

## Crossing the Adriatic: Italy's Role in Albanian escapes during the 1980s and the Long-Term Impacts on Albanian Cultural Identity, Media, and Perceptions of the West

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### Abstract

During the 1980s, Albania was one of the most isolated countries in the world, with strictly guarded borders and an authoritarian leadership that barred interaction with the West. Italy, being a nearby country with major cultural influence, became a primary destination for Albanians trying to exit the communist state. This study investigates the dynamics of Albanian escapes to Italy, Italy's role in absorbing and integrating Albanian refugees, and the long-term impacts of this phenomena on Albanian culture and media. Using historical sources, archival documents, and sociological analyses the paper provides a comprehensive overview of Albania's political climate during the 1980s, detailing the authoritarian regime, the isolationist policies, and the societal pressures that drove many Albanians to seek refuge in Italy. Moreover, the study explores the political ramifications of this movement and the Italian public's response to the flood of Albanian migrants. It also assesses how these events shaped the perspective of the West among Albanians and how media played a transforming role in shaping post-communist identities and aspirations.

**Keywords:** Albanian escapes, migration, Italy, media, culture, communist Albania, post-communist transition.

### 1. Introduction

The 1980s were an era of profound political stagnation and repression in Albania. Under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, and later Ramiz Alia, the country remained one of the most isolated governments in the world, comparable only to North Korea.

During this time, Albanians lived under continual supervision, with virtually no access to foreign information, travel, or culture. Despite this suppression, many Albanians desired for freedom and a link with the outside world. Italy, situated directly over the Adriatic Sea, epitomized hope, freedom, and affluence. Albanians, in their perilous quest for departure, were motivated not alone by economic desperation but also by a profound cultural and ideological curiosity regarding the West. This study examines the historical backdrop of these escapes, the actions implemented by Italy in response, and the lasting cultural impact that ensued.

## 2. Methodology

This research uses an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates historical, social, and media studies techniques. Primary materials encompass governmental archives, refugee policy documents from Italy, and, when accessible, diplomatic exchanges. Secondary sources include scholarly articles and books authored by historians and migration specialists, in addition to oral histories gathered from Albanian emigrants. This analysis examines the following research question: (1) What were the historical and political motivations for Albanian escapes throughout the 1980s? What was the effect of Albanian migration to Italy on their cultural identity? What influence did media play in molding Albanians' opinions of the West during and subsequent to their migration? The study also encompasses a media analysis of Italian broadcasts favored by Albanians during and after to the collapse of communism. The limitations of this research comprise the lack of comprehensive migration statistics from the 1980s and dependence on retrospective narratives, which may be prone to memory bias.

## 3. Analysis

During the communist period, especially under Enver Hoxha's governance, Albania exhibited profound isolationism. The regime enforced rigorous efforts to deter its subjects from escaping the nation, perceiving such actions as treasonous. The borders were extensively secured by armed personnel, barbed wire, and landmines, establishing a hazardous atmosphere for anybody considering escape. Notwithstanding these perils, the repressive political environment and economic adversities drove numerous Albanians to pursue asylum overseas. Following the cessation of relations with China in the late 1970s, communist Albania established connections with Western European nations, including Italy. The nations were compelled to cooperate for contrasting motives. For the Albanians, it was a matter of economic imperative. For Italy, it served as a mechanism to augment its power in the Balkans. Archival data indicates that more than 2,000 Italians visited Albania in 1983 as tourists, journalists, businesspeople, professionals, and diplomats. Italians and other Western Europeans were observed in Tirana, Dures, and various other tourist destinations. Historically, as is the case presently, mobility regimes exhibited

asymmetry. It was easier for Italians to go to Albania than the other way around. The first Albanians to reach Italy in substantial numbers came from Kosovo. In April 1984, the right-wing publication *Il Tempo* reported that Italian authorities had conferred asylum for several migrants from Eastern Europe, notably 444 individuals from Albania. The Albanian Foreign Minister Reis Malile refuted the report, asserting that it originated from Kosovo, where individuals faced persecution, rather than Albania. They asserted their birthplace as Albania because of concerns about deportation, considering the favorable connections between Rome and Belgrade. Comparable occurrences were documented in November 1988, when 43 Kosovars residing in the Capua refugee camp asserted their Albanian heritage.

The late 1980s saw a gradual decline in the regime's authority, resulting in heightened efforts to flee. In 1987, seamen from the vessels *Teuta* and *Korabi* sought shelter in Italy, marking the inception of a broader migration trend. Italy, located directly over the Adriatic Sea, symbolized a source of hope and liberation for several Albanians. The cultural and geographical closeness rendered it an attainable refuge for fugitives. Italian media, especially television broadcasts, significantly influenced Albanians' impressions of Western living. In contrast to Yugoslav citizens, Albanians were unable to acquire visas without compelling familial or professional justifications. Illegally crossing the border was perilous due to the state's vehement response. Following the demise of Albanian tyrant Enver Hoxha in April 1985, individuals exhibited increased audacity. On December 12, 1985, six individuals from the Popa family, comprising four women and two men, circumvented security measures and gained entry to the Italian consulate, where they sought political asylum. The incident incited a diplomatic crisis. The Albanian authorities asserted that the Popa were prior collaborators with fascists and Nazis, and requested Italy to extradite them. The Italians declined. Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti highlighted the safeguarding of "human rights" as the primary rationale for the refusal.

The situation remained precarious for months, since Albanian authorities prohibited Popa from traveling to Italy. The vehicles of Italian ambassadors were scrutinized and monitored due to concerns that the Popa may flee. Certain Italian politicians wanted a more forceful stance from their government. Proponents of the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, today known as "*Fratelli d'Italia*," sought to sever diplomatic relations with Albania due to its refusal to permit the migration of the Popa to Italy. The Popa resided at the embassy for over five years. They were ultimately granted permission to emigrate in May 1990. This motivated some Albanians to seek refuge in foreign embassies in July 1990.

The Popa family highlighted the issue of human rights in Albania in Italy. In 1987, Italian organizations submitted petitions to Tirana requesting the liberation of political prisoners and the establishment of additional freedoms. This political climate may have prompted others to seek asylum in the adjacent state. In August 1988, a lyrical vocalist educated at the Conservatory of Turin notified the embassy of her decision to remain in Italy due to her intention to marry an Italian. At the conclusion of September 1988, Elvira Gjezi, subsequently recognized by her pseudonym Elvira

Dones, vanished from her hotel in Milan. She attended a film fair with colleagues from the movie production company Kinostudio. The migratory patterns in the Adriatic have rarely been unilateral; individuals from various regions have sought to enter Albania. In August 1982, a 15-year-old boy from Morocco concealed himself within an Albanian vessel at the port of Nador and arrived in Durrës. In the late 1980s, several Italians sought to go to Albania for political motivations. The Albanian authorities deemed these requests inappropriate and dismissed them. Notwithstanding the Albanian government's prohibitions, numerous residents covertly accessed Italian channels, cultivating a sense of affiliation with the wider European society. This exposure not only underscored the extreme disparity between the two states but also intensified the aspiration among Albanians to attain the freedoms and opportunities shown in the perilous passage over the Adriatic Sea, which became a prevalent route for Albanian escapees. Employing diminutive, frequently unseaworthy craft, individuals and families ventured onto the wide waters in pursuit of safety. The apex of these endeavors was apparent in March 1991, when more than 20,000 Albanians reached the borders of Italy in a brief period, surpassing local resources. The Italian government, initially ill-equipped for such an inflow, encountered difficulties in delivering prompt help. A notable occurrence was the large migration to foreign embassies in Tirana in July 1990. Numerous Albanians sought asylum in these diplomatic missions, with the Italian embassy assuming a crucial role. This action emphasized the populace's need and stressed Italy's symbolic significance as a conduit to the West. Italy's reaction to the surge of Albanian migrants was complex. Initial responses involved improvised actions, including the creation of temporary refugee camps in southern areas like Brindisi and Bari. The Italian government struggled to reconcile humanitarian responsibilities with internal political constraints and public sentiment. In the early 1990s, stronger immigration regulations and repatriation agreements were introduced to limit migrant influx. Public mood was ambivalent; although there was compassion for the struggles of Albanians, apprehensions regarding integration and economic repercussions resulted in stigmatization and societal discord. After the dissolution of the communist regime, Albania had a phase of cultural disorientation. The lack of a cohesive ideological framework resulted in a void swiftly occupied by narratives based on consumerism, Western liberalism, and nostalgia. The opposing narratives were significantly shaped by media consumption, especially Italian television, which had historically served as an alternative public sphere, even during communism. Italian media narratives, replete with depictions of prosperity, liberty, and modernity, proved important to the development of post-communist identity. Italian soap operas, music programs such as Festival di Sanremo, and advertisements were perceived not alone as entertainment, but as indicators of a desirable lifestyle. This "narrative of desire" constituted the emotional and cultural foundation for migration choices and social ambitions.

Albanian society saw a transition from collectivist ideology to individualistic principles, a change propelled by persistent exposure to Italian cultural artifacts. Scholar Nando Sigona posits that in transitional societies, narratives of migration

frequently accompany accounts of identity reconstruction. These narratives redefined the concepts of “modernity” and “European identity.”

The extensive influence of Italian media significantly impacted Albanian society. During the communist period, despite formal limitations, numerous Albanians clandestinely accessed Italian television broadcasts. This exposure presented Western ideas, fashion, music, and lifestyles, gently undermining state propaganda and cultivating a desire for change. Following the collapse of communism, the influence grew as Albanian broadcasters embraced Italian media formats and content. This cultural infusion contributed to Albania’s change, as residents sought to replicate the modernism and openness evident in Italian society. Prior to 1990, Albanian national television comprised a single channel that transmitted for four hours daily, from 6 to 10 p.m. During the communist era, the Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture featured only one film per week, typically a rerun of an Albanian film.

The message was consistently political, nationalistic, and didactic, primarily intended to indoctrinate audiences rather than entertain them. Italian media not only impacted Albanian consumers but also served as a forum for diaspora thinkers to deliberate about Albania’s future. Albania exhibited films sourced from other socialist nations, as well as from Western or non-aligned countries occasionally, contingent upon their ideological conformity to avoid undermining or corrupting the national Albanian Marxist-Leninist culture. The remaining time was allocated to politicized and propagandistic documentaries and programs, intended to commemorate the nation’s achievements under the leadership of the omniscient Albanian Party of Labour. Notable Albanian figures in Italy employed media platforms to promote democratic reforms and human rights in their country. This cross-border conversation enhanced the Albanian media environment by bringing varied ideas and promoting a more pluralistic society. Moreover, the diaspora’s participation in cultural and educational endeavors enabled knowledge transfer and capacity enhancement, aiding the nation’s post-communist rehabilitation. The interviews reveal that the motivation for Albanians to watch Italian television sprang from a desire for novelty, with their primary appreciation being for beauty, amusement, and abundance. In the early 1980s, Albanian television commenced carrying Italian news from RAI1, the principal channel of Italian public service broadcasting, at 8 p.m. This enabled Albanians to obtain news and information from beyond their sequestered surroundings.

During my viewing of Italian television, I was most struck by the presentation of information and the production of shows. It is essential to acknowledge that our senses were significantly dulled at that time, whereas theirs were considerably more refined. This disparity ignited the desire and curiosity among Albanians, who were accustomed to rigid formats and standardized programming: news, television, culture, and entertainment. Additionally, there existed a profound yearning to explore the unknown and to observe events occurring elsewhere, which rendered that curiosity particularly distinctive (Dervishi, 65 years old). The most politically significant aspect of the relationship between media and migration in post-communist times is the appropriation of narrative and visual scripts from Italian television

by young Albanians. This appropriation is associated with an imaginary and inclusive viewership space linked primarily to consumption and recreation, which has influenced the desire to migrate. Through engagement with Italian television, Albanians gained access to programming from various Western nations, significantly contributing to the perception of Italy as a mythical and cohesive utopian cultural construct associated with the West. Due to the consistent 'subversive' influence of Italian television in daily life discourses and practices, as well as its historical significance in Albania, Italy emerged as the conceptual realm onto which Albanians projected their unfulfilled aspirations and preferred destinations. Consequently, as the subsequent example illustrates, the consumption of Italian television linked Italy to a utopian perception of the West as a realm of abundant material wealth and limitless possibilities.

#### 4. Final Assessment

The migratory patterns of the late 20th century have significantly influenced Albanian-Italian ties. Italy became a pivotal supporter in Albania's pursuit of European integration, offering economic assistance, technical support, and diplomatic backing. The shared experiences cultivated a distinctive connection, marked by cultural exchanges and reciprocal collaboration. Nonetheless, obstacles persist, especially with migration restrictions and the assimilation of Albanian communities in Italy. The memory of these escapes persists in shaping bilateral discussions, highlighting the necessity for cooperative strategies to tackle modern challenges.

The migration of Albanians to Italy in the 1980s and 1990s exemplified a nation's pursuit of liberty and improved living conditions. Italy's dual status as a sanctuary and a cultural luminary profoundly influenced Albania's socioeconomic evolution. The interaction of migration, media influence, and cultural exchange has created a complex framework that continues to influence the identities and relationships of both nations. As Albania and Italy confront the problems of the 21st century, the insights acquired.

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