



GIJTR

Global Initiative for Justice
Truth & Reconciliation

VICTIM-CENTERED APPROACH TO TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

COUNTRY: Republic of Albania

INTRODUCTION

After World War II, Albania embraced the political system of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, experiencing the strengthening of the Communist Party and the establishment of the communist regime. Albania had one of the most repressive dictatorships in southeastern Europe, lasting for almost 46 years, from December 1945 to March 1991.¹ The first multiparty elections in Albania's history were held on March 31, 1991. The Albanian Party of Labor was able to win two-thirds of the parliamentary seats. The Democratic Party won most of the remaining seats, primarily in the cities. Two short-lived transitional governments followed before the opposition was able to force new parliamentary elections on March 22, 1992.²

The complex sociopolitical situation in postcommunist Albania shows some of the consequences of the lack of transitional justice mechanisms. In essence, Albania was largely unsuccessful in implementing a serious program of transitional justice after the fall of communism in 1990. Transitional justice in Albania became highly politicized and was used by politicians for personal political gains.³ The rush to achieve what is called transitional justice, or rather to leave the impression of transitional justice, led to an incomplete outcome.⁴

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the beginning, communism seemed like a blessing for those partisans who fought for liberty and for the Albanians who believed in it. They could not wait to start building a “new” Albania, relying on its natural and human resources, but the complete opposite happened. The new regime started with transparent and open attacks on anyone who insulted or opposed it. With these actions taken, the regime seemed to want to sow terror, incite fear, and show what could happen to anyone who opposed it. There was no conflict between the parties, but the system, aiming to cement its base and ideology, attacked, violated, and killed those who did not fit that regime.⁵ With the motivation that everyone should be equal, the Communist Party brought out the famous slogan of the “Class War.” This system was established by a pattern of violence, fear, terror, and torture that followed the construction of the interrogation centers and where inhumane torture was carried out in prisons and labor camps.⁶ The violence took different forms. It started with sensational arrests, murders, deportations, and imprisonments. The psychological violence and humiliation or “sensational” arrests were intended to be a form of humiliation and were performative. The arrests in the middle of the cities, the dragging of the dead bodies, the humiliation of the clergymen, and the incitement of hysteria during the parades or the trials without evidence were among the forms of human rights violations they exercised.⁷

After the fall of the communist regime and the change of systems, to support memory policies in countries and societies that emerged from communist dictatorships, the Council of Europe and later the European Union (EU) undertook a series of initiatives and resolutions to aid the process of analysis and separation from communist totalitarianism. These documents were also approved and adopted by the Assembly of the Republic of Albania, such as the resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE) on “Measures to Eradicate the Legacy of Totalitarian Communist Systems” (1996); The Prague Declaration “On European Conscience and Communism” (2008), which defined the commitment to punish the crimes of

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communism, according to the practice of the Nuremberg Trials, as crimes against humanity; a collection of papers from the hearing “Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes,” organized in 2008 by the Slovene Presidency of the EU Council and the European Commission; and of the CoE Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1481 (2006) “Need for International Condemnation of Crimes of Totalitarian Communist Regimes.”⁸ Through these resolutions and documents, Europe asked postcommunist governments to clearly distance themselves from the crimes of totalitarian communist regimes and to condemn them without any ambiguity.⁹

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE MECHANISMS IN POSTCOMMUNIST ALBANIA

Transitional justice in Albania is mainly characterized by legislative changes. Laws were adopted, often amended, and not fully implemented. In general, the Albanian legal system is characterized by a high level of legal uncertainty. In this sense, the legislative changes brought more legal uncertainty than restoring violated rights. The cause lies in the significant influence of politics on the drafting and implementation of laws. Laws have been proposed, drafted, approved, and amended according to the political power’s wishes.¹⁰

Albania’s overall experience with transitional justice was flawed. As Robert Austin describes in his paper “Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania,” the first move against the old regime was a report that was essentially an audit of the luxurious spending of the communist elite.¹¹ It made clear that the communists were to be held accountable not for their political actions but for economic crimes. Since the change of the regime, there were communist remnants in Albanian politics, the old political elites still dominated, and it was difficult to remove them from the political scene. At the same time, it seemed there was a lack of determination to remove the old elites from political and administrative life.

At the end of 1991, the dictator’s ex-wife, Nexhmije Hoxha, was arrested.¹² She was accused of only of misappropriation of funds and her and her family’s privileged lifestyle. A general amnesty in November 1994 and provisions of the new penal code that came into effect on June 1, 1995, reduced her sentence by about two-thirds. Another amnesty by President Sali Berisha on January 1, 1996, reduced her sentence by another six months, leaving her with two years to serve.¹³ In December 1992 the successor of the Hoxha dictator, Ramiz Alia, was arrested.¹⁴ He was not accused of crimes against humanity but only of misappropriating funds and living with privileges. Alia considered the arrest politically motivated and a “revenge.” Despite the arrest of most of the political leaders in this period, the trials against them failed to generate enthusiasm for interest groups and society in general. In February 1996, Alia was arrested again, this time with new charges: “crimes against humanity,” “ordering the internment and imprisonment of thousands of citizens before 1991,” and charges of “ordering the murders of people who tried to leave the country in the years 1990-1991.”¹⁵ The trial lasted more than a year, while Alia managed to flee the country before he was sentenced, following the riots that began in March 1997.¹⁶ Other officials were sentenced from five years in prison to life sentences. But the sentences were not remitted in some cases.¹⁷ Twenty-four former high communist officials were arrested again, this time on charges of “crimes against humanity.”

The Democrats, meanwhile, applied a deep restructuring of the administration and the public employment sector. They referred to changes in the labor code. The approval and subsequent amendment of Law no. 7526 “On labor relations” would add a point to Article 24, where it was stated that “for special needs related to the improvement of the functions and reform of the structures of the state apparatus, the competent body has the right to transfer a state employee to another workplace in his profession. When finding another place is objectively impossible, it (the competent body) transfers (the employee) to another job or to social assistance.” This amendment made it possible to dismiss employees from state-owned firms or agencies “without explanation or right of appeal.” After the amendments came into force, “thousands of state employees left their jobs in ministries, institutions, universities, state media bodies, and state firms. Most were sympathizers of the Socialist Party.”¹⁸ The same process of movements and resignations was carried out by the Socialist Party when it came to power after 1997.¹⁹

In 1995, after three years in power, the Democrats passed two laws that enabled a different approach to the accusations of former communist leaders: from accusations of economic crimes to accusations of political crimes and crimes against humanity. Law 8001, dated September 22, 1995, “On genocide and crimes against humanity committed in Albania during the communist regime for political, ideological or religious motives,” and Law 8043, dated November 30, 1995, “On the control of the image of officials and other persons associated with the protection of the democratic state,” were the first two laws that could be said to have been created in support of the transitional justice process but that then ended up being applied politically.

Albania has had a history of aborted attempts for lustration.²⁰ Draft law on lustration has been restarted several times, it was always affected by politics. Separate from lustration and yet an integral component of the transitional justice process is the issue of file access. Files were generally used only for political purposes rather than public disclosure. Fifteen years after the fall of communism, file access is no longer important for most Albanians, who would prefer to close that chapter of their lives. The string of illegal file misuse from 1992 to 1995 also seriously undermined public perceptions of the files’ integrity.²¹ The Files Authority was created as an institution that provides information based on the state security archives, but it remains a contested process.²² Some victims claim that certain documents are intentionally hidden for political interests. The process of opening the files, which started in 2015, has not revealed any crimes from the communist past for which anyone can be held responsible.²³

In 1997, a quasi-civil war ensued in Albania. Those months, among other things, made the Albanians hostile according to a division, North-South.²⁴ When the Socialists came to power in June 1997, a purge of the state apparatus began with supporters of the Democratic Party targeted.²⁵ The new government also moved quickly to strike down the effects of the Genocide Law. The transitional justice process in Albania was derailed because it was used by its political leaders as a means to maintain power.

The right to property was one of the most violated rights during the communist system in Albania. In 1991, to remedy violations, several measures were taken, consisting of the reparation of violations, restitution, and compensation of property. However, the measures taken proved to be problematic, starting with Law 7501/1991 “On Land,” which was interpreted by the former owners, most of the Albanian society, and even by the head of the political forces of that time as the law that brought all the problems that followed. It should be noted that this law was drafted and adopted by a pluralist parliament that still had the remnants of communism. This law resembled the agrarian reform and did not return the

properties to former owners. Instead, it gave the land to those who used it, to the peasants. Thus, the correction seems to have begun with a new breach of property rights.²⁶ Regarding the restitution and compensation process, initially, the restitution process was initiated by Law no. 7698/1993 "On the restitution and compensation of property to former owners." According to this law, the parties were not entitled to appeal against the decision of the competent administrative commission to a higher authority. This law has been amended many times. There was no provision in this law regarding the deadline to seek restitution/compensation of property, which changed into law over the years.²⁷ However, it was criticized for being complicated and partly open to interpretation, as well as leaving discretion to the Committee of Restitution and Compensation of Properties.²⁸ According to the description about the first law on property restitution and compensation, the European Parliament Study states this law was adopted after some earlier reforms of 1991 and 1992, and as stated above, the state distributed real estate property to citizens, regardless of the fact that the property in question could have been unjustly confiscated by the former regime.²⁹ As predicted by the European Parliament Study, the legal framework for ownership of the property restitution and compensation process did not produce the desired results.³⁰ The results and the prolongation of a process beyond expectations are a clear indication of the negative effects that property laws have had and speak of a low expectation to regulate the situation. They have had a significant impact on the Albanian transition process.³¹

All victims' needs are important, but moral restitution is vital for them. Regarding material compensation, the problem starts because it has changed many times. This led to the lack of full implementation of the appropriate method and amount of compensation. As one of the interviews describes, his family has taken only two of the eight installments they were supposed to receive:

*"Not all of them were taken because the compensation procedure and formula changed many times. Legal changes have been one of the main reasons for the problems with material compensation, but they were not the only ones. Lies and false promises of the government about material compensation deeply influenced that process as well. It was promised that within eight years it would be accomplished, but it did not happen and I don't believe that it ever will."*⁴⁸

Initiatives to implement transitional justice mechanisms usually come from the associations of former political prisoners, nongovernmental organizations, individuals, and relatives of the victims. Because of the suffering and lack of social and political support, it has not been easy for the victims of persecution to organize that well. Only by organizing in associations have they tried to make their voice be heard for the most basic needs.³²

Apart from the nongovernmental sector, some state institutions have been created to deal with transitional justice issues (as mentioned above, the Files Authority), but a certain amount of skepticism from the public accompanies their work. Museums dedicated to the communist era have been set up, such as Bunk'art 1, Bunk'art 2, and House of Leaves - The Museum of Secret Surveillance, but they are viewed with suspicion by some and appreciated by others.³³ Even though crimes have occurred throughout Albania, museums that cover the communist era exist

only in Tirana and Shkoder. One of the relatives of the victims pointed out that these museums (except for the one in Shkoder³⁴) seem more like places of nostalgia than a testimony of what happened. According to the victim, museums should be places of commemoration and not a demonstration of what that time was like, what kind of furniture was used at that time, or what kind of phones or weapons were used to kill the innocents.³⁵

When the political system was changed, it was aimed to put the politically persecuted in power, but it was very difficult, because for 50 years the communist dictatorship did not allow the children of the persecuted families to study in universities. Initially, the rehabilitation started with granting admission opportunities in universities. People who had suffered in prisons and those who had been banished began to be hired. International nongovernmental organizations have made a precious contribution in this direction.³⁶

THE STATUS OF VICTIMS

The first pluralist parliament, resulting from the elections of March 31, 1991, in Albania, launched a “national reconciliation program” granting the innocence of all political prisoners and persecuted persons of the communist system. This occurred on September 30, 1991, through the approval of Law no. 7514 “On the innocence, amnesty and rehabilitation of ex-convicts and political persecuted.” With this law, the government of that time, the so-called Stability, pledged to take “all measures to compensate and rehabilitate those who were accused, tried, convicted, imprisoned, exiled or persecuted unjustly for violations of a political nature.”³⁷

In the meantime, the Parliament approved Law no. 7748 dated July 29, 1993, “On the status of ex-convicts and those persecuted politically by the communist system.” This law defined the basic criteria and conditions for when a person could be considered “politically convicted or persecuted” as well as the rights and obligations that followed from him/her in accordance with the degree of persecution. Political persecution or persecution was decided to be called “any action or inaction committed from November 8, 1941, to March 22, 1992, by state structures by order or decision of party bodies, when this action or inaction has caused the loss of life, liberty, civil rights, as well as any other deprivation.”³⁸

In the beginning, victims were convinced that justice would be made but that there would be rehabilitation also. But with the passing of time, hope turned into skepticism. The consequences of the past regime are numerous. At the beginning of the establishment of the democratic system, the victims seemed to be supported. From the interviews with the victims of that time, the right to education was restored and granted to many victims or their children. The system tried to compensate for the lack of educational opportunities by creating them and, in some cases, employment opportunities. Because of the prohibition to follow university studies for this social class, the youth suffered from a lack of advanced education.³⁹ That system affected people not only physically and materially, but above all morally and psychologically.

Albanian politics is still a hostage to the descendants of the communist regime’s power holders. It is difficult for them to recognize “their fathers’ crimes,” let alone to repudiate them publicly.⁴⁰

Unfortunately, too little was done for those who truly suffered under the cruel communist regime. Many of them were forced to immigrate and to realize their dreams in other countries. Their role today is even smaller than in the first years of the democratic system because the need for their image and vote has fallen over years. This has happened because this social class is not unified and does not actually constitute a voice that can impose changes. During these years, several representative associations were founded, which followed different courses, even political. The division of the victims of the communist system, it seems, has been achieved with the influence of the political class too.⁴¹

Almost 33 years have passed since the overthrow of the dictatorship in Albania, and very little has been done for the rehabilitation of the former political victims. This injustice deepens even further when the fund approved for the compensation of this social class is halved from year to year. The High State Control has addressed in the audit reports the many problems that the compensation fund had for this social class, leaving numerous recommendations for improving the situation. Changes in some of the most important articles of Law no. 9831 dated December 11, 2007, "On the compensation of former political prisoners of the communist regime," not accompanied by the drafting and approval of the relevant by-laws in long periods of time, have further complicated this process, causing confusion and unnecessary delays.⁴²

As for their inclusion in the process of transitional justice, one of the interviewees explains that working in an institution like Files Authority, for example, has helped her very much. "Even just finding a paper that helps document the sufferings of your family makes them feel happier and it seems as if their pain is relieved," she explained.⁴³ "This is important not only for those who have suffered themselves but even for the descendants born toward the end of the regime. Even they as generations have their traumas and pains which need healing and rehabilitation," she continues.⁴⁴

THE VICTIMS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR STATUS

After conversations and interviews with victims, one can understand that victims today have one main desire: to be heard. Their impression is that not only were they not supported by the new system after the 1990s and the governments that followed, but society often does not understand them. Victims want to be heard, to tell their stories because they want to show how great their suffering was. Maybe today, after 32 years, they have lost hope to restitute their properties, receive the economic compensation they were entitled to, and receive their grandparents' merits and values. Still, they want their dignity and acceptance of what happened. Despite the toll, this helps them to overcome what they have been through and to work for their cause.⁴⁵ The fate of those who were persecuted in Albania shows that too little has been done for them. They still continue to be the "persecuted," "former owners," etc., in permanent search of recognition of their suffering and rights.⁴⁶

Victims are in constant struggle, always searching for denied justice. They claim and believe that their rights are not restored. They fear that the new generations – their children – will continue to be persecuted as they were. If the parents were persecuted, their children today are labeled as the descendants of the oppressed, and this is their biggest despair. That the society did not deal with its past and that the perpetrators were not punished make victims' lives even more difficult. One of the victims said that even the memorials are difficult to be seen. Even though she understands that their purpose is remembrance, they still painfully remind her of what happened.⁴⁷ Thus, the transitional justice process does not end with reform of the legislation; it should also respond to the social and psychological needs of the victims so they can live a better and brighter future.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The main reason why the path of transitional justice in Albania is different from what it should have been lies in political will. Political interest prevailed over the welfare of the victims and the restoration of violated human rights. The planning and implementing of transitional justice mechanisms should have been done differently. Criminal convictions and processes such as lustration should have been prioritized. The involvement of the victims in the transitional justice process would be more valuable, since they would be focused on carrying out this process. Working directly with victims is the most accurate way to understand the effectiveness of transitional justice mechanisms or the consequences of the lack of implementation.

Firstly, victim involvement can potentially ensure a more accurate, honest, and efficient process. Victims know better than anyone the consequences of the violation of human rights. While talking to victims, they expressed that they wanted to be part of the process, but their involvement was used for political purposes. One victim illustrated her participation, highlighting the lack of decision-making opportunities. This means that it is not just necessary for the victims to be involved in the process but to have the chance to change something. The other example relates to the involvement of the children, nephews, and nieces of victims outside Albania who were not recognized and involved in the transitional justice process.

Secondly, it is essential to be aware of the time when it is vital to act. This would ensure the restoration of rights and build security, satisfaction, and dignity for the victims, and keep hope alive. Transitional justice measures are deeply influenced by the time when they are implemented. Specifically, after the first years had passed since the change of the regime in Albania, restoring victims' rights or restituting

the properties became more complex. The same applies to criminal convictions – because of the passage of time, it becomes difficult to prosecute those responsible for human rights violations.

Thirdly, legislative reform is fundamental, but it must entail more than adopting laws. New generations, nieces, and nephews of the perpetrators seem to be proud of what their grandparents or parents once did. The main reason is that the perpetrators of the crimes never faced criminal liability. The 1990s came with a slogan, “fellow sufferers and accomplices.” Thus, one of the lessons learned from the Albanian context is the importance of working with younger generations. They are the inheritors of the past and the builders of the future. Young people must learn, understand, and analyze more objectively the society they live in and its past. They must know and understand the importance of human rights as the foundation of a democratic society and the basis of the rule of law. They must persevere to create a future free from the ghosts of the past and build a better society. Therefore, youth engagement in the transitional justice context is critical.

Lastly, education is an essential step toward democracy. It is the premise for a better future and a healthy society.

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42. F.B. Interview, August 9, 2022.
43. Xhesika Xhuveli, auditor at the High State Control in Albania, (Not) rehabilitating the politically persecuted (In Albanian: "(Mos) rehabilitimi i të përndjekurve politikë"), 2019, available here (in Albanian): <https://sot.com.al/opinion-editorial/mos-rehabilitimi-i-te-perndjekurve-politike>, last accessed: May 7, 2023.
44. A.R. August 8, 2022.
45. A.R. Interview, August 8, 2022.
46. A.R. August 8, 2022.
47. F.C. August 9, 2022.
48. B.S. Interview, September 18, 2022.



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