The legacy of communism is present in a capillary form in many social domains.

The Albanian transition represented a negotiated transition characterized by a *transfer of power*. In this initial phase, the transition was dominated by organized forces of the outgoing regime. Taking advantages of the weak organizational capacity of the democratic opposition, the reformist elements of the predecessor regime moved to control and dominate the central institutions of the emerge regime. A direct product of this situation was the delay on the transfer of power, which had a crucial implication on colonization of many of the new structures, political and economic, associated with the emerging regime by forces loyal to the old regime<sup>14</sup>.

The transition process proved to be a traumatic experience to the *immature political behavior* of the Albanian elite. The newly Albanian political elite was mostly composed of last minute converted members of the former Communist intelligentsia without any real political experience. The current Albanian elite is a *hybrid product* of doubtful institutional intentions and suffers from an *complex of inferiority*<sup>15</sup>. Moreover, it has found it impossible to liberate itself from the fundamental shortcomings of the authoritarian elite mentality. While in other countries, the sense of cultural identity, or even economic rationalism serves as the common ground that insures the cohesion of the elite, in Albania there is no trust among the hostile elite.

Another characteristic of Albanian transition is the lack of understanding of the kind of rules needed to make a political system work properly. Moreover, laws and rules are written to conform to the “advanced contemporary standards”. The compilers of these laws did not consider it necessary to take into account the psychological makeup of Albanians and especially, the peculiar composition of Albanian society<sup>16</sup>. The modern legislation based on the European standards, is one thing, while the Albanian reality is another thing. Laws, here, in fact are written according to the European standards but are applied according to the Balkan standards.

In 1990s, it is evident that the country has traveled along the course of democratization. It is still obvious that Albania still lacks many requirements to democratic behavior as: elections are free but not necessary fair, the majoritarian electoral laws, media coverage etc. Poorly institutionalized parties lacking strong social bases or effective governing programmes, a legacy of authoritarian power-structures, the weakness of civil society and declining living and health standards do not offer a propitious domestic environment for rebuilding a country ravaged by totalitarian rule<sup>17</sup>.

Especially in the initial years of transition, the emphasis of economic policy was on macroeconomic objectives, including price and trade liberalization, and limiting budget deficits. However, with very few exceptions, the present economic strategies do not seem to be able to create sufficient economic growth. The road to a market economy would be strewn with landmines in the form of cumulative political, economic and social legacies of Hoxha's communist dictatorship<sup>18</sup>. Instability, economic destruction, and anarchy in Albania precluded the achievement of a revised constitutional framework, new political and economic institutions. Economic transition proved to be a costly process. Albania experienced severe recession, a contraction of industrial production, and a dramatic drop in GDP<sup>19</sup>. The liberalization of the region economy resulted in growing unemployment, rampant inflation, social dislocation, poverty and rising inequality.

Political transition was in time with an important aspect of the social transition of the society, from one rural to an urban society, a phenomenon which for the great dimensions was called as Albanian characteristic of transition, in comparison with other countries.<sup>20</sup> The mentality, the different way of living, new stereotypes that bang into narrow spaces create many tensions and sharp problems. Albanians believed that the transition would bring about almost immediate material wealth. It went from rampant euphoria to deep disillusionment within twelve months. After two to three years there was mass dissatisfaction due to the economic hardships to which the vast majority were subject and a subsequent rejection of the new political elites at the polls<sup>21</sup>.

Among the winners in the period of transition are parts of the skilled workers in the surviving industries, the new entrepreneurs and top civil servants who manage to survive in middle position<sup>22</sup>. On the other side of the social spectrum are unusually large fragments of the losers of transition: employers of the lower ranks in the hierarchy, small entrepreneurs who underrated the risks of capitalism, less-qualified workers, parts of the intelligentsia and the nomenclature of the old regime as well as women<sup>23</sup>.

Kleptocracy<sup>24</sup> was a feature of the years of Albanian transition. Some members of the government were involved in sanctions busting, and a web of massive extremely rich corruption soon developed, as a new class of people became extremely rich in the process. This kleptocratic group became an obstacle for creation of the middle class, which is necessarily in strengthening of democracy.

The support of the international institutions and that of Western countries have an important impact in Albanian transition. Their impact in one small country as Albania is considerable as it will bring stability and peace in the region.

In spite of all this, the transformation unfolding must be judged as successful. Democratic institutions have been introduced and despite intense political struggles, lawfully elected and government have gained power<sup>25</sup>. The real question in Albania is the creation of democratic institutions and a democratic culture. People must learn to assume civil responsibilities and get actively involved into political life.

## **5. Lessons from the Albanian transition**

Albania's transition has been most problematic. Corruption and violence have been widespread, hindering the emergence of stable democratic orders. In addition, decades of isolation under the communist regime have bred a xenophobia that provides fertile soil for political manipulation and extremism.

What transpires from the situation in Albania is that transition can be only successful when democracy is stronger, power less concentrated, and the media free from the government control. The earlier histories of political conflicts and economic reforms under state socialism produced more pragmatic, stronger cultural and political elites. One of the many factors that have greatly contributed to the failure of democracy in Albania is *the extreme polarization* of the Albanian elite<sup>26</sup>. As long as it remains within the realm of the dispute of diverse views and opinions held at the level of civic discourse, the fictionalization of the elite is a normal process of democracy.

The challenges facing Albania will try to remedy the democratic deficit that led to these events: to build liberal political institutions, to develop a civil society and genuinely free media to underpin these institutions<sup>27</sup>.

Serious levels of internal political strife and criminality place the question marked over whether Albania can enjoy orderly government. Albania shows an inability to break out of a situation where past patterns dominate the present and allow limited scope for a democratic future. Many aspects of the transition suggest a possible case of failure in regime change.

The cumulative impact of totalitarianism has been a cultural, social, economic and political environment that has considerably slowed down the democratization process and complicated the prospects for consolidation.

In fact it is not democracy which has failed in Albania, but its political class, which has been unable to lead the democratic process. Despite of internal conflicts, Albania did not have and do not have dilemma on its Western orientation. Albania is more pro American country in the region, which first of all has to do with the American role in solving out the Kosovo crisis.

## CONCLUSION

After the fall of Communism, transition to democracy in Albania has undergone profound political, economic, and social transformations, which has led to the rule of law, a freely elected government, democratic institutions, a free market economy, respect for human rights, a free civil society, and peace with itself and its neighbors. But the way achieving all these features was very difficult and it took a long way through many challenges. Historical and communist legacies have proved powerful forces, while the political dynamics of transition have not allowed much progress towards democratization. Albania has therefore acquired some characteristics of a formal democracy, but has in practice demonstrated several features of a hybrid regime, suggesting an unclear outcome so far to transition.

During the years of transition, Albanians were unable to achieve the substantive features of democracy due to the failure of the country's major actors to respect democratic norms and procedures, the absence of a strong party system, and serious economic constraints. The tumultuous events of 1997 reflected that there was no deep-rooted attachment to democracy or democratic values among the elites and the populace at large. Albanians in general, did not appear to understand that preserving the legitimacy of the state is an essential component of democracy.

The consolidation of the Albanian fragile democracy depends on whether the rule of law becomes a permanent feature of the country's political landscape. Inability to break out of a situation where past patterns dominate the present and allow limited scope for a democratic future. Many aspects of the transition suggest a possible case of failure in regime change.

The emergence of a new generation of leaders who are better prepared to cope with the complex problems of democratic governance is essential for the successful democratization in Albania. The democratization process contributed to a significant transformation of the political elite. Despite the high turnover, however, current elites share a significant resemblance to their Communist predecessors. Communism breeds a culture of intolerance and prevented the development of political skills as coalition building, negotiation, and compromise. Thus, as long as current leaders continue to dominate, the Albanian polity will remain politicized.

Transition was faced with an extremely unstable policy, which had many consequences in its economy and society. After nearly ten years of transformations, the unstable policy and the lack of democratic tradition have left footprints in the economic transition to market economy. It is obvious that the lack of political leadership and lack of political culture can block the economic development through optimal directions.

The weakness of civil society and declining living standards do not offer a propitious domestic environment for rebuilding a country ravaged by totalitarian rule and further damaged by a so far failed transition to democracy.

Albania faces an array of daunting challenges. The process of full consolidation of democracy will require generations. The future looks bleak for Albania's new regime and at best it has a long way to go before its prospects for any real democratization. While Albania's democratization will depend on the choices that the Albanians make and strategies they pursue, continued political and material support from outside also will remain crucial. From the other part, a stable, democratic Albania will contribute to regional peace and stability.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Biberaj, Elez. *Albania in Transition- A Rocky Road to Democracy*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1999, pp. 17.
- <sup>2</sup> Biberaj, Elez. *Albania in Transition- A Rocky Road to Democracy*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1999, pp. 22.
- <sup>3</sup> Although before 1948 Stalin had practically given Yugoslavia a free hand in Albania, the Soviets offered Tirana substantial economic and military assistance as Albania came to play a critical role in Stalin's strategy of exerting pressure on Yugoslavia.
- <sup>4</sup> Biberaj, Elez. *Albania in Transition- A Rocky Road to Democracy*. Colorado: Westview Press, 1999, pp. 23.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23.
- <sup>6</sup> Vickers, Miranda & Pettifer, James. *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000, pp. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77.
- <sup>8</sup> Schopflin, George. *Politics in Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993, pp.226.
- <sup>9</sup> Nomenklatura had all significant appointments which were made with the acquiescence of the party and relying on political criteria.
- <sup>10</sup> Schopflin, George. *Politics in Eastern Europe*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993. pp.254.
- <sup>11</sup> UNDP *Report on Human Development in Albania*, 1999, pp.67.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5.
- <sup>13</sup> *Communist Rule* [www.janda.org](http://www.janda.org) date 5.27. 2001.
- <sup>14</sup> Diamandouros and Larrabee. *Democratization in South-Eastern Europe* ed. Bianchini Stefano and Schopflin George in *State Building in the Balkans*, Long Editore Ravenna, 1996, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>15</sup> Rama. A. Shinasi. *Failed Transition, Elite Fragmentation and the parliamentary Elections of June 29, 1997*, International Journal of Albanian Studies, 1999, pp.7.
- <sup>16</sup> Beyme, Von Klaus. *Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe*. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1996, pp. 99.
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- <sup>18</sup> Biberaj, Elez. *Albania in Transition a rocky road to democracy*. Colorado: Westview, 1999, pp. 7.
- <sup>19</sup> Ekiert, Grzegorz. *Transition in Eastern Europe* [wwics.si.edu/ees/reports/1998/149eki.htm](http://wwics.si.edu/ees/reports/1998/149eki.htm)
- <sup>20</sup> UNDP *Report on Human Development in Albania* 1999, pp.67.
- <sup>21</sup> Crawford, Keith. *East Central European politics today*. London: Manchester University Press, 1996, pp 303.
- <sup>22</sup> Beyme, Von Klaus. *Transition to Democracy in Eastern Europe*. London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1996, pp. 167.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 167.
- <sup>24</sup> Kleptocracy is a Greek term meaning "government by thieves".
- <sup>25</sup> Ekiert, Grzegorz. *Transition in Eastern Europe*. [wwics.si.edu/ees/reports/1998/149eki.htm](http://wwics.si.edu/ees/reports/1998/149eki.htm)
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