Re-Imagining Albania:
The Politics of Democratization, Religious Revival, and Cultural Heritage
In the Pursuit of Global Security

By Dana Phelps[1]

Introduction

Albania's cultural heritage, both its preservation and its management, is a reflection of this post-socialist country's rush to "modernize" for the sake of economic development and European Union (EU) integration. Centuries of invasion and occupation have left Albania a scattering of Ottoman-era houses and building works, medieval castles, communist-era industrial sites, and Greco-Roman ruins. Yet, for Albania, this richness and diversity of cultural heritage is often a painful reminder of a past that was never theirs or of a totalitarian system that has prevented Albania's development within Europe. Therefore, cultural heritage has not easily fit within Albania's agenda for economic development and Europeanization.

Albania's key method for economic development is through massive urban construction, heavily concentrated in the capital city, Tirana (Pojani 2015). This method has been in gross conflict with cultural heritage, as the Albanian central and local governments have chosen to demolish historic buildings and places of communist memory to make way for new high rises. At the same time, external pressures to protect its cultural heritage by competing actors including the EU, United States (US), Turkey, Germany, the Vatican, and Greece, have compelled Albania to negotiate its heritage destruction practices. Lacking a national strategy for protecting the country's cultural heritage, and relying almost entirely on foreign investors and donors for support in this sector, Albania's heritage landscape is thus a clean slate by which foreign actors

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can impose their own agendas in Albania through restorations of mosques and churches, tourism infrastructure investments, and memorialization of the communist past.

In this report I argue that the Albanian heritage landscape is a reflection of its haphazard and difficult development process, which has been hindered by corruption, extreme political and social ruptures, and its 45 years of Stalinist-style isolationism and tyrannical rule under its leader, Enver Hoxha. Competing national and international agendas and social identities have yielded an erratic and paradoxical display of historical erasure, preservation, and propaganda. This fractured "heritagescape" is formed through tensions and outright conflict between the national government, foreign investors, civil society, ethnic and religious communities, and the victims of previous communist persecution.

The data in this report is an analysis and evaluation of six months of ethnographic research focused upon cultural heritage politics in Albania. It is important to note that the entire research project will take 15 months and therefore the report is a midterm evaluation of this research. During the previous six months, I employed a heritage ethnographic approach, which combines material analysis with traditional anthropological methods. Survey analysis of heritage sites and museums were united with data from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with government officials, nongovernmental organizations and civil society, foundations, religious communities, foreign embassies, and international agencies.

"Europeanizing" Albania: development, erasure, or both?

Since the collapse of nearly 50 years of a Stalinist-style communism in 1991, Albania has undergone massive transformations (Abrahams 2015, Pettifer & Vickers 2009, Vickers 2014). However, transitioning from a centrally planned dictatorship to a market-based economy and democratic system has been problematic in Albania, even in comparison to its post-soviet

neighbors (Abrahams 2015). Although Albania is ripe with economic potential, the particular isolationist policy that persisted for decades in Albania during communism has made the country's re-engagement with the world beyond its borders a challenge politically, economically, and even socially (The World Bank Group 2017). Albania's top priorities are large-scale economic growth and EU integration, with development taking first priority since political corruption has hindered its achievement of EU integration. Communism has not truly "fallen" in Albania, as top-level government positions are largely held by former communist executives and their offspring (Holmes 2006).

While corruption and nepotism run through the veins of the political system, Albania is attempting to rebrand itself in an effort to conceal the issues that are impeding its democratization process. Urban renewal projects are sweeping the country. Every major city is receiving investment funds from the Ministry of Urban Development and the EU Delegation to construct walking-only streets (*pedonalja*) in order to give the urban centers a Europeanized makeover. Yet, certainly the most significant project of urban renewal is the Tirana 2030 project, with aims of transforming Tirana into an "intense and polycentric metropolitan city" (Bashkia Tirana 2016). In order to achieve such a goal, the Tirana municipality is calling for a complete restructuring of the center of the city.

The urban center of Tirana was constructed largely by the Italian fascists during their occupation of Albania (1939-1943) and, as typical of fascist constructions, involves two large squares that are connected by a long boulevard (Capolino 2011). Leaving their indelible fascist mark on Tirana, a stadium was built next to the boulevard so that from aerial view, the whole assemblage would form the *fasces*, the bundle of rods with protruding axe blade and symbol of the Italian Empire (Pojani 2015: 74). The Tirana 2030 project, designed by a new generation of

Italian architects, has ambitions of modernizing this entire section of Tirana through a combination of revitalization and destruction. Seeking to become one of the top ten "greenest" cities in Europe by 2030, the project has already torn into Tirana's historic Skanderbeg Square. Several of the Italian fascist buildings that surround the square, including the national theater, as well as the last remaining Ottoman-period house in Tirana, will be demolished in order to open the space to white pavement, trees, and public parks.

Years of destruction of Roman ruins and Ottoman-period buildings during the Italian fascist and Albanian communist periods have transformed this ancient city into a assemblage of soviet-style apartment blocks; fascist-era government buildings, public squares, and boulevards; and communist public artworks. Heritage has been erased and transformed rapidly since the beginning of the 20th century (Pojani 2015). Tirana is a thus a city of constant reinvention, whose material past is relentlessly deconstructed in order to make way for a new city of a new political imagination.

In line with Albania's current strategy for "Europeanization," the Municipality of Tirana seeks to "replace its old buildings with green spaces" (Bashkia Tirana 2016: 11). Yet, Tirana's imagination of Europe is quite inauthentic. For Albania, and perhaps for the Italian architects that are remodeling Tirana, Europe is (or should be) a landscape of modern high rises and green spaces with no historical remains to taint its narrative of modernization. Yet, perhaps in Albania, the past is not a source of pride; perhaps it is a place of shame, disenfranchisement, and disoccupation. The urban renewal projects express an Albanian desire to cleanse its past and build the Europeanized Albania of its imagination. At the same time, it could express an Italian desire to build the Europe of its own imagination, albeit in a country that is willing to sacrifice its history in return for sleek, contemporary designs. Yet, the nation-branding project in Albania has

unleashed tensions in Tirana's socio-material landscape, as its historical memory is now sacrificed for the "green" development of a synthetic Europe.

While nation-branding through urban development is concentrated exclusively in Albania's capital city, heritage sites around the country are under serious threat due to neglect. Lacking any strategy to care for its heritage sites, including those on the UNESCO World Heritage list, the Ministry of Culture relies largely on foreign investments for restorations, excavations, heritage management, and infrastructure development. In rural Albania, the West is investing in heritage management and tourism infrastructure in an effort to develop and democratize Albania to European standards for swift entry into the EU. The West views this as a matter of global security as emerging Wahhabism, increased ties to Turkey and Russia, and porous borders threaten the region and its democratic processes, essentially putting the EU at risk (Cooperation & Development Institute 2016). To counter such security threats, several EU initiatives to democratize and integrate the Western Balkans have recently been bolstered, most notably the *Berlin Process*, which aims at revitalizing the multilateral ties between the EU and Western Balkans and at improving regional cooperation in the areas of infrastructure and economic development (European Parliament 2016).

The Albanian-American Development Foundation's Tourism Improvement projects at Albanian UNESCO World Heritage sites, the Council of Europe's "heritage for development" project in the Western Balkans as part of the *Llubjana Process: "Protecting Our Common Heritage",* and more recently, the World Bank's $71 million loan for tourism infrastructure development in southern Albania (see page 6), are all examples of large multilateral projects between the West and Albania that employ cultural heritage for the country's development. In a recent press release given by the EU Ambassador to Albania, Romana Vlahutin, she said that

"Cultural heritage is not only essential to the identity of people, but [it is the] best example to understand our common history as Europeans" (Vlahutin 2017). Vlahutin (2017) goes on to acknowledge that, "What is often under-valued, however, is how much [Albania's] heritage can drive sustainable tourism and local economic growth. It is one of the few areas where well-planned investments can generate a high return." Therefore, the EU in particular sees cultural heritage potential as two-fold in Albania: Firstly, it is an excellent source of revenue for the country, which can foster the economic development needed for Albania's EU integration. Secondly, the EU views protecting its "common heritage" as part of a greater European cultural project that unifies a singular supranational identity (see Shore 2014). Ensuring Albania is both culturally and economically European appears critical for guaranteeing a well-integrated member of the EU that will protect European values and interests.

However, the EU's "soft" approach to developing Albania is often challenged by Albania's more aggressive tactic for developing the nation. At the remote UNESCO World Heritage site of Gjirokastra, a medieval and Ottoman-period city cherished for its vernacular architecture and medieval castle, the aforementioned World Bank-funded project is set to break ground next month. This regional project aims to develop tourism infrastructure in four key areas of southern Albania, including at its two UNESCO World Heritage sites. Approximately $12 million of the $71 million loan is in negotiation for the construction of an invasive bypass that will cut through the historic center of Gjirokastra. The winning proposal for the project, chosen by the Albanian government, involves the destruction of at least two Category II Cultural Monuments. During the period of negotiation and design phase of the project, the list of Category II Cultural Monuments was revised, erasing these two Cultural Monuments from the list with it (Van Gerven Oei 2017) and further demonstrating the Albanian government's

willingness to sacrifice its material heritage in return for economic gain. Therefore, although the project is intended to develop tourism at sites of historic importance, a corrupt heritage sector in Albania is facilitating the erasure of its heritage in a mediation between infrastructure and history that destructs the very cultural importance of the sites for which they have been chosen for foreign investment.

Albania's treatment of its cultural heritage is in direct conflict with both its desires to Europeanize and Europe's need for Albania to develop and democratize to EU standards. Ironically, Albania's *vision* of its path to Europeanization is impeded by Europe's demands for Albania's Europeanization process. While Europe sees democratization, economic development, and protecting common heritage as keys to Albania's successful integration process into the EU, Albania itself sees urban development and destruction of the past as the main modes for achieving its Europeanized-self. This continued disharmony between Europe's demands and Albania's vision of its desired self is the underlying cause in Albania's delayed EU integration.

"Our Noble Cultural Value": Inter-religious harmony and the global security agenda

A key element in the branding of Albania is its promotion of the idea of its religious harmony. Historically, Albania, unlike its Balkan neighbors, has been a country with a nationalism that focuses upon cultural rather than religious identity (Merdjanova 2013, Norris 1993). A national identity centered upon culture over religion, and decades of religious persecution under communism, has yielded a society that is non-religious, religiously indifferent, or culturally liberal in its religion. This aspect of society has been has been heavily promoted in Albania's post-communist years to display a peaceful country that is ideal for Western integration (Clayer 1997, 2008). However, the promotion has been one of an idyllic inter-religious harmony, engrained in the Albanian DNA; stories of Muslims praying in churches and

Christians praying in mosques are told in communities as romanticized myths. These stories have a certain element of truth to them, but are linked mostly to the religious communities' needs for spaces for prayer in the post-communist period as result of the nation-wide demolition of religious buildings that took place in 1967 under Hoxha (O'Donnell 1999: 142).

Under the current administration, the promotion of Albania's "unique" inter-religious harmony has reached a level of exaggeration and even abuse. Most notably is through Prime Minister Edi Rama's project to construct the enormous "Park of Faith" in the center of Tirana, using Hoxha's abandoned and dilapidated pyramid-shaped mausoleum as its focal point. The project aims to "transform the linear open space of the boulevard, as well as other pockets of green spaces into landscape representations of the noblest cultural values that Albanians share that is not only related to religious harmony, but to harmony in general as well" (National Territorial Planning Agency 2015). Taking Tirana's largest architectural symbol of religious and overall societal oppression, Hoxha's pyramid, and turning it into a space of inter-cultural dialogue and symbol of Albania's general "harmony" not only is an exploitation and manipulation of a particular aspect of society for political demonstration of social stability, but it is an erasure of historical memories of trauma that could serve as reconciliation for many members of society. Yet Joni Baboci, the Director of Urban Development for the Tirana Municipality, argues that the pyramid is a place of multiple memories (pers. comm., October 26, 2016). This young bureaucrat remembers the pyramid as a child in the early post-communist years for being a space where music concerts were held. Amidst years of political and religious persecutions during communism, many Albanians having lived their lives in internal labor camps, the formerly persecuted are seeking retribution from the Albanian government for the crimes committed against them. The formerly persecuted, as they are formally called, were not

consulted in the designing of this project, and many of them argue that the pyramid ought to be a site for the construction of a national memorial for the victims of communism, rather than have it transformed into a propagandistic site of the innate harmony of the Albanian people (V. Banushi, pers. comm., November 14, 2016), a concept that certainly stands in contradiction to their personal experiences. Indeed, erasing the traumatic memory to make way for a new form of Albanian propaganda is more reflective of communist-style practices than democratic ones. The Albanian government's insistence that "all memory matters" while excluding the memory of the formerly persecuted is an abuse of history and power, especially when coming from a government with deep ties to communist power. Therefore, the use of the communist-era pyramid for contemporary propaganda is actually a project that protects the perpetrators of the communist regime through the silencing of memories of its victims.

The idea of inter-religious harmony is widely appreciated and accepted by the West, as it provides a security blanket in a region that borders and is infiltrated by the West's greatest threat: violent religious extremism. Concerns that violent Islamic extremism is rising in Albania are valid. In the years immediately following the collapse of the communist regime, several hundred Albanians were funded to study conservative forms of Islam in the Gulf States, which they then brought back to Albania, introducing a fundamentalist approach to Islam that had not previously existed in the country (Endresen 2015: 223). At the same time, Saudi Arabia took advantage of Albania's non-religious state after years of its oppression under communism to invest in a massive mosque construction project around Albania during the 1990s (Blumi 2014, Hall 1994: 49). Most of these mosques are illegal properties and several of them have been found to have ties with Wahhabism. Therefore, the push for the idea of religious harmony in Albania serves

foreign interests as well as Albanian. However, the Park of Faith only serves to mask issues rather than deal with them.

Promoting the idea of religious harmony could be provoking unintended conflict among the religious communities. In the northern Albanian city of Shkodra, known as the Albanian capital of Islam and Catholicism, a religious skirmish has been ongoing since 2005, when the Ambassadors' Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP), a US State Department initiative to preserve global heritage as a form of "soft power" (Nye 2005), awarded the US Embassy in Tirana $30,000 to restore the Cathedral of Saint Stephan in Shkodra's medieval castle (Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs 2006). However, this historic site, a church that was turned into a mosque in the Ottoman period, is also known to the Muslim community as the Mosque of Sultan Mehmetit. To the broader Albanian nation, it is called the *Kisha-Xhami* (Church-Mosque). Before the restorations on the *Kisha-Xhami* could commence, the Muslim community held protests on-site, refusing its restoration as a church. The conflict drew such attention that the funds had to be reallocated to another restoration. Every Christmas Eve since the proposed restoration, the Catholic community has held vigil in the ruins of the *Kisha-Xhami*, which is met immediately with annual protest by the Muslim community in Shkodra. This ongoing conflict reached its height in December 2016, when the Catholic community declared intentions to register this cultural monument as a place of Christian worship. The Mufti of Shkodra retorted that this action was "totally ridiculous and abusive" and insisted on the cultural site's identity as a mosque (Sytari, pers. comm., January 15, 2017). In prepping for battle, the Muslim Community is currently in negotiations with the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TIKA (see page 12) to secure funds for restoring the site as a mosque.

In an interview with a senior official at the US Embassy in Tirana (pers. comm., November 23, 2016), the official stated that a key strategy for winning heritage preservation funds from the AFCP is to promote sites that showcase Albania's inter-religious harmony. The US Embassy in Tirana will only accept proposals for interventions in heritage sites that do not have an official religious affiliation as a *current* place of worship. Therefore, the embassy official sees the conflict between the Catholic and Muslim communities as a "misunderstanding on the part of the Muslim community" (pers. comm., November 23, 2016) while failing to recognize that the restoration proposed was biased towards the Catholic community in not acknowledging the site's concomitant historical identity as a mosque. While the US Embassy in Tirana may have attempted to avoid religious conflicts in its acceptance of proposals for historic sites with no official religious affiliation, it lacked understanding that even historic mosques and churches preserve significant religious and social identities for its present-day religious communities. The push for a religious harmony branding by both Albanian and foreign institutions is a threat to Albania's security. Forcing religion out into the public and political sphere, even in a country where religion is seemingly insignificant to society, can enflame conflict where tensions have been simmering.

Indeed tensions in religion do exist in Albania. At the political level, international actors to both Albania's East and West have been pouring huge amounts of money into the restoration or construction of religious buildings. Before the Eurozone crisis hit in 2009, the Vatican and Greece were bolstering investments for the restoration of churches, with the former preserving Catholic churches in the north of Albania and the latter Orthodox churches and monasteries in the south, near the Greek border (Albertini & Deliso 2015). The same money was also being invested in access roads to predominately Catholic and Orthodox villages, as well as religious

schools for children. At the same time, Arab Gulf money was focused on heavily Islamizing the country through mosque and *medresa* constructions, as well as through funding students to study Islam in the Gulf States. In Europe's current economic state, funding for transnational Christian heritage preservation has nearly come to a halt, leaving Turkey and Kuwait as Albania's largest investors in religious heritage. In particular, Turkey's development agency, TIKA, has invested enormous funds for restoring and building mosques in Albania, and in other Muslim-majority countries. Its most recent project is the construction of the Namazgah Mosque in the center of Tirana, slated to be finished this year as the largest mosque in the Balkans.

A growing Islam at a time when radicalism poses a threat to regional and global security is planting the roots of uneasiness in religious communities across Albania. Christian missionaries from the US are increasing their presence in the country, believing that "Albania is the steppingstone to Islamic extremism" (Anon., pers. comm., November 5, 2016). Many Albanians see TIKA's restorations as "invasive" and "clearly neo-Ottoman," concerned that Turkey is imposing a cultural imperialism upon Albania's past and present, rather than offering unattached development aid. Tensions are present within the Muslim community itself, with fears that Turkey's neo-Ottoman agenda is a "distraction to the real threat of Wahhabism" (Anon., pers. comm., November 6, 2016). Uncertainties over how a presence of Islamic extremism in Albania would also impact negatively upon the image of and funding for the Muslim community in Albania are widespread.

While mosques are being restored and constructed throughout the country, several Orthodox churches are threatened by demolition from the Albanian Government. In the city of Përmet, located in the Gjirokastra region near the Greek border, a conflict broke out between the Orthodox community and the Albanian government that required Greek diplomatic intervention.

Albanian officials forcibly seized the Church of the Virgin Mary in 2013, intervening on behalf of the local municipality who argued that the building should be returned to its communist state as a cultural center.[2] However, in an agreement between the Albanian government and the country's religious communities in 2010, all religious buildings that were confiscated during communism must be returned to its previous state as a religious building and ownership transferred to the religious community. Yet, several Orthodox churches continue to be occupied by private tenants while others have been destroyed to make way for new developments (O. Becis, pers. comm., February 12, 2017).

The Albanian government's privileging of Turkey's heritage investments is rooted in Turkey's intensive financing of Albania's economy through road constructions and natural resource investment. Meanwhile, historic tensions between Albania and Greece persist today (Channer 2013).[3] As Albania warmly welcomes Turkey's mosque constructions and restorations while disenfranchising its Orthodox community, to which the Greek minority is closely linked, existing political tensions between Greece and Turkey are likely to backfire on Albania.

Conclusively, I argue that the Albanian and foreign push to showcase religious harmony in Albania is not only an exploitation of religious communities, but it is a practice that is provoking inter-religious conflict. While this conflict is for now non-violent, continued pressure on the communities while mingling in politics and large investments in religious heritage sites could bring about violence. Furthermore, permitting religious constructions and restorations in return for accepting development funding is a non-secular approach that allows cultural and economic authoritarianism to stronghold Albania into a position of dependency on Turkey. As

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[2] During Hoxha's religious purge of 1967, several religious institutions were converted into cultural and sports centers in order to prevent the unnecessary and expensive demolition of buildings (O'Donnell 1999: 142).

[3] For a discussion of Greek-Albanian relations see Channer, A. (2013). "Albanians Divided by Borders: Loyal to State or Nation?" in Mabry, T.J., McGarry, J., Moore, M., & O'Leary, B. (Eds.), *Divided Nations and European Integration*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 157-189

Turkey rises as a non-secular and authoritarian leader between Europe and the Middle East, representing a growing threat to the West, Albania's continued dependency on Turkey is a threat to regional and global security.

Democratization, Musealization, and the Politics of Communist Memory

Preserving and interpreting the material remains of Albania's communist past in its post-communist period has been a convoluted and often corrupted process. The fractured memories of the communist past, former communist leaders that are still in political power, a politically-affiliated civil society, and pressures from the EU to openly confront this period of its past are all causes for the socio-political tensions that emerge in the musealization and memorialization of this period in history. In this section I argue that the current practice for dealing with the communist past in Albania is shaped through frictions in its material and social landscapes, specifically conflicts in the privileging of economic development and cronyism over democratization in Albania's transition to a free-market society; disputing social memories of communism; and international pressures for transparency of the past.

Albania's previous administration (2005-2013) was led by the Democratic Party under Sali Berisha, a vehement anti-communist from the north of Albania whose treatment of the material communist past involved projects of total destruction of communist-era buildings while re-interpreting communism through museum displays that would showcase the brutality of the regime (Eaton & Roshi 2013, Eaton 2011). The current administration, led by the Socialist Party, has resurrected certain aspects in the communist past in an effort to Europeanize while still protecting its political party, which is deeply tied to the former communist regime. As such, the Albanian government's approach in musealizing and memorializing this period of history seems

paradoxical, yet in reality is consistent with its need to propagate its party and silence its opposition.

It is important to note, quite briefly, that harsh treatment of intellectuals and religious personnel from the north of Albania during communism coupled with the economic privileging of Albanian society in the south, from where Enver Hoxha hailed, has yielded a post-communist society with polarized interpretations of the communist past. Thus, in the now impoverished south, society borders on a romanticizing nostalgia of its communist past, while in the north, the formerly persecuted and its offspring are on a mission to seek retribution for the crimes committed against them during Hoxha's tyrannical rule. In Tirana, communist nostalgia runs through the veins of the system, with a new generation of communist privilege having taken over government by the youngest relatives of those in power during the communist period, several of whom seek to protect the image of their family members who are viewed by many as the perpetrators of the communist regime (see Holmes 2006).

This protection for the image of the communist regime contradicts Albania's democratization process. German authorities, mainly by way of the German Embassy in Tirana and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, as well as more recently the EU Delegation in Tirana, have called upon Albania to reconcile its communist past as an integral part of its democratization process. At a German Embassy-funded conference entitled Remembrance Days, EU Ambassador Vlahutin (2016) said in her keynote speech:

> For too many who suffered it is too late for an active pursuit of justice. But what is never too late for is our respect for their sacrifice and eternal memory of what they did for democracy. There is one more word that is of utmost importance for the future of Albania, and that is reconciliation. And from the human rights point of view, I urge you to see these Remembrance Days aren't just about reflecting over one ideology and those who lost their lives under dictatorship, but about respect of human dignity, ideals and what we stand for as Europeans. Your country is at a very important juncture, opening the opportunity of European integration in true terms. For the success of this integration you need the energy of the entire population; you need political forces that have prime national interest on their hearts and minds, regardless of ideological differences and above and before any other personal or group interest. Striking the balance between remembrance and reconciliation has proven to be a very difficult process, but it's the process

which stands at the heart of the European Union. This is why the European Union has been created in the first place – to secure reconciliation and peace for the prosperity of the people of Europe.

Therefore, the EU's role in Albania's reconciliation process is to urge Albania to protect its citizens' human rights through truth, justice, and remembrance of the communist past to ensure it become a democratic member of the EU. Albania is one of the few remaining countries in the former Soviet bloc to have not opened its secret service files (Brunwasser 2017). The director of the Institute for Democracy, Media, and Culture insists that the opening of these files and truth and justice committees, the search for missing bodies, the education of youth on communism, and the construction of museums and memorials that will honor the victims of communism, are all important methods for Albania to achieve reconciliation (J. Godole, pers. comm, January 20, 2017). In an effort to appease the West's call for resolution, the Albanian government is employing communist heritage as a so-called means of remembrance through exhibitions and the whitewashing of communist-era monuments. Yet, failure to open the secret service files, search for missing bodies, and incorporate communist history into its textbooks for school children indicate that the Albanian government might be using its communist heritage to conceal the realities of its less-than-democratic "reconciliation" process. A step further, the specific types of communist heritage the Albanian government employs demonstrates protection of the communist regime, rather than transparency, all the while still fulfilling the EU's demand for memorialization.

This tension between Europeanization and protection of communist power that is evident in Tirana is exemplified in the opening of the museum, Bunk'Art 2. In September 2016, a construction of a giant bunker was unveiled in the center of Tirana, behind the Ministry of Interior. This seemingly harmless construction incited social and political violence in Albania, as

the bunker is considered a symbol of Hoxha's oppression and paranoia (see Glass 2016).[4] Thus, the construction of a bunker in the capital city was a sign, to many, of a resurrection of communism. Members of the Democratic Party flew a drone over the bunker and set it on fire, while others attempted to destroy this communist symbol from the ground. The bunker, it turned out, would later become the entrance to Bunk'Art 2, a museum that showcases the intricate underground tunnel system built by the former Ministry of Internal Affairs to safeguard the communist regime's elite in case of nuclear attack. Bunk'Art 2 is funded through a private Italian media company with close ties to Prime Minister Rama. The entry fee exceeds that of any other heritage site or museum in the country, which has caused many to question the purpose of this museum. Is it a foreign tourist attraction, which profits from the sufferance of the victims of communism, or is it a self-professed memorial for the formerly persecuted?

For the victims of the communist regime, as well as for its closely allying Democratic Party, this museum is a "pornography of victims' suffering" (J. Godole, pers. comm., January 20, 2017) and as one journalist described it, "a nuclear attack on meaning" (van Gerven Oei 2016). In interviews, several critics have pointed out to me that the name alone, Bunk'Art 2, is a demonstration that the Albanian government views the communist past for its potential as a profiting art exhibition rather than as a memorial to acknowledge the crimes committed against society under communism and as a painful reminder of a past that should not be repeated. In other interviews, museum and heritage professionals criticized the museum's inappropriate design and "complete lack of interpretation of historic objects and connection of oral histories" (J. Eaton, pers. comm., November 27, 2016). A key issue in Albania with regards to the

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[4] During the height of his fanatical suspicion that the country would be under attack from all of its borders, Hoxha constructed somewhere in the range of 400,000 to 800,000 concrete mushroom-shaped bunkers across the country to be used in case of invasion. The heavy investment nearly bankrupted the country, and Hoxha's paranoia turned out to be just what it was, as the country was never invaded. Since the fall of communism, the bunkers have been demolished or neglected, incorporated into the landscape as a reminder of the country's present economically disadvantaged state and propagandistic regime that had brainwashed the nation (Glass 2016: 146).

treatment of its communist past is that it is not legally under the protection of any governing body, such as the Ministry of Culture or Ministry of Education. While the Ministry of Culture recognizes some communist-era buildings as protected Cultural Monuments, they fall under the category of *Socialist Realist Art*, essentially voiding the buildings' traumatic history. The tunnel system on display at Bunk'Art 2 was not curated by experts in the field of museology, and was instead a creation of an Italian journalist with limited understanding of Albania's communist past.

Although the curators and management of Bunk'Art 2 claim the museum to be dedicated to the victim's of communist terror, it appears to be in rhetoric alone. The exhibitions are a narrative of the history of the former Ministry of Internal Affairs and a display of objects of the *Sigurimi*, Albania's communist-era secret police. The vast majority of the rooms are dedicated to telling the story of the perpetrators with only a few rooms narrating the suffering of the victims, albeit without interpretation of the events. Most significantly, displaying the sufferance of the victims of communism without interpretation fails to provide retribution for those that suffered and further fails to acknowledge the lasting impact that decades of violence and socio-political oppression have upon a great part of society today. The isolated communist economy and society sunk Albania into economic despair in its post-communist years, and the trauma that its victims sustained endures into the present day through mental illness, health problems, poverty, and unemployment, to name a few (Lubonja 1992). Failing to acknowledge the deep impact that communism holds for society today is a renewed persecution for the victims who continue to have their voices silenced by a more powerful central government.

While the Albanian government focuses on funding exhibitions held in communist-era bunkers and on constructing a museum of the secret service, all sites that highlight the successes

of the communist regime, sites of persecution around the country are neglected and the memory of communist brutality slowly disintegrates with the stones. Tucked away in a remote area in central Albania's Mirdita region are the ruins of Spaç prison, infamously the most inhumane internment camp of the communist regime, not only because of police brutality, but because of the harsh weather conditions prisoners were forced to endure. Known for housing some of the most prominent intellectuals of the 20th century, Spaç was built in 1968 at the site of a copper and pyrite mine, where the prisoners were forced to spend their days in labor (de Waal 2005: 78)

Spaç is a Category II Cultural Monument, which essentially pardons the central government from any financial responsibility for the site's preservation. The Director of the Institute of Cultural Monuments, a branch of the Ministry of Culture, insists, "The whole site has recently been analyzed by experts who have determined that Spaç cannot be regarded as a museum or as a cultural destination. The state of preservation is too poor and there are not many original objects left" (A. Dollani, pers. comm., December 1, 2016). Yet, the site has recently been listed by the World Monument's Fund as one of its top 50 sites in danger due to continued neglect and over-development and urges for its safeguarding, regardless of its current state of conservation (World Monuments Fund 2016). Intellectuals who labored at Spaç for more than 20 years are fighting for its protection as a site of memory necessary for informing the world and Albania's future generations about the ruthlessness that they endured under communism. The site is under threat due to neglect from the Albanian government, but most importantly due to destruction from Tete, the Turkish mining company that has held land rights in Spaç since 2003. Much of the mining sites have already been destroyed and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and Swiss Embassy in Tirana are currently questioning the Albanian government for its involvement in the illegal re-delineation of the boundaries of the

cultural site that gave Tete additional mining rights. Moreover, the area where Tete works is the same place where many prisoners lost their lives in the mines. Therefore the area likely contains human remains of political prisoners for whose bodies the deceased's families are still searching (see also Herscher 2014).

Spaç is an example of a site whose preservation is a necessary aspect of society's reconciliation process. Yet, it is a site that for the Albanian government embarrassingly displays the material evidence of communist brutality. Trouillot (1995:29) wrote in *Silencing the Past*, "What happened [in the past] leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete…that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of the many reasons that why not any fiction can pass for history. The materiality of the socio-historical process sets the stage for future historical narratives." Material heritage, thus, provides the undeniable truth to a people. In the Albanian government's pursuit to protect the perpetrators of the communist regime, while at the same time appeasing the West in demonstrating its so-called transparency in dealing with the communist past, it has negotiated its communist heritage by silencing sites of persecution while using sites of communist power as exhibitions that are open to endless interpretation. Will the West take Albania's bargaining chip as a sign of its willingness to reconcile the communist past, or will it understand that the heritage the Albanian government employs only serves to empower the government while disempowering its victims?

Conclusion

Albania's post-communist heritage landscape exposes a disempowered and unwanted past in its neglected Ottoman-era buildings, abandoned communist-era factories, and schizophrenic religious buildings of multiple identities. Albania is undertaking a systematic process of erasing its cultural heritage either by way of total destruction or through neglect and

eventual dereliction. Yet, international pressures to protect the aspects of its heritage that satisfy foreign agendas is now causing friction within the country's social and material landscapes. As such, Albania's heritage landscape is a disjointed image of competing national and international agendas and desires that inevitably release tensions in the social fabric of its built environment.

While the West calls for Albania's immediate development and democratization into the EU, necessary for protection against the security threats that the Middle East poses to Europe, countries to Albania's East seek to Islamicize the Balkan region and invest in the area's rich natural resources. Though Albania desires EU integration, it lacks the will to democratize through anti-corruption and human rights initiatives. Therefore, Turkey's investment package in Albania, which demands only that Albania permit its cultural and religious influence within the country, seems a lucrative offer. Yet, strengthened relations between Turkey and Albania, and the country's growing conservative Islam, have called the West into action, who is accelerating its fight to move Albania into the EU. Nevertheless, EU officials are largely divided on this issue. While some feel that Albania's entrance into the EU is essential for forming a barricade against security threats to its East, others are adamant that Albania's corrupt political system and struggling economy will only incorporate the security threats within EU boundaries (Elbasani 2010).

These large international political issues can all be viewed through the lens of cultural heritage in Albania, which act upon the country's built environment: Tirana is undergoing massive urban development schemes in order to nation-brand its "Europeanized" state, all the while erasing heritage in the capital and neglecting the rest across the country. The EU is engaging in "soft" forms of economic and cultural development through tourism infrastructure projects, excavations, and overall protection of the heritage that it views as "European."

Meanwhile, large-scale tourism infrastructure projects are ironically destroying cultural heritage at sites these projects aim to promote. Albania is promoting its "inter-religious harmony" in efforts to appear peaceful and non-radical, although these propagandistic projects that are funded internally and externally are actually dividing religious communities and inciting social and political conflict. Inconsistently, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are contributing to Albania's growing Islam, while a bankrupted West struggles to fund a trans-Christianity. And finally, in appeasing the EU's demand for Albania's transparency of its communist past, Albania is using heritage sites of communist power to narrate a history that appears transparent, while in reality is a protection of its political leaders and disenfranchisement of the victims of its communist past.

Without an agenda for protecting its cultural heritage and lacking institutional capacity for the sector, Albania's heritage landscape will continue to fall prey to competing foreign interests. Albania's material past will tango between employment and destruction, erasing historical memory, silencing the past's victims, and enflaming religious conflict in this political dance. Unless Albania solidifies a strategy for dealing with its past, its material landscape will mirror a history that is engineered by foreign agendas alone and the ruins of Albania's past will become hotspots for social and political conflict.

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