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Evoking Huntington: Albania's Democratic Transition and the Revival of Religious Freedom

Published 2025-10-14

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Article History:

Submitted: August 1, 2025

Reviewed: September 26,
2025

Accepted: October 10, 2025

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Sociology, UIN Sunan
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initial publication in this
journal.

How to Cite:

Evoking Huntington:
Albania's Democratic
Transition and the
Revival of Religious
Freedom. (2025). *Jurnal
Sosiologi Reflektif*, 20(1),
91-
138. <https://doi.org/10.14421/n590qj07>

Abstract

After nearly half a century of totalitarian atheism, Albania's transition to democracy in 1991 represented one of the most complex transformations in post-communist Eastern Europe. Framed within Samuel Huntington's 'third wave' of democratization, this study revisits Albania's early years of political transition to analyze the intertwined processes of democratic change and religious revival. The aim of this research is to understand how U.S. foreign policy, particularly through diplomatic and symbolic interventions, contributed to shaping Albania's democratization and restoration of freedom of conscience. Using a qualitative historical-political approach, the study relies on library research that integrates primary sources—including diplomatic archives, official speeches, and media documents—with secondary literature from Scopus-indexed journals and academic books. Data were thematically analyzed across six interpretive clusters, connecting political, social, and religious dimensions of Albania's transformation. The findings reveal that U.S. diplomatic engagement, especially Secretary James Baker's 1991 visit, catalyzed pro-democracy movements and symbolized external support for Albania's reentry into the democratic world, while the revival of religion expanded civil liberties and strengthened pluralism. The implication of this research is that international pressure, moral encouragement, and religious freedom jointly served as enduring safeguards against authoritarian relapse and remain essential to Albania's democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Religious Revival; Albania; Democratic Transition; Foreign Policy

Setelah hampir setengah abad hidup di bawah rezim ateis totaliter, transisi demokrasi Albania pada tahun 1991 menjadi salah satu perubahan politik dan sosial paling kompleks di Eropa Timur pascakomunis. Berangkat dari kerangka 'gelombang ketiga' demokratisasi yang dikemukakan Samuel Huntington, penelitian ini meninjau kembali tahun-tahun awal transisi politik Albania untuk memahami kaitan antara perubahan demokratis dan kebangkitan kehidupan beragama. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menjelaskan bagaimana kebijakan luar negeri Amerika Serikat, melalui diplomasi dan simbol-simbol politik, berperan dalam mendorong demokratisasi sekaligus memulihkan kebebasan berkeyakinan di Albania. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan analisis historis-politik melalui studi pustaka yang menggabungkan sumber primer—seperti arsip diplomatik, pidato resmi, dan laporan media—dengan literatur akademik terkini. Data dianalisis secara tematik melalui enam klaster utama yang menghubungkan dimensi politik, sosial, dan keagamaan dalam proses transformasi Albania. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan diplomatik Amerika Serikat, terutama melalui kunjungan bersejarah James Baker pada tahun 1991, menjadi katalis bagi gerakan pro-demokrasi dan menandai dukungan internasional bagi kembalinya Albania ke dunia demokratis, sementara kebangkitan agama memperluas kebebasan sipil dan memperkuat pluralisme. Implikasi penelitian ini adalah bahwa tekanan internasional, dukungan moral, dan kebebasan beragama menjadi pilar penting bagi keberlanjutan demokrasi dan konsolidasi politik di Albania.

A. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1991, the late Samuel Huntington, then Professor of the Science of Government and director of the John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, published in the *Journal of Democracy* a timely article titled 'Democracy's Third Wave' (Huntington 1991a). His highly acclaimed book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Huntington 1991b) appeared a few months later the same year. It became almost immediately a seminal formulation of the democratic transition theory. 1991 was the year Albania held its first multi-party elections embarking on the most procrastinated, difficult, and painful transition process in Eastern Europe. The year 1991 was also when Albania re-established diplomatic relations with the United States after a long hiatus that lasted 52 (fifty-two) years, as well as with the United Kingdom after a total break in their relations for 51 (fifty-one) years. The reference to Huntington's third wave is made not merely to situate it as a concurrent phase in Albania's delayed transition from authoritarianism to democracy, but to underscore the relevance of Huntington's framework in tracing both the challenges and the advancements of Albanian democracy over the past three and a half decades, particularly in relation to the influence of the international community – most notably, the United States.

According to Huntington, the first wave of democratization had been a long, slow wave from 1828 to 1926, and the second wave lasted from 1943 to 1964. Significantly, each of these ended with what Huntington called a 'reverse wave' of democratic breakdowns (the first lasting from 1922 to 1942, and the second from 1961 to 1975), a period during which some of the newly established (or re-established) democracies failed (Huntington 1991b). In the 'third wave' of global democratic expansion, of which Albania was a part and which Huntington defined as 'a group of transitions from nondemocratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time' (Huntington 1991b), the United States has been a

very important agent for change with full instrumental rationality in every domain of economic, political, and social life.

During the 1990s, often described as the 'third wave' of democratization, democracy emerged as the dominant paradigm shaping both local and global political imaginaries. The global turn toward democracy was celebrated in international forums, embedded in the discourse of post-socialist transition across Eastern Europe, and institutionalized within international development agendas, where good governance became a central criterion for foreign aid (Pieterse 2016). As Augustus Richard Norton (1993) observed, democracy had become the defining concept of the decade – an idea so globally diffused that, much like Coca-Cola, it required no translation to be understood.

Huntington (1991b) noted that during this period, the U.S. administration employed a range of political, economic, and diplomatic strategies to advance democratization, many of which extended to Albania. These included public endorsements of democratic reform by senior officials, advocacy through media channels such as the U.S. Information Agency, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty, as well as direct diplomatic engagement by what he termed an emerging class of 'freedom-pusher' ambassadors.

More than three decades after the publication *The Third Wave* and the beginning of the democratic transition in Albania it is worth taking a refreshing look at Huntington's text considering the role of the United States and its European allies in promoting democratic change in Albania, especially by effectively using some of the instruments mentioned above. Although in the 340 pages of Huntington's book Albania is mentioned only four times, as one of those countries 'whose previous experience with democracy had been modest or nonexistent' (Huntington 1991b), this is still a good intellectual exercise.

Previous scholarship on Albania's democratization since 1991 has generally concentrated on three intertwined dimensions: electoral consolidation, external actors' role, and religion's sociocultural resurgence. Analyses of democratic consolidation emphasize fragile institutions and polarized elites, noting how electoral volatility and weak rule of law have persisted across cycles despite intermittent progress (Elbasani 2004; Ceka 2013). More recent work underscores democratic backsliding in the 2000s and 2010s, situating Albania within broader trends of democratic erosion in Southeast Europe (Levitsky and Way 2010; Bieber 2018). At the external level, European Union conditionality has been a significant driver of reform, but its effectiveness has oscillated depending on domestic elites' incentives and geopolitical configurations (Vachudova 2005; Elbasani and Šabić 2017). In parallel, the United States has been central in shaping democratic trajectories through diplomatic interventions, aid conditionality, and public diplomacy, though detailed process-tracing of these mechanisms remains scarce (Krasniqi 2014; Radeljić 2014). Complementing these institutional accounts, research on Albania's post-communist religious revival highlights the reintegration of faith into public life after decades of state atheism, marked by imported clergy and institutions, and framed by a pluralist ethos of interfaith coexistence (Clayer 2014; Endresen 2016).

Despite this growing body of literature, important gaps remain. First, while Huntington's (1991b) 'third wave' framework is often cited to contextualize Albania's transition, few studies engage substantively with how U.S. democratization instruments—such as the Voice of America, high-level diplomatic statements, and 'freedom-pusher' ambassadors—interacted with local actors in key historical moments, including Secretary James Baker's 1991 visit to Tirana. Second, analyses of democratization and studies of religious resurgence largely evolve in parallel; little effort has been made to integrate freedom of religion and the re-emergence of

religious institutions into models of democratic consolidation in Albania. Third, while macro-comparative accounts of weak institutions dominate, fewer micro-level studies explore how clientelism, campaign practices, and shifting citizen attitudes interact longitudinally with institutional performance. Finally, existing accounts have yet to reconcile why short bursts of democratic progress—such as the 2013 elections—regularly coexist with long-term stagnation, leaving the mechanisms behind Albania's stop-and-go democratization poorly understood.

This paper centers on the visit of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker to Tirana more than three decades ago, a moment of historic significance that conveyed critical messages about Albania's political future. The visit marked a pivotal juncture in shaping the nation's difficult, turbulent, and prolonged democratic transition. Using this event as a point of departure, the analysis examines the emergence and decline of Albania's atheist state during and after the communist era.

B. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach with a historical-political analysis design based on library research. The primary aim is to deeply trace the dynamics of Albania's democratic transition since 1991, with particular emphasis on the instruments of U.S. democracy promotion and their intersection with the religious revival after the atheist regime. A qualitative orientation is chosen because the research does not focus on quantitative measurement but rather on interpreting meanings, narratives, and historical-political mechanisms that shaped the transition period.

Data were collected through library research, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official documents, speeches by U.S. officials, international media archives, and publications from institutions such as Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and relevant diplomatic reports concerning Albania in the early 1990s. Secondary

sources consist of books, Scopus-indexed journal articles, and more recent academic works on Huntington's 'Third Wave' theory, democratic consolidation in Albania, the role of external actors (the U.S. and the European Union), and the religious resurgence after communism. This combination of sources provides a comprehensive corpus that links political, social, and cultural dimensions of the democratization process.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis organized around six key themes: Opening the Communist Bunker's Gate, The U.S. Ambassadors, The Last Domino to Fall, The Rise of an Atheist State, The Fall of the Communist Atheist State, and Rousseau and Reagan Rebutted. Coding and categorization were applied to group empirical evidence into these thematic clusters, after which interpretive analysis was conducted to connect the themes and explain how U.S. democracy promotion, the legacies of state atheism, and local sociopolitical dynamics jointly shaped Albania's uneven democratic trajectory.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the main findings of the study, describing how Albania's democratic transition unfolded through political, diplomatic, and socio-religious dimensions. The discussion highlights the crucial role of U.S. foreign policy and international involvement in supporting Albania's move toward democracy, while also addressing the nation's internal struggle to redefine freedom after decades of authoritarian rule. It further explores the interrelation between the fall of the atheist regime, the revival of religion, and the gradual development of a pluralistic public sphere that

contributed to strengthening democratic values in post-communist Albania.

1. Opening the Communist Bunker's Gate

The first and most significant move of the United States to approach Albania and to show the Albanian people Washington's readiness to support democratic change in their country was the visit of then U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker III in Tirana, on June 22, 1991. Much has been written about that visit and its significance in those early days of democracy awakening for Albania. The New York Times (1991) covering the event wrote: "It was as though his visit had provided the first tangible proof that their [the Albanians'] long national nightmare was over". The massive coming-out party and the boisterous atmosphere that dominated Tirana during Baker's visit resembled that of a merrymaking. Fred Abrahams has described Secretary Baker's arrival to Albania's capital city in the following words:

Unlike the usual military reception for visiting dignitaries, a few hundred irrepressible Albanians greeted him at the airport and escorted the convoy into town. On the outskirts of Tirana, an ecstatic mob engulfed the cars, hoping to glimpse the guest from the West. Men threw flowers, kissed the windshields and wanted to carry Baker's limousine into town. U.S. security agents jogged along Baker's car, sweating in their suits. The delegation drove to Skanderbeg Square, where more than 300,000 people had crammed every corner and nook, waving small American and Democratic Party flags. A large banner with the Statue of Liberty holding an American flag hung from the Palace of Culture. Spectators clung to lampposts and tree branches. They dangled off rooftops and balconies to get a better view. Someone raised an English sign that read, in: 'Welcome Mr. Baker, Albania has been waiting for you for 50 years. (Abrahams 2011).

The visit of Washington's top diplomat and the messages he conveyed to the Albanian people stirred strong pro-American sentiments. The hundreds of thousands of those gathered at the Scanderbeg Square in the center of Tirana (Kempster 1991). Overwhelmed by the enthusiasm with which the people of Albania hailed him, Baker would tell foreign journalists

on his way back to Washington that [their] outpouring of genuine affection and support was because of the symbol that America represents to people like this, who have had nothing to hope for, for so very long (quoted in Csongos 1991). Secretary Baker wrote in his memoirs published a few years later; 'In fifteen years I had spent in national politics I had never seen anything like this' (Baker 1995). William Ryerson, an American diplomat who had come to Tirana with the advance team after U.S.-Albanian diplomatic relations had resumed a few months earlier, on March 15, and who later that year became the first U.S. ambassador in post-World War II Albania, compared James Baker's visit to Tirana with J. F. Kennedy's visit to Berlin in 1963 (Ryerson 1991).

Secretary Baker conveyed to the Albanian people and politicians a message, loud and clear:

On behalf of President Bush and the American people, I come here today to say: that Freedom works. At last, you are free to think your own thoughts. At last, you are free to speak your own mind. At last, you are free to choose your own leaders. (quoted in Ryerson 1991).

Baker told the Albanians that the road to democracy requires 'freeing all political prisoners,' 'holding fully free and fair elections that include a fair campaign and fair media access to all parties,' 'full respect for religious and minority rights,' 'opening the media to genuine pluralism,' 'eliminating repressive security organs and bringing legitimate police functions under democratic control, civilian control over the military (and) freeing the factories, farms and mines from political controls and mismanagement' (Kempster 1991).

Statements like these were what Huntington considered U.S. 'endorsement of democratization' in a particular country. Through America's chief diplomat Washington had spoken, "Welcome to the company of free men and women everywhere, the way our Creator intended us to be. You are with us, and we are with you" (see Ryerson

1991). Bearing a strong emotional force, this message served as a catalyst for change in Albanian politics and society at a time when an already sclerotic and crumbling authoritarian rule was giving way to a new form of politics. Just ten days before Baker's visit in Tirana, on June 12, 1991, the Socialist cabinet was replaced by an interim government in which half of its members were drawn from the newly formed opposition parties and half from the socialists. This caretaker government was vested with authority to run the country until full multi-party elections would be held in the spring of the following year.

The message was reiterated in Mr. Baker's address to the Albanian parliament that same day. Moreover, that message was still crystal clear:

I have a very simple message for the members of this chamber today. For the citizens of this country which now faces the difficult challenge of national reconstruction: On freedom's road, we must always move forward. In this parliament, in this capital, and across this land, there can only be forward movement toward establishing full democracy, a market economy, and the rule of law. After so many years, Albania cannot afford delay. (Foreign Policy Bulletin. 1991).

Secretary Baker went on to say:

I want to be very clear about something else: just as there is no turning back on the road to a new Albania, there is no place along that road for violence, no place for intimidation, no place for the use of force. The watchwords of the new Europe – the Europe Albania has just begun to rejoin with its membership in CSCE [Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe] – are respect for human rights and the peaceful settlement of disputes. I know that I speak for every American when I say to every member of this chamber and every citizen of Albania: Let us see an end to all fear in Albania. This is a new Albania, and you are members of a new Europe. (Foreign Policy Bulletin 1991).

Mister Baker concluded his message to the Albanian lawmakers by saying:

Here, as in America, democracy must be not only an ideal – but a reality. In this endeavor, if you are true to these principles, we will stand with you as we stood with you early in this century, when President Woodrow Wilson championed your cause. I am proud that my President and my country stand with you in the last decade of the 20th century, supporting a free and independent Albania. Every part of this continent, just as every

citizen of this country, must be part of what President Bush calls 'a Europe whole and free'...[it] is our hope from this day forward the American and Albanian people will share these ideals: open government, open media, an open economy, an open society. These are the safeguards of freedoms. Moreover freedom works. (Foreign Policy Bulletin 1991).

William Ryerson (1991) characterized Secretary Baker's visit to Tirana as a catharsis. What the visit most profoundly evoked in the Albanian imagination—and what resonated deeply with their collective conscience—was the conviction that America is with us, a phrase that carried powerful emotional significance even for the usually composed James Baker, who later reflected, "I have never felt more privileged to represent my country" (Baker 1995:312).

James Baker's visit to Tirana more than three decades ago warrants particular attention not only because it marked the first visit by a senior American official to the last formerly communist country in Central and Eastern Europe, but also because it symbolized a pivotal moment in shaping what may be described as Albania's 'internationally monitored' democratic transition. The term 'internationally monitored' underscores the central role of the international community in sustaining Albania's democratization over the past three and a half decades—an issue revisited in the concluding section of this paper.

Since then, five U.S. Secretaries of State—representing both Democratic and Republican administrations—have visited Albania: Madeleine Albright in 1999, Colin Powell in 2003, Hillary Clinton in 2012, John Kerry in 2016, and Antony Blinken in 2024. Each visit carried messages on behalf of the American president and people, reaffirming a consistent diplomatic stance. The central message has remained unchanged: the United States stands with the government and people of Albania in their

efforts to consolidate democracy, uphold the rule of law, and build a prosperous future.

2. Diplomatic Frontlines of Albania's Transition

When Secretary Baker visited Tirana, there were just two American diplomats in town, none of whom was an ambassador. In December that year William Ryerson, who had been in consular affairs most of his life, became the first U.S. ambassador to Albania since 1939. Representing the strongest nation on Earth, and with the incredible might that comes with it, Ryerson became almost immediately 'one of Albania's most influential men' (Abrahams 2015). At that time, many young intellectuals in Tirana did not understand nor endorse Ambassador Ryerson's appearances at opposition rallies or his strong and forthright public statements in their support. Most believed that his words and actions were personal and did not necessarily reflect the official stance of the U.S. government. Nevertheless, this assumption proved to be mistaken—a point that Huntington's framework helps to elucidate.

Democracy promotion has been a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy for over half a century (Fowler 2015). To enact such policy U.S. presidents have used various ways and means for promoting democracy for the purposes of achieving national and international security objectives, regional stability and spreading American values abroad. Starting from the mid-1980s under the Reagan administration, U.S. policy had entered 'a new phase moving actively to promote democratic change in both communist and non-communist dictatorships, symbolizing its commitment with the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy' (Huntington 1991; see also Hassan and Ralph 2011). President Reagan, like President Carter before him, followed a 'moralistic' approach to promoting human rights and democracy abroad (Jacoby 1986; Brown and Hawthorne 2009), which remained unchanged during the presidency of George H. W. Bush, even

though the latter seemed considerably more pragmatic. In April 1990, Secretary of State James Baker declared that:

The time of sweeping away the old dictators is passing fast; the time of building up the new democracies has arrived. That is why President Bush has defined our new mission as promoting and consolidating democracy (quoted in Carothers 2007).

By the time Ryerson was appointed to represent the U.S. Government in Albania, the ethos of the U.S. State Department had changed in a 'revolutionary' way, to use Huntington's language (1991). 'Rather than simply maintaining good relations' with the government of the country to which a U.S. ambassador was accredited, it was now upheld that 'the responsibility of the American ambassador,' envoy or other chief of mission in that country was 'to promote democracy' (Huntington 1991). Ryerson was no doubt the type of 'freedom-pusher' U.S. ambassador in Albania, the prototype of which had been Frank Carlucci in Portugal in 1975, or Lawrence Pezzullo in Uruguay and Nicaragua, Mark Palmer in Hungary etc. (Huntington 1991).

Ryerson is not the only ambassador of the United States to have played a direct and crucial role in the politics of Albania. Virtually all U.S. ambassadors have been deeply involved in promoting political stability, the rule of law, and democratic consolidation in this country, working closely with all governments—Democrats and Socialist—and, at times, with opposition forces. They have carefully coordinated their efforts with the EU representation in Tirana, the OSCE, and the ambassadors of the major EU member states, pushing hard to promote consensus among opposition parties and the government and to conduct the necessary reforms.

In short, they have served as mediators and, in moments of political crisis, have delivered bold warnings to both the ruling party and their government and the opposition parties. Ambassador Marisa Lino did this in the late 1990s; ambassadors Joseph Limprecht and James Jeffrey played

the same role in the early 2000s, reflecting differences in their temperament; and so did ambassadors Marcie Ries, John L. Withers II, Alexander Arvizu, Donald Lu, and Yuro Kim after them. Their policy and attitude towards Albania did not change.

3. The Last Domino to Fall: Albania in the Third Wave of Democratization

As discussed, Huntington's 'Third Wave' provides an underlying foundation for reflecting on the role of external factors—primarily U.S. diplomatic tools and other soft power—in the process of democratic transition in Albania. That book, alongside his other provocative and controversial work, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1997), is thought-provoking on several other important social and cultural issues about creating a free and democratic society. In the early 1990s Albania was embarking on becoming such a society.

1989 was Europe's *annus mirabilis*, when a series of mostly peaceful democratic movements across Central and Eastern Europe brought an end to communist rule and to Soviet domination east of the Iron Curtain. The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9 of that same year marked the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era in European and global politics. The collapse of the Communist system was assisted by what Walter Laqueur called the echo effect: "once the onslaught against the old establishment had been successful in one country, revolutionary uprisings tended to be infectious" (Laqueur 1992). Polish sociologist Victor Osiatynski (1991) described this process most eloquently: "As with waves at sea, each revolution picked up some energy from the preceding one and could not avoid building its own momentum".

While Hungary, Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania moved away from Communism, Albania, very isolated from the outside world and left alone in a remote corner of the Balkans, survived the 1989 wave of democratic change largely intact. The country started its

post-communist transition more than one year after the crumbling process was set in motion in all formerly communist states of Eastern Europe which had already embarked on their democratic transformation. Resembling a falling row of dominoes it was inevitable that, after Romania, Albania would be the last domino to fall (Tarifa 1995; 2020). Huntington has perceptively argued that:

At the close of the 1980s demonstration effects produced efforts at democratization in countries where other conditions conducive to democratization and democracy were weak or absent. After the movements toward democracy in the Philippines, Poland and Hungary, the Koreans, East Germans, and Czechoslovaks appropriately asked, 'Why not us?' After these peoples moved toward democracy, the Chinese and Romanians also asked, 'Why not us?'. (Huntington 1991b).

The strong repression and the isolation from the outside worlds explain why the Communist rule in Albania. However, it had begun to show signs of serious erosion, was the last to come under attack. The 'Romanian story' that had dominated world radio and television however had a particularly profound effect on the Albanian people, and their government. Besides showing the dramatic effects of the ending of Communism, that story carried the message that even brutal regimes, such as the one under Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania and the one under which the Albanians were living, could be toppled.

For various reasons Albania's transition was from the beginning the most difficult and most painful one. Her split with communism was very dramatic, bearing no resemblance to any other transition in the region. Moreover as we are prompted to reflect on Irving Louis Horowitz's (2006) critique of. Those who lack 'a sense of history when promoting democracy' in what follows, we provide a brief overview of Albania's historical and cultural development in the Balkan and Eastern European contexts.

Eastern Europe has always been the poorest part of the continent, and Albania has been the poorest. Like other Balkan countries, for centuries it was cut off from the West not so much by distance as by time (Kenan

1993). Albanian's most notable tradition from ancient times has been one of foreign domination (Keefe 1971), her lands ravaged and partitioned by covetous foreign powers—the Ottoman Empire for five centuries, during which time approximately 70 per cent of Albanians converted to Islam (Rizaj 1985; Tarifa 2008); rule by other European states during World War I; and then occupation by fascist Italy (1939-1943) and Nazi Germany (1943-1944).

Loosing half of its territories to its bellicose neighboring states—Greece, Montenegro, and what was then Kingdom of Serbia prior to World War I—Albania was also oppressed by a legacy of backwardness—pervasive poverty, disease, illiteracy, superstition, vendetta—suffering immensely from social and political disunity, regionalism and, in northern Albania, from semi-feudal tribalism (Tarifa 1998). Independence was won in 1912, but by the end of World War II Albania was the only sizeable country in Europe without a national railway system, with no paved roads. No university at that time 85% of her population was illiterate (among women the figure was well over 90%). Century-old tribal social relations and norms derived from customary law prevailed, particularly in the northern part of the country.

Albania is home to Muslims (the largest group), Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, and members of the Bektashi order—a Sufi-influenced Muslim group with rather strong influence in southern and central Albania. Before the Communists took power in 1944, it was estimated that about 70% of Albania's (roughly 1,2 million) population were Muslims while 30% were Orthodox Christians (roughly 18 percent) and Roman Catholics (about 12%). Among the Muslims, the majority were Sunnis, while some 17% were Bektashis, in addition to a collection of much smaller orders (Keefe 1971).

Albania differed in many ways from the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the period between the two world wars. Unlike

Czechoslovakia, where a democracy existed even before the communist takeover, Albania's only experience with democracy was a short-lived democratic government in 1924, before it became subject to monarchic rule until 1939 and to the most extreme form of Communist totalitarian rule after World War II, under Enver Hoxha. Immediately after the Communist takeover, Albania followed the other countries of Central and Eastern Europe in adopting the Soviet pattern. It was subject to the Soviet sphere of influence until 1960. The Communist Party remained the sole political force in the country for forty-six years, controlling all aspects of society and people's lives – the state, the economy, the army, culture, education, and their minds.

There's no denying however that among the communist-ruled states of Eastern Europe significant differences existed regarding the degree of political and cultural repression. Communism atomized society, destroying virtually all institutions of autonomous collective action, which we usually call civil society, and leaving very little space for any form of private or group initiative based on free association to succeed. However, not all East European societies were equally regimented by Communist totalitarianism nor was civil society demolished everywhere to the same degree (Tarifa 1997; 2020).

There was significant variation by country – with Poland and Hungary representing one end of the civil society continuum and Albania and Romania the other. In Poland, for instance, formal structures of self-defense – the Catholic Church, underground social organizations, semiautonomous associations, active workers' groups, – had existed for a long time during the socialist period. Their activities played an important role in the self-liberation of civil society, which, in turn, became a crucial agent for change. Hungary was also a country in which an organized opposition, albeit not as effectual as its Polish counterpart, played an

important role in buffering the fray between state and society and aiding the re-emergence of civil society.

Poland and Hungary enjoyed a measure of freedom, including religious freedom, unequalled in the socialist block. Many segments of social life in these two countries were relatively free from the pressure for uniformity (Reykowski 1994). Both countries opened their societies to a considerable extent and, indeed, the totalitarian system there never came fully into existence. As Adam Michnik phrased it, Polish socialism was 'totalitarianism with broken teeth' (Michnik 1998). Poland and Hungary enjoyed a fairly lively press, albeit subjected to censorship, but not as thoroughly controlled as in the other socialist countries. Instead of repression and economic Stalinism, Hungary, particularly under Kádárist rule, aimed for consumer satisfaction and controlled relaxation of political pressure. The general easing of controls encouraged Polish and Hungarian intellectuals to begin open criticism of their regimes' shortcomings much earlier than in other countries.

The straitjacket of 'Socialist Realism'—insistence by the Soviet overlords upon the grandiose pictorialization of communist heroes and achievements—was cast off. There was considerable artistic freedom in these two countries explored cubism, surrealism, and abstractionism, and the works of modern composers were played in the academies. Western newspapers were available to intellectuals and the risk of speaking your mind in public became gradually more calculable and less extreme (Ash 1989). Polish professors were allowed to visit the West, distinguished self-exiles could return home, and many political prisoners were released. For most of the 1960s-1980s life in these two socialist countries was relatively relaxed. Hungarian sociologist Robert Manchin described Albania's idiosyncrasy vis-à-vis his own country's context as follows:

For many generations of Hungarians growing up after the 1956 revolution, during the late 60s and early 70s, listening to Radio Tirana was like visiting

a museum. The language, the harsh rhetoric was absurd but at the same time familiar to our earlier past. It has served as a curious mix of a day-to-day reminder of the roots of our own 'soft dictatorship' and a constant inspiration for political jokes (Manchin 1991).

Of all formerly communist states, Albania and Romania had the most oppressive regimes. No other country in Eastern Europe experienced such an uninterrupted exercise of Stalinist repression, so closely foreshadowing the tyrannical and stifling society imagined by George Orwell in his novel *1984* (Tarifa and Weinstein 1995). After assuming power in 1944, the Communist Party maintained control over the country through the politics of permanent purge, the brutal use of violence by the *Sigurimi* (Security police), and a vast network of informers.

During Hoxha's reign, all his political or ideological opponents were either assassinated or given long prison sentences on the pretext of being agents of American imperialism or Soviet social imperialism. From a population of about three million, thousands of Albanians were imprisoned on political grounds for voicing thoughts which differed from the official clichés, or for making statements which expressed disappointment or dissatisfaction with the existing situation. These were considered crimes of 'agitation and propaganda against the state'. Many families also suffered internal exile in remote areas when someone in the household was imprisoned.

However whereas in Romania, even under the utterly unfavorable circumstances of the Ceausescu's regime, the germs of civil society managed to survive (Tismaneanu 1993), in Albania virtually no civil society, in the sense of 'a network of underground organizations outside of communist control' (Osiatynski 1991), and *ipso facto* no dissident movement ever emerged. The complete absence of an organized opposition remained one of Albania's main features until the last days of her Communist rule (Glenny 1990; Tarifa 1997). Communism not only survived longer in Albania than in the rest of Eastern Europe, but it also survived with most

of its Stalinist trappings in place. It is therefore no surprise that the breakdown of Communism found this country with no democratic traditions or institutions. Under Hoxha's dictatorship, every spark of democracy had been extinguished. Communist Albania's almost total isolation from the outside world was reflected domestically in extremely ridged policies that violated several basic human rights, including the freedoms of belief, conscience, expression, and peaceful assembly. Many rights that existed in theory were ignored in practice; even on paper, many rights were limited and incomplete. Albania did not undergo any period of liberalization like other East European countries in the post-Stalinist era, where a cultural form developed opposing totalitarian terror, encouraging criticism and a more open interpretation of the official ideology. Although this was a short-lived phenomenon and varied in intensity in different socialist countries, it played an important role in destroying Communist ideology (Kolakowski 1992).

4. The Rise of an Atheist State: Albania's War on Religion

Of all East European countries Albania was the only one that avoided all revisionist thinking and withstood the pressures from change that periodically affected the other countries. In Albania, philosophies and ideologies other than Marxism were strictly prohibited, making atheism and Marxism legal obligations for all Albanian citizens. Regardless of their worldviews and personalities, social scientists were all required to think alike, identifying themselves as Marxists. Because no one could be an anti-Marxist or a non-Marxist if they wanted to have a job, earn a salary, have friends—in short, to live freely. The communist regime in Albania was deeply 'anti-sociological' in its ethos, and hostile to the very idea of 'society'. Sociology was considered a 'bourgeois science' and forbidden from being taught in schools and universities (Tarifa 1996; Tarifa and Sokoli 2006). Diverse opinions on and interpretations of social reality were

tolerated only within the framework which exposed the Marxist, materialist-historical worldview. Outside this framework there could be no other 'scientific' explanation of social reality. Any explanation that contradicted Marxist theory was deemed 'pseudoscientific' or 'nonscientific,' or worse still, 'retrograde' and 'reactionary.'

On the other hand, uniformity of opinion was seen as a sign of social cohesion in the Durkheimian sense—absent of social conflict, based on trust, cooperation or voluntary participation, and as a sense of belonging or inclusive socialist identity. Unity allegedly existed not only among the people but, most importantly, it characterized the relation between the People and 'their' (Communist) Party, as was postulated in the slogan: 'What the People want, the Party does; what the Party says, the People do'. Such unity was periodically 'displayed' in systemic national ballot rigging assuring that the Communist Party (the only political party in the country) received 99.99 per cent of the votes, hence justifying its 'legitimate' rule in the eyes of the people and retaining its firm grip on power (Tarifa and Fortman 1998), just like the 99.99 of the votes for Kim Jong-un which 'legitimize' the Kim dynasty's firm grip on power over the North Korean people for the last three quarter of a century.

Enver Hoxha's fanatical ideas—a mix of calcified Stalinist Marxism and nationalism—became the mainsprings of Albanian politics and legislation as well as part and parcel of people's daily lives. Hoxha's works were considered sacred in every way, without which it was claimed life would make no sense. The case of Albania confirms Kolakowski's (1992) argument that totalitarian regimes need an ideological foundation in the form of an obligatory doctrine with all-embracing pretensions. The last token of civil society in Albania was demolished in 1967 with the total abolition of religion (Tarifa 1992, Tarifa and Çela 1991) during the high tide of Albania's 'revolutionization' frenzy in the second half of the 1960s, a mirror image of China's ill-famed Cultural Revolution. However, while in

China religious activities were banned between 1957 and 1977, atheism was never officially inscribed in the Chinese Constitution (Bartl 1993) as was in Communist Albania. Hereinafter, we focus on this issue.

Let us first make our point clear on something which we consider crucial. Religion in Albania is a captivating tapestry woven from a rich history and diverse cultural influences. Its landscape of religious diversity and coexistence has shifted many times. The country was once majority Christian under Byzantine and later Roman influence. During Ottoman rule, as previously mentioned, Islam spread widely, especially in central and northern regions. At the same time after independence, the different religious communities coexisted convivially, often through 'mixed marriages' and mixed participations in both Muslim and Christian holidays, regardless of faith. These cultural practices have remained intact to this day.

Having experienced various religious transitions over the centuries, Albanians presents a unique blend of beliefs and practices that largely define their national identity and explain their 'enviable religious tolerance' without ever being religious fanatics (Durham 1910; Barnes 1918; Schwartz 1955; Clayer 2003; Tarifa 2008; Vurmo et al. 2018; Young 1999) has highlighted the observation that faith is of essence to the Albanians, not the particular denominational affiliation per se. All communist governments, with the rare exceptions, have been hostile towards religion and religious freedom. Hoxha's version of communism, originally modelled after the Soviet model, however, banned religion and religious freedoms entirely. His ruthless regime went to extremes, further even than the Soviet Union (Luehrmann 2011), creating an unprecedented example in modern history.

After initially seizing power, the communists pursued a tolerant policy towards religion. The first Communist Constitution, adopted in March 1946, contained several liberal provisions regarding religion. 'Freedom of conscience and religion' was 'guaranteed to all citizens'

(Article 16). The church was separated from the state, and religious communities were 'free to exercise and practice their creeds'. It was forbidden to 'use the church and religion for political purposes', and 'political organizations based on religion' were outlawed, while the state was tasked with giving 'material assistance to religious communities (Article 16).

This policy was ephemeral, however. Whereas in the Soviet Union religion was 'fitted on the Procrustean bed of the Soviet State' (Wilber 1969), in Albania it was banned under a notorious law against 'agitation and propaganda'. The communist government began its assault on religion with the 1946 Agrarian Reform Law, nationalizing most property of religious institutions, including the estates of monasteries, orders, and dioceses. The assault continued with full force in the second half of the 1960s with a new policy aimed at the destruction of organized religion. It was enunciated by Enver Hoxha in his rapport delivered to the 5th Congress of Albania's Labor (Communist) Party in October 1966, emphasizing the necessity of intensifying the class struggle in the field of ideology (see Hoxha 1982a). It was further played up by him in a programmatic speech delivered to the Party's Central Committee on February 6, 1967, and in a secret order addressed to all local party committees in the country signed by Hoxha himself three weeks later, on February 27, 1967, in which it was stated:

Religion is the opium of the people. We should try our best to make anyone apprehend this great truth and cure those poisoned by it (and not a few). This is not an easy task, but neither is it impossible. We should not leave this great struggle to spontaneity or please ourselves by saying that the new generations will turn their back on this opium. Our struggle against religion must be spearheaded both against religious dogmas, its philosophical idealist and mystical viewpoints, and the religious customs that have penetrated the daily behaviors of believers, even of those who do not believe. We have destroyed the material and propaganda base for disseminating religious texts. We have also eliminated any possibility of training new clergy. Now the problem lies with the churches and mosques

that exist in our country as the only means for the clergy to gather the believers and to keep the religious beliefs, even though in a state of decadence, alive. We must continue this war until we have erased religion and the religious beliefs from the face of the earth. (Hoxha 1982b).

In the aftermath of that programmatic speech religion was banned, and religious institutions were forced to relinquish all 2, 169 houses of worship—about 740 mosques, 607 Orthodox churches and 157 Catholic churches, as well as about 530 cloisters, and shrines. Most were demolished or heavily damaged (Young 1999); some were converted into cinema halls, sport palaces, or cultural centers for young people. The clergy were publicly vilified and humiliated, their vestments taken and desecrated, and many became the target of a political witch hunt, considered as ‘enemies of the people’ or ‘counter-revolutionary individuals’ who were ‘dangerous to socialism and the interests of the homeland’. More than 200 clerics of various faiths were arrested, imprisoned, or executed; most were forced to seek work in either industry or agriculture while others were shut away in remote areas of the country along with their families. If caught practicing their religion covertly, individual believers faced harsh punishments. Religious weddings were prohibited. Parents feared passing on their faith for fear that their children would tell others.

Nine years later, in 1976, a new Constitution stated that ‘Socialism has shown its absolute superiority over the old exploiting order,’ and formally declared the ‘proletarian ideology’ or Marxism-Leninism as ‘the ruling ideology’ in the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania’ (Article 3). ‘The entire socialist social order’, according to the Constitution, was developed on the principles of that ideology. Religion was proclaimed unlawful. The Constitution stated ‘The State recognizes no religion and

supports atheistic propaganda to implant a scientific materialistic world outlook in the people' (Article 37).

The Constitution prohibited the creation of 'any type of organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious, and anti-socialist character' (Article 55). It further stated that: 'Fascist, anti-democratic, religious, war-mongering, and anti-socialist activities and propaganda, as well as the incitement of national and racial hatred are prohibited' (Article 55). Thereupon Albania became the first atheist state in the world, and the Penal Code of 1977 codified the campaign against religion. Atheism became the basis of the state doctrine, in effect the state religion, and spreading of atheism became a goal of the state. Absurd as it may sound to compare religious institutions with anti-democratic or fascist organizations, and religion with anti-democratic, racist, fascist, and military propaganda, one should be reminded that the absurdity was in the very nature of the communist political system, the existence of which was based on two main elements: propaganda and terror (Berger 1976; Brown 1988; Furtak 1986, Huntington 1968; Tarifa 1997).

5. The Fall of the Communist Atheist State: Albania's Path to Pluralism

The Albanian communist rulers vehemently opposed the restoration of religion until their last breath. Hoxha died in 1985, but his hand-picked successor, Ramiz Alia, although not as strictly orthodox as Hoxha, followed, by and large, his predecessor's political hard line. Alia faced the same dilemma that Khrushchev encountered when he decided to confront the criminal legacy of Stalin (Glenny 1990). During his first years in power, Alia made virtually no change to Hoxha's policies. In the 9th Congress of the Labor Party (November 1986) Alia vowed to follow Hoxha's path. He again professed his fidelity to Hoxha's political line in his book *Our Enver*, published in 1988. Alia (1988) wrote: "Enver Hoxha has shown us the road we must follow. Continuity on the road of socialism and continuity on the

road of Enver are the same thing". His loyalty to Hoxha's policies made many people believe that Hoxha still ruled the country from the grave.

At the close of the 1980s, however, with the extreme brutality of Hoxha's regime very gradually easing, Alia began to relax the rigid isolationism of his predecessor and, under considerable domestic and international pressure, slowly and very reluctantly began to shift position, introducing a perestroika-style 'new economic mechanism' consisting of a raft of limited reforms designed to make life easier for his long-suffering compatriots (Tarifa 1995). Such movements gave rise to the hope that Alia would become 'Albania's Gorbachev'. Most citizens enthusiastically received the new reforms. However, while conservative forces were concerned that too many changes were being made, other people seemed to be dissatisfied with the scope and the speed of change. Even two years earlier, these reforms might have seemed adequate, and Alia would have gained tremendous political credit; but the time for half-measures had passed. Alia's mild relaxations merely made people more restless. Far from thanking him, they felt frustrated that the changes were being carried out too slowly and that more time was being lost.

Once minor changes were put on the agendas, the people headed by the intellectuals demanded total change as they did all over Eastern Europe. We must assume that Alia did not realize that Albania had embarked upon the spiral which had become familiar in Eastern Europe: pressure for change brings minor concessions, which in turn create pressure for greater change, which elicits fresh concessions, and so on until the old system cracks. Alia underestimated the iron rule of reform one change leads to another. Furthermore, having seen every other East European Communist leader fall, Alia did not know what lessons to draw and what mistakes to avoid. The official line adopted by Alia *vis-à-vis* events in Eastern Europe

was simple and self-serving: it was not Socialism that had failed, but revisionism (Tarifa 2020).

In the weeks after Ceausescu was toppled, Alia again showed his political myopia by believing Albania could remain unaffected by the tremors shaking Eastern Europe. At this time, he formulated the political slogan: 'Albania is neither West nor East.' However, nothing proved to be further from the truth. The economy had become a major problem, and political solutions were needed. First, the 1976 Constitution, with its ban on foreign credits and investments, and—as importantly—with his ban on rights and liberties, including religious one, had to be revoked. This was clearly no easy task for Alia, given the ideological fanaticism prevailing among the hardliners who still dominated the party leadership and the government bureaucracy, and, of course, Alia's pledge to continue Hoxha's line. To his credit, however, he understood that isolation from the outside world and 'self-reliance' were leading the economy 'to the edge of the abyss, which, in fact, was a threat for the country's freedom and independence' (Alia 1992). If Albania was to be less poor, it had to open up and become more democratic.

Alia's pragmatic approach left the door open to several possibilities, yet he remained fearful of radical change. The 1976 Constitution was the greatest hindrance to the democratization of Albanian society. However, the persistent demands coming from many quarters, especially from intellectuals and from the urban youth for its abrogation were largely ignored. Revoking the Constitution would imply consenting to a multi-party system—replacing a police-state with the rule of law; removing the barriers built into the Communist legal system by restoring freedom of conscience and belief; permitting people to express their opinions freely to organize societies and hold meetings without fear of punishment.

Abandoning the old Constitution would not simply mean rectifying the many human rights violations and social injustices of Hoxha's

dictatorship; it would mean creating a new legal framework, essential for democracy and economic and social progress, and a new set of democratic institutions. These demands were rejected by Alia and the ruling elite, who believed them to be the demands of exclusive intellectual circles, lacking in popular support. Alia sincerely believed that the Albanian people had bound their life to socialism. However, pressure from inside and outside pressure was increasing on Alia's government. The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) refused to admit Albania because of its poor human rights record and opposition to a multi-party system. The West clarified that Albania should expect nothing until essential changes were made and free elections were held. However, there was no organized force to take the initiative for change.

That said, Ramiz Alia appeared to be more successful in foreign affairs than domestic ones. In 1986 he began to show serious interest in emerging from isolation and gravitating toward the West in search of new political and economic ties. Diplomatic relations were established with several countries, including the German Federal Republic, Canada and Spain. At the same time, Albania's diplomatic relations with the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary – dwindling after Hoxha's break with the Soviet Union in 1961 – were upgraded to the ambassadorial level.

In the 10th Central Committee Plenum of the Labor Party (April 1990), to the surprise of many, Alia declared that Albania was now ready to resume diplomatic relations with the United States and the Soviet Union. Both superpowers were seen as incarnations of ideological evil during Hoxha's rule, and the mere suggestion of talks with Washington and Moscow would have been dismissed as a perfidious plot at that time. In May 1990, Albanian Prime Minister Adil Çarcani announced to parliament the leadership's decision to abandon its boycott of the CSCE – today the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – and sign

the previously scorned Helsinki Final Act. In a matter of months the USSR and the U.S. opened diplomatic offices in Tirana, while negotiations were going on to exchange ambassadors with Israel, Great Britain and the Vatican. In September 1990, Alia addressed the United Nations for the first time, where he was spotted shaking hands with Britain's former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (see *The Economist*, 15 December 1990).

Joining the CSCE and re-opening relations would give Albania a chance to make the new ties to the outside world—both political and commercial—badly needed after the long years of isolation. On the other hand, participating in the Helsinki process would necessarily impose obligations on the Albanian government to abolish several repressive and discriminatory laws, and to fundamentally improve its human rights record. Indeed, the move to sign the Helsinki Final Act was accompanied by a series of laws and governmental decisions restricting the death penalty, giving those on trial the right to a legal defense and the right to appeal, as well as allowing Albanian citizens to apply for passports and to travel abroad into the previously prohibited world.

The winds of change in Eastern Europe had opened the eyes and minds of the Albanians as well as a host of demands for further change, and Albania, to borrow Huntington's words, could not but be 'vulnerable to the cumulative snowballing of the antiauthoritarian movement throughout Eastern Europe' (Huntington 1991b). Renowned intellectuals and academics started speaking in favor of democratization, and thousands of university students, who mobilized massive support, particularly in Tirana, demanded their economic, academic and political concerns be heard, putting more pressure on the government. With time, their demands became more radical and, as Laqueur has noted for other East European countries, they were united in the belief that 'there would be no future for any of them unless the old order were defeated' (Laqueur 1992). In the end, the case of Albania proved Glenny's assessment that youth—and students

in particular – were ‘the engine of rebellion that generated such powerful change in the whole region while the intellectuals provided the fuel’ (Glenny 1990).

Unlike Chile’s Pinochet regime, which was “strong enough to resist opposition pressure to negotiate democratization” (Huntington 1991a), Alia’s government proved unable to withstand the students’ vigorous mobilization, the persistent popular demands, and the growing unrest from the newly formed opposition. Confronted with these forces, he conceded to a negotiated transition that culminated in Albania’s first multiparty elections in the spring of 1991. The same factors that compelled other formerly communist regimes to democratize – namely, declining legitimacy and mounting opposition pressure – also drove Albania’s transition, rather than its Muslim-majority context. These dynamics likewise explain why the communists, rebranded as socialists, were defeated in the following year’s elections.

This analysis aligns with Huntington’s (1991a) assessment of democratic transitions across Latin America, Southern, and Eastern Europe. It also affirms his broader claim that culture plays a significant role, leaving enduring marks on contemporary values. However, the argument diverges from Huntington’s later thesis that the “failure of democracy to emerge in much of the Muslim world” is primarily attributable to “Islamic culture” (Huntington 1997). Nor is it accepted that radical Islamism stems from something intrinsic to Islam or its cultural system. As Oliver Roy (2004) convincingly argues in *Globalized Islam*, radical Islamism arises instead from the deterritorialization of Islam, which has reopened fundamental questions of Muslim identity in the modern global context.

Huntington maintained that two (Portugal and Spain) of the first three democratized countries during the third wave were Catholic. Democratization then swept through six South American and three Central American countries before it moved on to the Philippines, the first East

Asian country to democratize, doubled back to Chile and affected Mexico, and then burst through in Catholic Poland and Hungary, the first East European countries to democratize (Huntington 1991b). This course of events, among other reasons, Huntington argued in 'The Third Wave' and 'The Clash of Civilizations' (1997) may lead us to assume that 'the core clash between the West and Islamic worlds concerns democracy'.

Contrary to this assumption, several Muslim sociologists, political scientists, and other thinkers, the general Muslim publics, and Western authors, argue that traditional Islamic notions, such as *shura* (consultation), *maslaha* (public interest), and '*adl* (Justice) justify representative government institutions similar to what is known as Western democracy, reflecting Islamic rather than Western liberal values (Norris and Inglehart 2002; Browsers and Kurzman 2004; Fukuyama 2006; Browsers 2015). Still others have advanced liberal democratic models of Islamic politics based on pluralism and freedom of thought (Browsers 2004, 2006; Muslih & Browsers 2009) or have advocated secularist views of Islam (Esposito 2011; Tarifa and Labi 2013; Alrebh 2018).

There is also what is known as European Islam. Its proponents – represented most outspokenly by the Swiss philosopher Tariq Ramadan (whom The Washington Post called 'the Muslim Martin Luther' – believe that this religious-cultural trend promises to bridge the Western and Muslim cultures. In his 1999 book 'To be a European Muslim', Ramadan addresses some of the fundamental issues born of the several million strong Muslim presence in Europe in our times claiming that an independent and liberal Islam is emerging in Europe among young, educated Muslims who have been profoundly and positively influenced by modern liberal democracy with its free press and separation of church and state.

It should also be emphasized that this analysis does not subscribe to the notion that there is anything inherent in Islam that fosters radicalization. It is essential to recall that a millennium ago, the Arab world stood at the

forefront of human progress, and Muslim societies at that time were markedly more tolerant than their Christian counterparts. Maimonides was born in Muslim Cordova – an extraordinarily diverse center of learning and culture – while Baghdad for generations was home to one of the world's largest and most vibrant Jewish communities. For centuries, these two cities, Cordova and Baghdad, served as the intellectual and cultural heartlands of the Arab world, eclipsing all major European capitals of their era.

Fukuyama (2006) insightfully notes that “it would make no more sense to see contemporary radical Islamism as an inevitable outgrowth of Islam than to see fascism as the culmination of a Christian European cultural tradition.” Likewise, the claim that the absence of democracy fuels terrorism ignores the reality that many extremists have been radicalized within some of the most stable democratic societies in Europe (Tarifa 2006).

A thorough critique of Huntington's view is by renowned American political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2002) in an often-cited article *Islamic Culture and Democracy: Testing the 'Clash of Civilizations'*. They argue that Huntington is essentially mistaken in assuming that at the heart of the today's clash of civilizations lies the opposing stance of the West and the Islamic world towards democracy. In their view, although Islamic nations differ from the West on issues of religious leadership, this is not a simple dichotomous clash, as many countries around the globe display similar attitudes to Islam. Moreover Huntington's thesis fails to identify the primary cultural fault line between the West and Islam, concerning the social issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization, hence 'the values separating Islam and the West

revolve far more centrally around Eros than Demos' (Norris and Inglehart 2002).

6. Rousseau and Reagan Rebutted: The Return of Faith and Freedom in Post-Communist Albania

It was not a coincidence, nor an aimless action, that one of the first demands of the movement for democracy in Albania was the one for the abrogation of those articles of the Constitution that prohibited religion and the freedom of thought and belief. A new pluralistic and democratic society would require freedom for a plurality of ideas, philosophies, and beliefs – religious or other – as well as the freedom to openly and earnestly express them, including the right to allow the distribution of religious material and the performance of religious activities. New demands and protests were serving as a galvanizing moment for social and political change, and fearful that the situation could slip out of hand, Alia took another step back to save his face and buy time. A new Law On Major Constitutional Provisions was adopted on March 31, 1991, sanctioning that:

The Republic of Albania is a secular state. The state respects freedom of religious beliefs. Religious sects are free and equal before the law. Using them for political purposes and national division is prohibited. Relations between the state and religious institutions are regulated by law...Citizens are guaranteed freedom of conscience. They have the right to believe in a religion or not to believe at all, to preach their religion or to promote atheism. (Articles 23).

Ending the proscription and harassment of religion, Albania's political and religious landscape began to change in a way that, even a year earlier, no one would have thought possible, and this, as Huntington (1991b), would have put it, implied 'implications for the future of democracy' in this country. Initially, the new atmosphere was marked by total relaxation and confusion which was only natural under the new conditions created after 45 years of dictatorship. It was now possible to

speak your mind openly, to criticize the government and the politicians, to express viewpoints previously considered heretical without fear of prosecution, to freely confess whether you believed or not in any religion, to read the Quran, the Bible or Torah which had 'disappeared' for decades from people's homes and to practice the religion you personally, or your ancestors traditionally believed in mosques and churches that began to rise right away.

In the Fall of 1991, a national survey – the first of this kind in Albania which was commissioned by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and conducted by the first author of the present article, produced results that were way beyond of what had been the conventional wisdom for too long. Based on a representative sample of 1,000 respondents drawn from 15 of Albania's then 26 districts, 26 percent of Albanians identified themselves as Muslims, 14.7 percent as Orthodox Christians, 6.9 percent as Catholics and 52.4 percent as nonbelievers, agnostics, or atheists (see Tarifa 2007). Clearly, a half-century of communism and official atheism had left its mark on Albania's social fabric and in the spiritual constitution of its people, especially on the younger generations.

Gradually, the religious resurgence gained momentum, leading to an inevitable rise in public expressions of faith. Between 1991 and 1997, approximately 1,240 mosques were built – slightly exceeding the total reported in 1927 (Young 1999; see also Lakshman-Lepain 2001). Scholars have variously described this phenomenon as a revival, rebirth, comeback, or resurgence of religion (Zickel and Iwaskiw 1992; Trix 1995; Clayer 2003; Mustafa 2008; Elbasani and Roy 2015; Boman 2023; Szendrő 2025), suggesting that it represents a multifaceted reawakening of religious life in post-communist Albania.

Such terms may be used interchangeably, yet each adds something distinct to the true content of the seismic shift to Albania's religious landscape accompanying the transition from communist state-sponsored

atheism to a post-communist religious tolerant society. We are reminded of one of Rousseau's most famous maxims saying that: 'We may acquire liberty, but it is never recovered if it is once lost' (Rousseau 1762). The Albanians were ruthlessly stripped of their freedom of belief and religious liberty by their Communist dictatorship but, finally they did regain them – all and sundry. Ronald Reagan (1967) also believed that 'freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction.' Both have been proven wrong. Not one, but two generations of Albanians born after World War II were raised with no religion and no freedom of belief – religious texts or institutions and no religious practices – but neither religion nor their other basic freedoms had vanished.

Free thinking, faith, and the freedom to believe can be abolished by law, but they cannot be erased from the human mind and hearts. Laws can impede formal worship and hinder their free expression, but they cannot uproot them and the human need to believe, or what William James (1896) called 'the will to believe' as 'our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters' without prior evidence of its truth. Legally banned ideas and beliefs, as well as religious practices can be pushed into an underground existence and continue to be practiced clandestinely to escape punishment by authoritarian laws and the police baton, but they can endure repression and rarely are erased from people's conscience. In fact, the more repressive the laws, the deeper the underground where banned ideas, beliefs, and practices find shelter to survive, awaiting the day when they can resurface under conditions of freedom. This is what happened in Albania after the fall of the Communist rule. Rousseau could have not foreseen such outcome two and a half centuries ago, while Reagan's words may be understood only within the framework of his anti-communist rhetoric.

There is no need to elaborate further, but it is important to note that the post-communist religious revival in Albania was accompanied by

intensive—and at times aggressive—proselytizing efforts by foreign missionaries (Abazi 2023), who sought to implant their beliefs and practices in the spiritual vacuum left by decades of communist repression. After more than half a century of a total ban on religion, Albania became fertile ground for the arrival of various Christian churches, denominations, sects, and movements eager to establish a presence in what had long been labeled a “land of infidels” (see Clayer 2003). These missions, however, attracted limited engagement, particularly among younger generations. Public perception often characterized the missionaries as “soul buyers,” and the attention they did receive was largely driven by material incentives—such as food, clothing, medicine, and even Coca-Cola—rather than by genuine ideological commitment (Mustafa 2008).

While younger and more educated individuals tended to view foreign religious missionaries with skepticism and suspicion, many among the older and less educated population welcomed their presence. To these groups, the missionaries symbolized Western modernity and the promise of a freer world. For some, they embodied American or European values, even if they did not fully represent them (Stutzman 1996).

Some 120 new religious sects were registered between 1991 and 1996 (Young 1999), most of which had *not* been part of the traditional religious makeup of Albania, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Swedish Evangelists, Wahabi Islam, Baha'i, the Dutch Evangelical organization God Loves Albania, and even the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Scientologists, to mention a few. Most of these missions followed their ecumenical and political agendas—a Christian outreach crusade aiming to ‘spread love and hope among people who desperately needed it,’ or converting non-Christians to Christianity—rather than simply helping the Albanians to succeed in the transition from atheism to religiosity (Lederer 1994). For some, their hopes of finding followers in Albania were short-

lived and faded away, while the Scientologists were shortly banned from the country.

It is important to emphasize that the revival of religion in Albania was a peaceful process without conflicts or competition among different beliefs or the main religions basically for two reasons. First, as mentioned above, Albanians have always been exceptionally tolerant on religion matters, never fighting a religious war among themselves or creating religious conflicts that would disrupt their social fabric. Since 1879, Pashko Vasa, one of the founders of Albania's 19th century National Renaissance Movement, pointed out that:

Differences in religion have never been a reason for a systematic separation [among Albanians]; Muslims and Christians have always lived...on equal footing, enjoying the same rights and duties. (Wassa 1879).

Religious tolerance among Albanians, expressed in their true feelings for one another – whether Muslim, Orthodox Christians or Roman Catholic – was born of national expediency (as a marker of the Albanian national identity) of indifference towards religion, and a general lack of religious convictions. Usually, the tradition of religious tolerance is linked to the multiconfessionality of Albanians as a nation (Clayer 2003). No religion ever became a central defining characteristic of Albanian national identity, as Huntington (1997) noted regarding other nations or civilizations. Unlike the other nations of the Balkans (e.g., Greeks, Serbs or Bosnians), the national identity of the Albanians has never – objectively or subjectively – been tied to a specific religion, such as Orthodoxy, or Islam. For them, the distinguishing feature of their national identity has always been their language, an Indo-European language among the oldest in Europe and entirely different from Greek as well as from the Slavic

languages spoken by almost all the peoples of the former Yugoslavia and many peoples of Eastern Europe, apart from the Hungarians.

For the Albanians, the uniqueness of language and their multiconfessionality have been common discursive elements directed towards efforts of foreign assimilation. Whereas Huntington placed language 'second only to religion as a factor distinguishing people of one culture from those of another' (Huntington (1997), for the Albanians language always came first. Their religious heterogeneity has been – and remains – an inseparable part of their national and cultural homogeneity and this has generally been associated with the slogan 'the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism', as was famously formulated by Pashko Vasa's in one of his poems circa 1878.

*Çonju, shqyptar, prej gjumit çonju,
Të gjith si vllazën n'nji bes shtrëngonju,
E mos shikjoni kish e xhamija,
Feja e shqyptarit asht shqypтариja!*

Wake, Albanian, from your slumber,
Let us, brothers, swear in common,
And not look to church or mosque,
The Albanian's faith is Albanianism!
(Vasa [1878] 1996)

Second, the revival of religion in Albania reflected a general lack of deeply held religious convictions among her people. In Albania religion has always followed its own rhythm. Unlike most neighboring countries where faith has been – and to this day still is – closely tied to politics or ethnicity, Albania has developed a model of religious coexistence that is both quiet and resilient. It is not based on strict doctrine or public displays; it is personal, cultural, and often rooted in family and tradition rather than institutional or political influence.

This explains why in Albania, unlike Huntington's (1997) assumption about other Muslim dominated societies, religion did not take

over from ideology, and it has never become, to use Huntington's own words (Huntington 1997), 'a cognitive guide' to their 'high-solidarity system'. This is also the reason why, unlike other societies in today's modern world, the case of Albania does not support Huntington's thesis that religion is 'perhaps the central force that motivates and mobilizes' people (Huntington 1997), or the crucial factor that defines their 'cultural values' (Huntington 1997), their social status or opportunities.

In post-communist Albania—as in her pre-communist period that followed its independence in 1912—the religion has been well accommodated with secularism, which largely explains why most Albanians lead a secular life. They have little information on or knowledge of religion and reject religious considerations to shape or condition their way of life

D. CONCLUSION

Albania's transition to democracy in 1991 marked both a political and moral rupture from its totalitarian past. The study finds that the U.S. foreign policy—through its diplomatic engagement, symbolic acts, and continuous ambassadorial presence—played a decisive role in legitimizing Albania's shift toward pluralism and open society. Secretary James Baker's historic visit in 1991 symbolized a critical moment that catalyzed public optimism and political momentum for democratic reform. Alongside this political transformation, the findings also reveal a parallel religious revival, in which the end of enforced atheism enabled the restoration of faith, the reopening of religious institutions, and the strengthening of civil liberties. Together, these processes demonstrate that Albania's democratization was not solely a political transition but also a moral and spiritual renewal shaped by both domestic aspirations and external encouragement.

These findings reflect how the return of religion in post-communist Albania redefined the social meaning of freedom and collective identity.

The revival of faith became a channel through which civic morality, pluralism, and tolerance were reconstructed in a society long deprived of belief and public expression. Religion, once silenced by the state, has reemerged as a source of social cohesion rather than division, contributing to the reconstruction of trust and ethical life within Albania's democratizing public sphere. This interplay between faith and freedom illustrates how religion can act as a sociological force that sustains democratic values in post-authoritarian contexts.

This research is limited by its reliance on documentary and secondary data, which may not fully capture the experiential and emotional dimensions of Albania's transformation. Future studies could expand this analysis through fieldwork, oral history, or comparative approaches within other post-communist societies. The implication of this research is that democracy promotion, moral legitimacy, and religious freedom must be understood as interconnected pillars of sustainable democratization. Albania's experience shows that external support and internal pluralism together provide a durable foundation for freedom, belief, and democratic consolidation in transitional societies.

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