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## Under the Shadow of Repression: The Human Cost of Escaping the Communist Regime of Albania

### Introduction

The period from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s in Albania stands as a grim testament to the extremes of state power under the communist regime of Enver Hoxha. During this period, Albania was one of the most isolated countries in the world, governed by a repressive apparatus that left little room for personal freedom or dissent. The government's influence extended to every aspect of daily life, supported by an extensive surveillance network that mirrored, and in some ways surpassed, those seen in other authoritarian regimes of the time, such as East Germany's Stasi<sup>1</sup>. Under this regime, the act of attempting to escape the country was criminalised as an unprecedented act of treason, surpassing even murder in its severity. The penalties for escaping were brutal, as those who were captured were often executed on the spot or sentenced to labour camps notorious for their inhumane conditions. The sentence extended to the families, who were detained, stripped of their assets and forced into harsh internment.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Bruce (2003). *The Prelude to Nationwide Surveillance in East Germany: Stasi Operations and Threat Perceptions, 1945–1953*. "Journal of Cold War Studies", 5(2), pp. 3–31.

Despite these severe consequences, many Albanians chose to risk everything in their pursuit of freedom. This study aims to understand the motives behind these escape attempts, examining the complex interplay of sociopolitical context, personal psychological factors, and the universal human drive for freedom. Furthermore, the importance of this research goes beyond documenting a historical phenomenon. It is fundamentally linked to the field of transitional justice, which is the process by which societies that have experienced systematic human rights abuses seek to address the legacy of such regimes, often through legal and non-legal mechanisms that include prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations, and institutional reforms<sup>2</sup>. This area is not only about addressing past injustices, but also about laying the foundations for a more just and equitable society moving forward.

In the context of Albania, transitional justice involves accounting for human rights violations committed by the communist regime, including the harsh repression of personal freedoms and the brutal punishment of those who sought to escape. Understanding the motivations and experiences of those who attempted to flee is critical for several reasons. First, it gives a full picture of the regime's abuses, highlighting the extreme measures individuals were willing to take to escape repression. Second, it provides insights into the psychological and social impacts of living under such a regime, both for individuals who attempted to flee and for their families, who often endured most of the state's punishment.

Moreover, by examining these escape attempts through the lens of transitional justice, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how societies recover from periods of extreme repression<sup>3</sup>. In many cases, the narratives of those who resisted either through escape or other forms of defiance play a crucial role in shaping a nation's collective memory and informing the processes of truth-telling and reconciliation. These narratives challenge official histories that may seek to minimise or justify the regime's actions, offering alternative perspectives that are essential for a truer and more comprehensive understanding of the past. This study hypothesises that individual acts of defiance, such as escape attempts from the communist regime, are not isolated expressions of personal desperation, but rather politically significant acts that expose the structural violence of authoritarianism and act as a catalyst for transitional justice. Although personal in execution, these acts collectively embody a form of resistance, reveal the depth of repression faced under the regime, and serve as a critical building block in the countries' transitional justice efforts. These efforts will then

<sup>2</sup> P. De Greiff (2012). *Theorizing transitional justice*. "Nomos", 51, pp. 31-77.

<sup>3</sup> P. Arthur (2009). *How "Transitions" Reshaped Human Rights: A Conceptual History of Transitional Justice*. "Human Rights Quarterly", 31(2), pp. 321-367.

help to reframe national memory, demand accountability, and foster societal resilience against future authoritarianism.

The study of escape attempts under the Albanian regime has implications for the ongoing discourse on human rights and justice in post-authoritarian societies. As Albania continues to confront its communist past, the stories of those who risked everything for freedom highlight the enduring consequences of repression and the importance of recognising and addressing these legacies in search of justice. Transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions or remembrance efforts, can benefit from including these personal stories, ensuring that the voices of those who resisted are not lost in the process of national healing.

Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of transitional justice in preventing the recurrence of such abuses. By critically examining the factors that led to oppression and the ways individuals resisted, this study can inform contemporary efforts to build more stable and equitable societies. Understanding the motives behind acts of opposing authoritarian rule is not only essential for addressing past mistakes but also for fostering a culture of rights and accountability that can protect against future violations.

In summary, this study of escape attempts from Albania during the 1970s and early 1990s is more than a historical investigation; it is a contribution to the ongoing project of transitional justice in Albania and beyond. Exploring the intersection of personal agency, state repression, and the pursuit of justice, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the past and inform the processes that aim to build a more just and humane future.

## Literature Review

The phenomenon of escape attempts under totalitarian regimes has been the subject of extensive research. Studies on East Germany's Stasi, the Soviet Union, and other authoritarian states have highlighted the psychological, social, and political factors that drive individuals to flee. Theoretical perspectives on authoritarianism, resistance, and the psychology of escape provide a foundation for understanding the Albanian context. However, the unique aspects of Albania's extreme isolation and the severity of its punitive measures require a focused study.

The literature on attempts to escape authoritarian regimes and transitional justice processes spans multiple disciplines, including history, political science, psychology, and human rights studies. This review will examine key themes within this body of literature, focusing on escape motives, mechanisms of state repression, and the role of transitional justice in addressing past abuses.

The phenomenon of escape attempts under authoritarian regimes has been extensively studied, especially in the context of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Researchers have examined the motives behind these acts, often identifying a complex interplay of sociopolitical factors and personal circumstances. In *The Rush to German Unity*, Konrad H. Jarausch (2023) highlights the desperation of individuals living under the oppressive East German regime, where fleeing was seen as a last resort for those seeking freedom<sup>4</sup>. Jarausch argues that the desire for freedom, coupled with the harsh realities of living in a state of repression, prompted a significant number of escape attempts. Similarly, Hein de Haas, in *A Theory of Migration: Aspiration-Ability Framework* (2021), notes that common motivators for escape included a deep sense of hopelessness, fear of persecution, and a strong desire for a better future<sup>5</sup>.

In addition, research by Richard H. Dana (2007) highlights the psychological dimensions of escape, suggesting that trauma and fear can push individuals to take extreme risks<sup>6</sup>. Their work reveals that the emotional burden of living in an oppressive environment can lead to a “fight or flight” response/conclusion, where individuals weigh the potential consequences of escape against the unbearable conditions they face every day. Literature on authoritarianism frequently examines the mechanisms employed by states to maintain control and suppress dissent. In her work on totalitarian regimes, Hannah Arendt showed how pervasive surveillance, propaganda, and the criminalisation of dissent create an environment of fear that stifles individual agency<sup>7</sup>. The Albanian regime, with its extensive network of informants and secret police (Sigurimi), illustrates these tactics. Scholars such as Heidi Boghosian in writings on self-censorship and expression have analysed how such mechanisms not only prevent escape but also reinforce the state’s narrative of loyalty and patriotism<sup>8</sup>.

The legal framework surrounding escape attempts is another critical area of study. Legal scholars such as Mark Osiel (1997) have examined how

<sup>4</sup> K.H. Jarausch (2023). *The rush for German unity*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

<sup>5</sup> H. de Haas (2021). *A theory of migration: the aspiration-ability framework*. “Comparative Migration Studies”, 9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>.

<sup>6</sup> R.H. Dana (2007). *Refugee assessment practices and cultural competence training*. In: J.P. Wilson, C.S. Tang (eds.). *Cross-Cultural Assessment of Psychological Trauma and PTSD*. International and Cultural Psychology Series. Springer. Boston, MA. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-70990-1\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-70990-1_5).

<sup>7</sup> H. Arendt (1966). *The origin of totalitarianism*. World Publishing Company.

<sup>8</sup> H. Boghosian (2021, July 10). *How the fear of government surveillance affects our behavior*. Literary Center. <https://lithub.com/how-fear-of-government-surveillance-influences-our-behavior> [accessed: 02.12.2024].

authoritarian regimes construct laws to justify their repressive actions<sup>9</sup>. In Albania, the escape was legally classified as treason, thus legitimising extreme punishments and social isolation. This legal dimension underscores the importance of understanding how laws can be manipulated to serve the interests of those in power while punishing individuals for seeking freedom<sup>10</sup>.

Transitional justice is an essential framework for understanding how societies can address the legacies of authoritarian rule. Researchers such as Naomi Roht-Arriaza have described various transitional justice mechanisms, including truth commissions, prosecutions, and reparations, emphasising the need to confront the past to build a more just future<sup>11</sup>. In the context of Albania, transitional justice processes have been complicated by the lack of recognition and accountability for the abuses suffered during the communist era. Furthermore, research by Mihaela Mihai explores the role of truth commissions in facilitating dialogue about past human rights abuses and fostering national reconciliation. Her findings suggest that incorporating the narratives of fugitives and victims into these processes is vital for creating a comprehensive story and fostering healing within society. In this context, criminal proceedings will support the principle of equal respect and concern for both victims and perpetrators, which can help shape important political emotions of citizens. Moreover, using the law to address public discontent and resentment ensures that the rule of law is maintained and not compromised<sup>12</sup>. The importance of personal narratives is also highlighted by scholars such as Kieran McEvoy (2007), who argue that the stories of individuals who resisted or attempted to escape are crucial to understanding the broader implications of state violence and repression<sup>13</sup>.

The psychological impacts of living under authoritarian regimes and the aftereffects of escape attempts have attracted increasing attention in recent years. Researchers such as Judith Herman (1992) have explored the concept

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<sup>9</sup> S.H. Whiting (2017). *The authoritarian "rule of law" and the legitimacy of the regime*. "Comparative Political Studies", 50(14), pp. 1907–1940. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414016688008>.

<sup>10</sup> G.M. Wilson. (1985). Review of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* [by B. Anderson]. "The American Historical Review", 90(4), pp. 903–904. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1858850>.

<sup>11</sup> N. Roht-Arriaza (2006). *The Pinochet Effect: Transnational Justice in the Age of Human Rights*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

<sup>12</sup> M. Mihal (2011). *Socialization of negative emotions: Transitional criminal trials in the service of democracy*. "Oxford Journal of Legal Studies", 31(1), pp. 111–131.

<sup>13</sup> K. McEvoy (2007). *Beyond Legalism: Towards a Thicker Understanding of Transitional Justice*. "Journal of Law and Society", 34(4), pp. 411–440. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6478.2007.00399.>

of trauma and its long-term effects on individuals and communities<sup>14</sup>. The core tension of psychological trauma lies in the conflict between the desire to deny terrible events and the desire to talk openly about them. Survivors of atrocities often recount their experiences in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented way, which can undermine their credibility and at the same time serve the dual purposes of telling the truth and concealment. When the truth is acknowledged, survivors can begin the healing process. However, secrecy often prevails, and the traumatic event emerges not through words but as a symptom<sup>15</sup>. The stories of the fugitives often reveal deep psychological wounds that come from both the oppressive environment and the dangers associated with escape. Studies on resilience and coping mechanisms, such as those conducted by Michael Ungar (2013), highlight how individuals navigate their experiences of trauma and develop strategies to cope with adversity<sup>16</sup>. Understanding these psychological dimensions is essential for informing mental health support and transitional justice initiatives, ensuring that the needs of survivors and their families are addressed after oppression.

Comparative studies of escape attempts across different authoritarian contexts provide valuable insights into shared patterns and unique factors that shape individual decisions to flee. For example, Hazel Smith (2015) analyses North Korean defectors, drawing parallels with experiences in Eastern Europe<sup>17</sup>. By examining different contexts, researchers can identify broader themes related to authoritarianism, state violence, and the human capacity for resistance. These comparative perspectives also inform the development of transitional justice frameworks that are sensitive to the specific historical and cultural contexts of affected societies. By learning from the experiences of other countries, Albania can better navigate its transitional justice processes and ensure that the voices of those who resisted are an integral part of its past narrative.

The literature on attempts to escape authoritarian regimes and transitional justice reveals a complex combination of sociopolitical, psychological, and legal factors.

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<sup>14</sup> J. Herman (1992). *Trauma and Healing*. Basic Books. M. D. New York.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> M. Ungar (2013). *Resilience, trauma, context, and culture*. "Trauma, Violence, and Abuse", 14(3), pp. 255–266. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838013487805>.

<sup>17</sup> H. Smith (2015). *North Korea: Markets and Military Rule*. Cambridge University Press.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in historical analysis and interpretive inquiry to examine the phenomenon of escape attempts from communist Albania during the 1970s to the early 1990s. The selected time frame is not intended to underplay the importance or frequency of escape attempts in earlier or later periods, but rather to highlight a particularly severe phase in Albania's political and economic isolation. Following the breakdown of diplomatic and ideological relations with both the Soviet Union in the early 1961 and the People's Republic of China by 1978, Albania entered a period of extreme autarky. During this era, the country experienced profound international isolation, the cessation of nearly all foreign aid and development assistance, and an intensified economic decline marked by widespread poverty, repression, and stagnation. These conditions provide essential context for understanding the desperation and motivations behind escape attempts during this period.

The research draws on three principal methodological components: archival and documentary analysis, theoretical literature, and semi-structured interviews. Primary and secondary historical sources, including declassified government documents, legal codes, official propaganda, and reports from human rights organisations, provide a structural understanding of state policy regarding border control, surveillance, and the punishment of escape attempts. These sources are further contextualised through academic literature on authoritarian regimes, mechanisms of repression, collective memory, and the sociology of resistance.

Second, interviews were conducted with individuals who attempted to flee during the communist period, former political prisoners, and family members of those affected. These semi-structured interviews were not directly quoted in the text; instead, their content was incorporated as general notes to inform the thematic understanding of the human drive for freedom and the personal cost of defiance. The aim was not to build case studies from individual stories but to extract recurring emotional, psychological, and experiential patterns that complemented the broader historical and theoretical analysis.

This methodology combines historical analysis, qualitative interviews, theoretical frameworks, and comparative analysis to explore the motivations and experiences of individuals who attempted to leave Albania during the 1970s and early 1990s. It ensures that while survivor testimonies are not explicitly cited, they are meaningfully embedded in the analytical narrative, contributing to a richer and more holistic depiction of the struggle for freedom under totalitarianism. This approach not only aims to illuminate the specific dynamics of Albanian society but also aims to contribute to



a broader understanding of escape attempts and the search for freedom in the face of oppression.

## Historical context

### Political climate in Albania during the 1970s–1990s

To understand the political context and control mechanisms employed by the Albanian communist regime, it is essential to apply the framework of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Totalitarian regimes are characterised by centralised control, where the state seeks to dominate all aspects of public and private life. This includes the rise of a cult of personality around the leader, an example that was highlighted in Albania by Enver Hoxha, whose image and ideology permeated every aspect of society. The main characteristics of totalitarianism include comprehensive surveillance, where the state uses extensive monitoring systems to suppress dissent and implement control policies<sup>18</sup>. The Albanian regime, for example, used the Sigurimi, or secret police, to instil fear and maintain control over the population. The mechanisms of social control were further reinforced through propaganda that portrayed the regime as the ultimate guardian of national identity and security, while censorship ensured that alternative views and dissident voices were silenced. The use of informants within communities fostered an environment of mistrust, where individuals were encouraged to spy on each other, thereby eroding social cohesion and discouraging resistance<sup>19</sup>.

The period of the 1970s and early 90s in Albania was characterised by the strict authoritarian rule of Enver Hoxha and the Albanian Party of Labor. Hoxha, who led the country from 1944 until his death in 1985, implemented a rigid Stalinist model of governance that prioritised ideological purity and absolute loyalty to the state. The political climate was marked by a widespread atmosphere of fear, repression, and isolation. Any dissent against the regime was met with harsh punishment, including imprisonment, torture, and execution<sup>20</sup>. The country's growing isolation intensified following its break with both the Soviet Union and later China – its two main

<sup>18</sup> E. Abazi, A. Doja. (2016). *From the Communist Perspective: Cultural Hegemony and Folkloric Manipulation in Albanian Studies under Socialism*. "Communist and Post-Communist Studies", 49(2), 2016, pp. 163–178.

<sup>19</sup> S.P. Ramet (2023). *Central Eastern Europe and the Politics of Communism, Culture and Society 1943–1991*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003311515>.

<sup>20</sup> S.R. Bowers (1989). *Stalinism in Albania: Domestic Affairs under Enver Hoxha*. "Faculty publications and presentations", 87. [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1086&context=gov\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/view-content.cgi?article=1086&context=gov_fac_pubs) [accessed: 28.10.2025].



communist allies. These alliances had previously provided Albania with essential technological advancements, agricultural machinery, medicine, and access to international trade<sup>21</sup>. The rupture of these relationships left Albania increasingly cut off from the outside world, exacerbating its economic and political vulnerabilities.

Early analytical accounts, such as those by Albanian émigré Stavro Skendi, highlight the decline in Albania's stability following the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Skendi noted that Albania had never achieved economic self-sufficiency and remained chronically dependent on external support. While China attempted to fill the void left by the Soviets, it lacked the technical capacity and specialised workforce necessary to sustain Albania's development, resulting in several unfinished projects and rising unemployment<sup>22</sup>. This economic stagnation, coupled with growing political isolation and regime-driven paranoia, fostered a hostile, dog-eat-dog environment. These conditions further justified and intensified the desire among citizens to flee the country, as the stark realities of life under one of Europe's most repressive regimes became increasingly unbearable.

### Factors Affecting Escape Attempts

In the oppressive climate of repression during Albania's communist regime, the government created a legal framework that harshly criminalised any attempt to leave the country. At the centre of this framework was Article 28 of the Criminal Code, which explicitly classified escape attempts as an act of treason against the state. This categorisation raised the severity of such actions to a level that was considered more flagrant than even murder, reflecting the regime's determination to maintain control and suppress dissent. Sentences for escaping were severe and often included execution, long-term imprisonment, or imprisonment in brutal labour camps, where conditions were inhumane and degrading<sup>23</sup>.

The social conditions in Albania during the 1970s and early 1990s were marked by deep difficulties, reflecting the oppressive policies of the regime and the economic challenges of the time. Poverty was widespread as the government's focus on ideological alignment often came at the expense of the population's well-being. Economic mismanagement led to shortages of

<sup>21</sup> P.R. Prifti (1973). *Albania and the Sino-Soviet Conflict*. "Studies in Comparative Communism", 6(3), pp. 241–279.

<sup>22</sup> S. Skendi (1962). *Albania and the Sino-Soviet conflict*. Foreign Affairs. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/1962-04-01/albania-and-sino-soviet-conflict> [accessed: 05.10.2024].

<sup>23</sup> E. Thomani (2017). *Execution of life imprisonment in Albania, in violation of fundamental human rights*. "Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences", 8(1), p. 169.

basic needs, including food, clothing, and medical supplies, which further exacerbated the suffering of ordinary citizens. The state-controlled economy prioritised heavy industry and collectivisation, neglecting agricultural production and leading to widespread malnutrition among the population<sup>24</sup>.

Access to education was extremely limited and tightly controlled by the state, with the curriculum filled with communist ideologies. This meant that, although a certain level of education was available, it often lacked depth and critical thinking, serving primarily to indoctrinate rather than empower young people. Cultural expression was also limited; Artists, writers, and intellectuals were expected to conform to regime standards and promote state-approved messages. Any deviation from this rate can result in severe consequences, including imprisonment or forced labour. As a result, Albania's rich cultural heritage was stifled, leaving the population with little opportunity for creative or intellectual engagement<sup>25</sup>.

The regime's isolationist policies played a significant role in preserving this oppressive environment. By limiting communication with the outside world and controlling the flow of information, the Albanian government was effectively protected from international scrutiny. The regime's propaganda efforts painted a distorted picture of life in Albania, portraying it as a thriving socialist state while hiding the realities of poverty and repression. Consequently, the international community remained largely unaware of the scale of human rights violations occurring within the country, allowing the regime to act with impunity. By cutting off access to information about life abroad, the Albanian government effectively prevented its citizens from gaining knowledge on political and economic developments in neighbouring countries and beyond. This lack of access not only hampered the population's understanding of alternative models of governance but also reinforced a narrative of fear surrounding the outside world<sup>26</sup>. The regime used propaganda to portray the international community as a hostile entity, fraught with dangers that threatened national security and stability. This portrayal created a grim dichotomy between the supposedly idyllic life in Albania and the chaotic realities beyond its borders. As a result, many Albanians were

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<sup>24</sup> H. Banja (2017). *The economy of Albania in the course of twentieth-century history*. EMAL Publishing House.

<sup>25</sup> B. Meta, E. Frashëri (2018). *Framework Study: On the system of prisons, internment and forced labor during the communist regime in Albania with a focus on the establishment of a memorial museum in the former Tepelena internment camp*. <https://dokumen.tips/reader/f/studim-korniz-mbi-sistemin-e-burgjeve-studim-korniz-mbi-sistemin-e-burgjeve> [accessed: 13.01.2025].

<sup>26</sup> D. Dani (2024, November 21). *Agitators in Albanian communism: Face-to-face propaganda*. Politics & Rights. <https://politicsrights.com/agitators-albanian-communism-propaganda> [accessed: 02.12.2024].

led to believe that any attempt to engage with the outside world could result in dire consequences, further entrenching their loyalty to the regime out of fear of the unknown. This combination of harsh social conditions, lack of basic rights, and a widespread atmosphere of fear fuelled a sense of despair among the population. Many Albanians felt trapped in a system that offered no path for change or escape, leading to a deep surrender because of their circumstances. The desire for freedom remained strong, but the overwhelming reality of repression and deprivation made it difficult for individuals to imagine a life beyond the limits of regime control<sup>27</sup>.

The constant stress of potential state surveillance, combined with the traumatic experiences of those who had been imprisoned or lost their loved ones to the regime, led many people to conclude that the risks associated with escape were preferable to the constant psychological torment of life in Albania<sup>28</sup>. This phenomenon highlights the extent to which fear, and trauma can affect individuals' perceptions of danger and agency, mirroring the experiences of individuals in East Germany, where fear of the Stasi led many people to attempt dangerous escapes<sup>29</sup>.

The regime's brutal punishments for attempting to escape further exacerbated the psychological burden on potential fugitives. Many faced a profound moral dilemma: the desire for freedom weighed against the potential consequences for their loved ones. Interviews showed that this fear was a significant obstacle for some, while for others, it became a motivating factor that drove them towards escape. In the context of psychological resilience, the overwhelming need for personal freedom often outweighed fear of punitive consequences, illustrating the complex interplay between fear, trauma, and the drive for liberation.

Despite the psychological consequences of living under an oppressive regime, many individuals showed tremendous resilience and hope in their quest for freedom. Resilience refers to the ability to recover from adversity and adapt to its conditions<sup>30</sup>. For many fugitives, the desire for a better life acted as a catalyst for this resilience. Personal stories told during interviews highlight how individuals maintained a sense of freedom and determination,

<sup>27</sup> J. Vullnetari (2019). 'Dancing in the Wolf's Mouth': Border Building Through Everyday Life in Socialist Albania. "Journal of Historical Geography", 63, pp. 82–93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2018.11.005>.

<sup>28</sup> P. Prifti (1978) *Socialist Albania since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Developments*. The MIT Press. Cambridge, MA, pp. 18–20.

<sup>29</sup> G. Bruce (2003). *The Prelude to Nationwide Surveillance in East Germany: Stasi Operations and Threat Perceptions 1945–1953*. "Journal of Cold War Studies", 5(2), pp. 3–31.

<sup>30</sup> B.H. French et al. (2020). *Toward a psychological framework of radical healing in communities of color. Toward a psychological framework of radical healing in communities of color*. "Counseling Psychologist", 48(1), pp. 14–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000019843506>.

often envisioning a future free from oppression. This inner strength was crucial to enabling them to navigate the complex and dangerous paths to escape. Psychological resilience is characterised by the ability to maintain mental well-being despite adverse circumstances. For many Albanian escapees, the hope for a brighter future served as a powerful motivator, enabling them to endure the hardships associated with their oppressive environment. This concept of sustainability aligns with findings from studies on defectors from other totalitarian regimes, such as North Korea, where individuals often cite the belief in a better life as a driving force behind their decisions to leave<sup>31</sup>. Relying on personal strength and the support of their communities, the fugitives cultivated resilience that propelled them toward their goal of freedom.

The longing for connection and belonging emerged as a significant motivator for many escapees. Interviews indicated that individuals yearned for social interactions, relationships, and cultural experiences that were stifled under the regime<sup>32</sup>. The prospect of reuniting with family members who had successfully emigrated or forming new connections in more open societies inspired individuals to take the risk of escape. This desire for connection is critical to understanding the psychological factors at play, as the isolation imposed by the regime increased the ardent desire for a sense of belonging and community<sup>33</sup>.

### Aspirations Beyond the Iron Curtain

The exodus from communist Albania during the late 20th century was fueled by a combination of attraction factors that lured individuals to seek a better life abroad. These factors offered the promise of improved personal freedom, economic opportunities, and social welfare. They played a crucial role in shaping the motives of those who risked everything to escape. One of the most powerful factors of attraction that drove Albanians to flee was the desire for personal freedom and democratic governance<sup>34</sup>. Western democracies,

<sup>31</sup> J. Kim, E. Park (2024). *Breathing the Democratic Air: The Journey of North Korean Refugees to Learn Sociocultural About Democracy*. "International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education", pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2024.2401330>.

<sup>32</sup> I. Idrizi (2021). *Debates about the communist past as a personal fiefdom: the long shadow of the Hoxha regime in Albania*. In: *Forum of Cultures of History* (27.04.2021). DOI: 10.25626/0127.

<sup>33</sup> L. Lula (2021). *Albania 30 years after the fall of the most radical communist regime: Has Justice been restored?* Institute for a Greater Europe. <https://institutegreatereurope.com/albania-30-years-after-the-fall-of-the-most-radical-communist-regime-has-justice-been-restored/> [accessed: 02.10.2024].

<sup>34</sup> R. King (2004). *Albania: Relations between population, poverty, development, internal and international migration*. "Journal of Psychiatry", 103(3–4), pp. 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.3406/medit.2004.3365>.

particularly those in Europe and North America, were seen as sanctuaries that upheld individual rights, political pluralism, and freedom of expression. For Albanians, who had endured decades of political repression and surveillance under Enver Hoxha's authoritarian regime, the opportunity to live in a free society was a strong motivator. The allure of democratic governance and personal autonomy reflected similar trends observed in other communist states, such as East Germany, where citizens were attracted to the freedoms available in West Germany<sup>35</sup>. The promise of a limitless life from the totalitarian state capture offered hope to those who were disappointed by the regime's ideological and political rigidity.

The prospect of economic prosperity was another major attractive factor that influenced the emigration of many Albanians to Western countries. Under the communist regime, Albania's economy was isolated, stagnant, and quite limited in terms of opportunities for personal or family advancement<sup>36</sup>. In comparison, the economies of neighbouring Italy and Greece, as well as countries further afield in Western Europe and North America, offered a profound contrast to open labour markets, opportunities for entrepreneurship, and the chance to achieve a higher standard of living<sup>37</sup>. The fugitives were motivated by the hope of securing employment in industries that were expanding abroad, such as manufacturing, agriculture, or services. This factor of economic attraction closely aligns with the motives of the fugitives from East Germany, where the profound contrast between the socialist economy of the East and the capitalist prosperity of West Germany prompted numerous attempts to cross the border in search of a better life.

An important pull factor for many Albanians was the prospect of reuniting with family members who had already fled or emigrated to foreign countries. Transnational social networks that were formed because of previous waves of migration provided vital support to new refugees, providing not only emotional but also practical resources such as housing, financial aid, and guidance on how to integrate into the host country. Family reunification was not only a matter of personal desire, but also a critical survival strategy, as it provided the fugitives with a social safety net upon arrival in

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<sup>35</sup> R.J. Dalton (1994). *Communists and Democrats: Democratic Positions in the Two Germanys*. "British Journal of Political Science", 24(4), pp. 469–493. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/194030>.

<sup>36</sup> M. Johnson, M. Dervishi (2021). *Isolation in Albanian economic thought*. In: *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology: Including a Symposium on Economists and Authoritarian Regimes in the 20th Century* (Vol. 38B, pp. 111–129). Emerald Publishing.

<sup>37</sup> Z. Dermendzhieva, R.K. Filer (2009). *The case of Albania*. In: M. Kahanec, K. Zimmermann (eds.), *EU Labor Markets After Post-Enlargement Migration*. Springer. Berlin-Heidelberg. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-02242-5\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-02242-5_11).

their destination country<sup>38</sup>. This factor highlights the importance of social capital in migration decisions, as individuals were often more willing to take significant risks when they had the prospect of reconnecting with loved ones who had successfully made the journey. This pattern was similarly observed among East German fugitives whose attempts to reunite with relatives in West Germany highlighted the importance of family ties in shaping migration patterns<sup>39</sup>.

In addition to political and economic factors, the desire to participate in vibrant cultural and social environments played a role in motivating many Albanians to leave. The communist regime imposed significant restrictions on cultural expression and personal development, prompting many individuals to yearn for societies where they could freely engage in artistic, intellectual, and personal pursuits. Western countries, with their open societies, cultural diversity, and opportunities for personal growth, presented an attractive alternative to the suffocating conditions in Albania<sup>40</sup>. The desire for cultural freedom and social engagement was also reflected in the fugitives from North Korea, where deserters often expressed a desire for the artistic and cultural wealth available in South Korea. For many, the attraction of living in a society that fostered creativity, expression, and individuality was as strong as the desire for political or economic freedom<sup>41</sup>.

Despite the strict control exercised by the Albanian communist regime over the leakage of information, individuals seeking to escape often found ways to get news from the outside world. Information about life in Western countries played a crucial role in shaping the aspirations of those contemplating escape, providing glimpses of the freedoms and opportunities that awaited them<sup>42</sup>. Although direct communication with the outside world was severely restricted by the regime, many Albanians managed to stay connected with relatives and friends who had fled abroad. These communications, often facilitated by trusted intermediaries, allowed individuals who planned to escape to receive letters and messages detailing living conditions,

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<sup>38</sup> Ç. Duro, F. Kolleshi (2023). *Albanian migration during the communist period, based on economic and political factors*. "International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management", 11(9).

<sup>39</sup> B. Glorius (2010). *Go West: Internal Migration in Germany After Reunification*. "Belgium", 1–2, pp. 281–292. <https://doi.org/10.4000/belgeo.6470>.

<sup>40</sup> D.C. Thomas (2005). *Ideas of human rights, the extinction of communism and the end of the Cold War*. "Journal of Cold War Studies", 7(2), pp. 110–141.

<sup>41</sup> R.C. Hassig, K. Oh (2008). *North Korea's clash of cultures*. "North Korean Review", 4(2), pp. 68–82.

<sup>42</sup> A. Doksani, D. Hysa, K. Bozo (2021). *Media in transition: Reflections from three decades ago*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/albanien/17277.pdf> [accessed: 21.01.2025].



job opportunities, and freedoms available in countries such as Italy, Greece, Australia, and the United States<sup>43</sup>. These messages, while often brief and monitored, provided essential information that shaped the expectations of those contemplating escaping. Stories of economic prosperity, educational opportunities, and personal freedoms in the West helped reinforce the pull factors that drive migration.

In addition to formal communication channels, informal networks played a key role in spreading information about life outside Albania. Families who had successfully escaped often communicated clandestinely with those who remained in the country, sharing stories of their experiences abroad and encouraging others to follow in their footsteps. Word-of-mouth information, passed through secret networks, created a sense of opportunity for those contemplating escaping and provided a critical counter-narrative to the regime's propaganda<sup>44</sup>. This informal flow of information was crucial in maintaining hope among future fugitives, providing them with a glimpse of the freedoms and opportunities that awaited them beyond Albania's borders.

Foreign radio broadcasts, especially from stations like Radio Free Europe, were another vital source of information for many Albanians<sup>45</sup>. Despite the regime's attempts to block or restrict access to these broadcasts, many individuals found ways to listen to news and programs that offered a broader perspective on political developments and social conditions in the West<sup>46</sup>. These broadcasts, along with smuggled literature and publications from abroad, helped create an awareness of the opportunities available in free societies. Access to this information was often limited and dangerous, but for those who managed to obtain it, the impact on their escape decision was profound.

Ultimately, the desire to leave Albania outweighed the risks for many individuals. The promise of a better life in the West – whether motivated by personal freedom, economic opportunity, or family reunification – was

<sup>43</sup> P. Prifti (1978). *Socialist Albania since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Developments*. The MIT Press. Cambridge MA, pp. 18–20.

<sup>44</sup> B. Meta, E. Frashëri (2018). *Framework Study: On the system of prisons, internment and forced labor during the communist regime in Albania with a focus on the establishment of a memorial museum in the former Tepelena internment camp*. <https://dokumen.tips/reader/f/studim-korniz-mbi-sistemin-e-burgjeve-studim-korniz-mbi-sistemin-e-burgjeve> [accessed: 13.01.2025].

<sup>45</sup> A. Puddington (2000). *Freedom of Broadcasting: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Freedom*. University Press of Kentucky. [https://web.archive.org/web/20200525173757id\\_/https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=upk\\_cultural\\_history](https://web.archive.org/web/20200525173757id_/https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=upk_cultural_history) [accessed: 21.01.2025].

<sup>46</sup> E. Pistrick (2015). *Listening to the "Soulless Man": Outline for an audience-focused broadcast story in communist Albania*. "Musicology", 15, pp. 141–160. <https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ1621141P>.

strong enough to push individuals to take significant risks, regardless of the potential consequences for themselves and their families. Interviews with the fugitives revealed.

a common thread: the belief that the potential rewards of living abroad, especially in countries such as Italy, Australia, and the United States, far outweighed the risks posed by the regime's harsh punishment for escape attempts<sup>47</sup>. This strong desire for freedom and opportunity, combined with the limited but influential flow of information from outside, shaped the motives of many Albanians seeking to flee.

## Conclusion

Studying the motivations and experiences of individuals who attempted to leave Albania during the 1970s and early 1990s is essential for several reasons. The research on these escape attempts provides valuable insights into the mechanisms of authoritarian control and the various forms of resistance used by individuals under repressive regimes<sup>48</sup>. By analysing the psychological, social, and political factors that influenced escape attempts, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how authoritarianism works and how individuals navigate the complexities of oppression. Moreover, this study hypothesised that the escape attempts were not merely acts of personal desperation but politically significant forms of resistance. Despite facing the threat of execution, imprisonment or the persecution of their families, many Albanians chose to flee, expressing a form of defiance that in a way challenged the regime's authority but also asserted their claim to personal dignity and freedom. Therefore, these acts offer a crucial insight into the realities of life lived under totalitarian rule. This understanding contributes not only to historical knowledge but also informs current discussions about authoritarianism and resistance in contemporary contexts, where similar patterns of repression can be observed in various countries worldwide.

As Albania continues to grapple with its past, acknowledging the narratives of those who escaped or attempted to escape during the communist regime contributes to the broader discourse on transitional justice. These narratives challenge official histories that have long ignored or downplayed

<sup>47</sup> E. Petreska, F. Sinoruka (2022). *The Journey of Freedom: The Brave Escape of an Albanian Family from Oppression*. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/13/freedom-voyage-one-albanian-familys-daring-escape-from-repression/> [accessed: 21.01.2025].

<sup>48</sup> M. Michaelsen, K. Ruijgrok, K. (2023). *The Long Stretch of Autocracy: Explaining the Host Country's Influences on Transnational Repression*. "Democratization", 31(2), pp. 290–314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2023.2267448>.

the regime's abuses, instead offering counter-histories rooted in lived experience. By recognising escape attempts as legitimate acts of resistance, policymakers and transitional justice practitioners can better address the moral and psychological wounds inflicted by the regime. Understanding the motivations behind these escape attempts can help shape transitional justice mechanisms that address the needs of survivors and promote healing within communities affected by past abuses. Moreover, documenting the experiences of fugitives serves not only as a form of historical preservation but also as a moral imperative<sup>49</sup>. These personal accounts offer critical testimony that can educate future generations about the consequences of totalitarianism and the value of human rights<sup>50</sup>. In this way, the study reinforces the hypothesis that these escape attempts are emblematic of a broader human struggle for autonomy and justice that transcend borders and time periods.

In an era where discussions about migration, asylum, and human rights are increasingly important, studying the historical context of escape attempts offers crucial insights into the ongoing struggles for freedom faced by individuals worldwide. The motivations that drive people to flee oppressive regimes today often mirror those of past fugitives, emphasising the universal desire for freedom and security<sup>51</sup>. By contextualising contemporary issues in the historical context of past struggles, researchers and policymakers can better understand the complexities of migration and the importance of addressing the root causes of oppression. The experiences of those who sought freedom in Albania reflect a broader pattern of human aspirations that transcend cultural boundaries. Therefore, recognising these patterns can help to better understand contemporary forms of displacement and political resistance, while highlighting the imperative for justice mechanisms that honour the dignity of those who dare to challenge oppressive regimes.

The experiences of individuals fleeing Albania resonate with those of people in other repressive contexts, such as North Korea, Cuba, or Vietnam. These shared narratives reflect a collective struggle against authoritarianism, illustrating that the desire for freedom and justice is a common thread in human experience. By emphasising this universality, the research reinforces the notion that the quest for freedom is not isolated from any single culture

<sup>49</sup> J. Kasmi (2024). *Dealing with the Past and the Path to Transitional Justice: A Comparative Analysis of South Korea and Albania*. "Asian Politics and Politics", 16(1), pp. 57–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12727>.

<sup>50</sup> L. Lula (2021). *Albania 30 years after the fall of the most radical communist regime: Has Justice been restored?* Institute for a Greater Europe. <https://institutegreatereurope.com/albania-30-years-after-the-fall-of-the-most-radical-communist-regime-has-justice-been-restored/> [accessed: 02.10.2024].

<sup>51</sup> AIDSSH (2021). *Disappeared by the dictatorship*. [https://autoritetidosjeve.gov.al/uploads/TE-ZHUKURIT\\_ALB-finaal.pdf](https://autoritetidosjeve.gov.al/uploads/TE-ZHUKURIT_ALB-finaal.pdf) [accessed: 05.10.2024].

or nation; rather, it is a joint human effort that emerges as a response to repression. Seen through universal lenses, this research also underscores the relevance of transitional justice in a global context and reinforces the idea that informal acts of existence, such as escape, deserve recognition alongside more visible forms of oppression. This realisation serves to foster empathy and solidarity among individuals and communities who defend human rights around the world.

The exodus of Albanians during the communist period can be understood through a complex combination of driving and attracting factors that motivated individuals to seek freedom, economic opportunities, and reunification with family members abroad. Harsh political repression and economic stagnation in Albania acted as important driving factors, while the lure of personal freedoms, job prospects, and vibrant cultural life in Western countries served as strong pulling factors. Despite the regime's efforts to control the flow of information, many Albanians managed to learn about life outside their borders through clandestine communication networks, foreign broadcasts, and smuggled literature. Comparatively, the dynamics of Albania's flight were distinct in their geographical isolation and extreme levels of state repression, setting it apart from other totalitarian regimes such as East Germany. However, the common human desire for freedom and a better life overcame the dangers and dangers associated with fleeing, pushing many Albanians to undertake the perilous journey towards a new future. Despite the regime's efforts to control information, Albanians accessed glimpses of the outside world through clandestine channels, affirming the hypothesis that the very act of escape functioned as both a form of resistance and a political statement.

The implications of this research for Albania are profound. By affirming the political and the symbolic weight of these escape attempts, this study supports a more inclusive and empathetic approach to transitional justice. This approach integrates personal agency and human resilience, combining them with national reconciliation, human rights, and the preservation of memory. By addressing the past and promoting a culture of accountability, Albania can pave the way for a more just and inclusive society. Recognising the experiences of the fugitives and their families will not only honour their struggles but also contribute to the broader goal of preventing the recurrence of oppression and ensuring the protection of human rights for all citizens. The journey towards healing and reconciliation requires a collective commitment to remember the past and strive for a future based on freedom, justice, and dignity.

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## Abstract

The period of the 1970s and early 1990s in Albania under the communist regime was marked by severe restrictions on personal freedoms and pervasive state surveillance. The Albanian government of the time, mirroring systems such as the Stasi in East Germany, criminalised attempts to escape from the country, considering them the highest form of treason, surpassing even murder in severity. Those caught faced immediate execution or imprisonment in labour camps, while their families were detained, interned, stripped of their possessions, and subjected to harsh conditions.

This paper examines the motives behind the decision to flee, despite the severe consequences, in the context of sociopolitical factors, personal and collective psychological factors, and the human drive for freedom. Through a combination of historical analysis, interviews with survivors and their families, as well as theoretical frameworks on authoritarianism and resistance, this study aims to give a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of escape attempts under Albania's harsh communist regime. While the interviews conducted with individuals who attempted to flee and with former political prisoners are not directly quoted, they are incorporated as general notes to support and enrich the analysis of the quest for freedom.

Moreover, by examining these escape attempts through the lens of transitional justice, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how societies recover from periods of extreme repression. In many cases, the narratives of those who resisted, whether through escape or other forms of defiance, play a crucial role in shaping the collective memory of a nation and informing the processes of truth-telling and reconciliation. These narratives challenge official histories that may seek to downplay or justify the regime's actions, offering alternative perspectives that are essential for a more truthful and comprehensive understanding of the past. The experiences of those who sought freedom in Albania reflect a broader pattern of human aspirations that transcend cultural boundaries. By studying these experiences, we can draw important lessons that resonate in today's global landscape, where the fight for freedom and human rights remains ever relevant.

Pod cieniem represji: ludzki koszt ucieczki  
z komunistycznego reżimu Albanii

## Abstrakt

Okres od lat 70. do początku lat 90. w Albanii pod rządami komunistycznego reżimu charakteryzował się drastycznymi ograniczeniami wolności osobistych oraz wszechobecną inwigilacją państwową. Ówczesne władze Albanii, wzorując się m.in. na systemie Stasi w Niemczech Wschodnich, uznawały próby ucieczki z kraju za najwyższą formę zdrady, surowszą nawet niż morderstwo. Osoby schwytane podczas ucieczki były natychmiast rozstrzeliwane lub trafiały do obozów pracy, natomiast ich rodziny poddawano represjom: zatrzymaniu, internowaniu, konfiskacie mienia i skrajnie trudnym warunkom życia.

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje motywy podejmowania decyzji o ucieczce – mimo tak drastycznych konsekwencji – w kontekście czynników społeczno-politycznych, psychologicznych (zarówno indywidualnych, jak i zbiorowych) oraz uniwersalnego ludzkiego dążenia do wolności. W oparciu o analizę historyczną, rozmowy z ocalałymi oraz ich rodzinami, a także teorie dotyczące autorytaryzmu i oporu społecznego,

badanie to ma na celu ukazanie złożoności zjawiska prób ucieczek z Albanii w okresie ostrej represji. Przeprowadzone wywiady nie są cytowane bezpośrednio, lecz stanowią materiał pomocniczy, wzmacniający i uzupełniający analizę dążenia do wolności.

Ponadto, zastosowanie perspektywy sprawiedliwości tranzycyjnej pozwala lepiej zrozumieć procesy, w ramach których społeczeństwa podnoszą się po doświadczeniach skrajnej przemocy i opresji. Narracje osób, które stawiały opór – poprzez ucieczkę lub inne formy sprzeciwu – odgrywają kluczową rolę w kształtowaniu pamięci zbiorowej i w procesach dochodzenia prawdy oraz pojednania. Relacje te podważają oficjalne wersje historii, które często starają się pomniejszać bądź usprawiedliwiać działania reżimu, oferując alternatywne świadectwa niezbędne do pełniejszego zrozumienia przeszłości.

Doświadczenia osób poszukujących wolności w komunistycznej Albanii wpisują się w szerszy, ponadkulturowy wzorec ludzkich aspiracji. Analiza tych przypadków pozwala formułować uniwersalne wnioski, szczególnie istotne we współczesnym świecie, w którym walka o wolność i prawa człowieka pozostaje niezmiennie aktualna.

**Keywords:** transitional justice, totalitarian regimes, political persecution, collective memory, resistance, Albania

**Słowa kluczowe:** sprawiedliwość tranzycyjna, reżimy totalitarne, prześladowania polityczne, pamięć zbiorowa, opór, Albania

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