

The Albanian Renaissance



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"Protest in Albania was associated with requesting either a change of regime, or of government. It was often violent. Protesting was also 'totalitarian', people went out only in extremely large numbers, requesting complete solutions to their problems. MJAF! has influenced the change of that mentality: towards peaceful, often funny or sarcastic protests focused on a specific issue. The importance of the message replaced the importance of numbers."

Arbjan Mazniku

INTRODUCTION

Communist Albania under its long-time dictator Enver Hoxha was a fortress state, seeing enemies everywhere. There were regular purges, the death penalty was applied, and there were a large number of political prisoners. There were thousands of executions of political enemies and of enemies of communism. Albanians did not have the right to a passport until May 1990.

Two decades later Albania has undergone a dramatic transformation. And yet, few countries in Europe are less understood than this Adriatic republic. Gratuitous violence, organised crime, human trafficking, blood feuds and grinding poverty are the images that first come to mind when the country is mentioned. This is not all due to the particular ferocity of Enver Hoxha's communism. The first post-communist decade has also produced its fair share of dark images, culminating in the anarchy of 1997. It is this dark and difficult legacy which makes the story of Albania's recent transformation all the more remarkable.

This briefing is a short summary of this transformation; more can be found on the ESI website www.esiweb.org and in the documentary film *Albanian Renaissance* (2008).

ALBANIAN RENAISSANCE

The 2001 film "Slogans", based on a short story by Ylljet Alickaj, tells the true story of a teacher who is sent to a remote Albanian mountain village during the time of communism. In the absurd situation it portrays, pupils and teachers spend more time arranging rocks on mountains to form party slogans than they do learning. It is a gripping illustration of wasted efforts under Hoxha's regime.

But the film Slogans is also an illustration that things are in fact changing in Albania. As one critic noted:

"an Albanian film, Gjergj Xhuvani's Slogans (2001), was selected to play in the Director's Fortnight, which runs concurrently with the Cannes film festival. It is thought to be the first time that an Albanian film has played at Cannes, and the novelty continued when it was critically acclaimed. ... Meanwhile, Fatmir Koçi's Tirana Year Zero (2001) was in the official selection at Venice this August and won the international competition at Thessaloniki earlier this month. Albania, the world now knows, makes films."

After decades of stagnation under Hoxha's brand of extreme communism, Albania has shrugged off slogans and isolationism, and is now developing at a fast pace. The streets of Tirana, virtually devoid of cars 15 years ago, are now as packed as those in any European

capital. Tirana has changed its appearance and created an image as a clean city; brightly coloured houses and refurbished parks awaken people's belief that change is possible. The country that had once broken off relations with each of its major allies in turn, becoming a European version of Kim's North Korea, has now been invited to join NATO and aims to become one of the EU's next new members. Civic activism has replaced the violent protests of the 1990s. Politicians and bureaucrats are increasingly held accountable by a young, restless population eager for change.

The political culture is changing as well. Albanian politics used to be known as divisive and confrontational. Leading politicians contested election results, accused their opponents of corruption and eschewed any attempt at compromise. Recent months have been marked by encouraging signs that cooperation might increase. At an event on 28 April 2008 at the European Policy Centre in Brussels, Edi Rama, the Mayor of Tirana and leader of the opposition, called for a unified consensus between government and opposition to push Albania towards an application for EU membership:

"We will continue to strongly disagree on what is domestic, but we will continue to push, as the opposition, the government to take the risk, to be courageous and to go ahead with this application submission. [...] We have succeeded in creating a climate of cooperation with the focus on NATO integration, [...]. It was also the challenge; it was also the visible objective, which helped."

Just one week earlier, a set of constitutional amendments to introduce proportional representation in Parliament were approved with rare agreement between the Democratic and Socialist Parties. This is not only a sign of co-operation: electoral reform might also be a step towards ensuring that Albania's next elections can for the first time be judged "free and fair".

Parts of Albania's industry and infrastructure are an aging reminder of communist under-investment and mismanagement. New projects are therefore a particularly important aspect of the country's modernisation. Albania's one international airport, Tirana International Airport Nene Tereza, named after Mother Teresa, is one such project. In March 2007 the new facilities were inaugurated, including a brand new passenger terminal. That year saw an 18 percent increase in passengers and a 65 percent increase in the amount of baggage handled (Tirana International Airport). The construction of the Durrës-Prizren-Pristina highway, due to be completed by the end of next year, is another ambitious infrastructure project.

Since its transition from communism, Albania's economic performance has been impressive. The serious crisis following the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1997 proved to be a temporary interruption. A World Bank Labour Market Assessment from 2006 notes that "Albania's cumulative growth since the transition has been among the highest in the region. GDP is now roughly 35 percent higher than it was in 1990." It also reports that real GDP growth has been between 5 and 10 percent ever since the recovery from the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1998, averaging close to 8 percent "lifting roughly one quarter of the poor in 2002 out of poverty" by 2005 (World Bank).

One promising industry to emerge in recent years is tourism. An Albanian tourism promotion slogan advertises 'Europe's last secret'. Word of that secret is starting to spread. Unofficial data from the UNDP estimates the number of international arrivals at 1.15 million for 2006 (UNDP 2007). Many of those who visit the beaches around Vlora and Durres are Albanians residing abroad or citizens of Kosovo. Nevertheless, in light of the boom in investment seen in other countries along the Adriatic coast, and considering Albania's natural attractions, it is likely that Albania won't be a secret forever.

LEGACIES OF COMMUNISM



Toppling of Enver Hoxha's statue on downtown Tirana's Skanderbeg square on 20 February 1991.

On January 11 1946, Enver Hoxha declared the People's Republic of Albania, launching the country on a path of oppression, isolation and mismanagement lasting almost half a century. By the time of the dictator's death in 1985, there were only about 2,000 cars in Albania, but approximately 700,000 reinforced concrete bunkers - an average of one per family.

The rise of communism in Albania began during World War II. Communist partisans were active in the resistance movement against first Italian and then German occupation. Enver Hoxha, who had founded the Albanian Communist Party (later the Labour Party) in 1941, became the leader of the National Liberation Army. After Albania's liberation from the Germans, he emerged as the leader of the newly formed communist state.

Hoxha's repressive regime permitted no challenge to its power or to the strict Stalinist ideas it espoused. In 1961, Hoxha broke with Albania's closest ally, the Soviet Union, because Khrushchev had abandoned Stalinism. Thereafter, Albania's chief ally was the People's Republic of China. When China established diplomatic relations with the United States in 1978, Hoxha denounced the Chinese as well and decided to pursue a policy of self-reliance. Albania became the North Korea of Europe, the most isolated communist state in the world. It was the last country in Europe with monuments to Stalin (besides one in Stalin's hometown in Georgia). Hoxha's Albania was a fortress state supposedly threatened by countless foes from abroad and within. Regular purges saw thousands executed as traitors or enemies of

communism. Opponents of the regime were held in notorious prisons like Tepelena, or served forced labour in copper mines like the one in Spac.

At the time of Hoxha's death in 1985, Albania had a population of around 3 million. It was by far the poorest country in Europe:

*"an island of increasing poverty and demoralisation, with a rapidly disintegrating infrastructure, crumbling buildings, malnourished and poorly clad workers and peasants using primitive agricultural equipment, all surrounded by slogans reminding them that Partia mbi te gjitha (the Party is above everything)."*¹

Hoxha was succeeded as communist leader by his protégé, Ramiz Alia. Alia shared Hoxha's Marxist-Leninist views but, facing an increasingly restive population and pressure from abroad, he gradually made concessions regarding political control and human rights. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, news of changes in other communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe reached Albania. The first mass anti-communist protests took place in July 1990, forcing the regime into some cosmetic changes in economic policy. It was in vain: shortages of spare parts, aging machinery, drought and growing unrest brought the economy to a standstill. By the year's end, after strong student and trade union protests, the regime was forced to accept a multiparty system. Hoxha's gilded statue in Skanderbeg Square, Tirana, was torn down by rioters on February 20, 1991.

CHAOTIC TRANSITION

Albania's transition to democracy began with anarchy and later developed into near state collapse in 1997. Although unlike neighbouring Yugoslavia, the country was not drawn into military conflict, its chaotic early transition was a deeply traumatic experience. As veteran journalist Remzi Lani put it, referring to the events of 1997: *"There is only one thing worse than dictatorship, and that is anarchy."*

The first years of the 1990s saw the disintegration of the communist state and the abandonment of the policies it had championed for over four decades. In April 1990, communist leader Ramiz Alia declared his willingness to establish relations with the United States and the Soviet Union. The government ended its monopoly on international trade. In August 1990 it opened the economy to foreign commerce. In December 1990, the Central Committee of the Albanian Party of Labour (APL) made the groundbreaking decision to authorise a multiparty system.

¹ Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to Balkan Identity*, 1997



Albanian anarchy in 1997

These changes were carried out against a background of violent protests and the flight of many thousands of refugees. In February 1991 hundreds of students and members of staff at Enver Hoxha University in Tirana went on hunger strike, demanding the dictator's name be removed from the university's official name. However, when Albania's first multiparty elections were held in spring 1991, the APL emerged victorious, winning two thirds of the seats. The new assembly re-elected Alia as President and entrusted a commission with the drafting of a new constitution. Protests continued and the government collapsed soon afterwards as trade unions called for a general strike. New elections in March 1992 led to a victory for the Democratic Party, whose leader Sali Berisha replaced Alia as President.

Under Berisha, Albania implemented sweeping reforms to its economic system. Rapid privatisation transferred most businesses to private ownership. Some 30,000 small firms were privatised by April 1997. The process also extended to collective and state farms. 220,000 state-owned apartments were privatised. Albania was opened up to foreign trade. It was a rough transition; smuggling and corruption increased dramatically.

Despite a lack of regulation, the economy grew rapidly in the early years of the transition (although with hindsight many of the official statistics appear suspect). At the end of 1992, unemployment was at 26 percent but by 1996 it had supposedly halved to 12 percent (World Bank). Real GDP, which had fallen sharply in 1991, now grew at a rate of 9 percent between 1993 and 1996 (WDI 2003). The World Bank praised Albania's economic reforms and their apparent success in turning around the economy.

Then, in late 1996 and early 1997, the country was rocked by a severe economic and political crisis. Berisha's Democratic Party was re-elected in June 1996 with over 85 percent of parliamentary seats, in the face of an opposition boycott and accusations of electoral fraud. A protest rally was broken up by riot police. Simultaneously, the country was gripped by a wave of investment scams. Naïve to the workings of a market economy, many Albanians fell for so called 'pyramid schemes', investing their entire savings in the hope of easy returns. These schemes began to collapse in autumn 1996, plunging the country into turmoil.

Most of the anger was directed at the government, whom many blamed for the loss of their savings. Millions of Kalashnikovs and other weapons were looted from police stations and military bases. Chaos reigned as militias took control of many cities. The south, particularly

the coastal city of Vlora, was the centre of violent riots. Even in Tirana, state authority collapsed.

President Berisha's first response to the crisis was to extend his own power over the judiciary, secret services and media:

*"The government declared a 'General State of Emergency' on 3 March (1997), which was done within the framework of communist-period legislation designed to mobilise the country against foreign military attack. The Emergency Laws gave the government draconian powers to rule by decree, and to use the army against internal opposition. There was to be complete government control of the media... On 4 March in Tirana, pro-Berisha thugs ransacked and burnt down the office of Koha Jone, in those days the main opposition newspaper, as Parliament, surrounded by scruffy troops with automatic weapons, re-elected President Berisha for another five-year term. SHIK operatives in black leather jackets toured the capital at night, ready to fire on anyone found breaking the curfew."*²

As the violence continued, Berisha was forced into a power-sharing agreement. The government was dismissed on 1 March 1997, and replaced by a government of national unity with a Socialist Party prime minister. On March 28 the UN authorised an Italian-led coalition of willing member states codenamed "Alba" (Italian for "dawn") of 7,000 troops to restore stability and support reconstruction.

Very slowly, a sense of normality returned. Early elections were called for July 1997. The Democratic Party lost these elections and its leader, Sali Berisha, resigned the Presidency. In 1999 the journalist Remzi Lani described the difficult path out of communism and Albanians' continued uncertainty about their country's future:

"Albania is probably the ex-communist country that has changed most. In fact, any comparison with the brutal communist regime would sound ridiculous. Among all East European people, Albanians have least reasons to feel nostalgic about the epoch before the fall of the Berlin Wall ... Nine years later the Albanian citizen can be compared to a passenger waiting at a bus station without knowing his destination. The tiny Balkan country cannot be considered as a Hope-Land. "Exit from communism" wasn't as rosy and festive as it seemed to be." (Albania: nine years after - Albania Media Centre 16 December 1999)

POVERTY IN ALBANIA

² Miranda Vickers & James Pettifer, *The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans*, 2007



Children playing in the mining town of Bulqiza

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century Albania was one of the poorest countries in Europe. Although "cumulative growth since 1990 is among the highest of all transition economies" (World Bank 2006), its GDP per capita of \$5,300 (PPP) means that Albania continues to rank among the poorest European countries:

2005 GDP per capita (Purchasing Power Parity, US\$)

Switzerland	35,600
France	30,400
Greece	23,400
Slovenia	22,300
Poland	13,800
Croatia	13,000
Bulgaria	9,000
Bosnia-Herzegovina	7,000
Albania	5,300
Philippines	5,100
Armenia	5,000

Albania's infant mortality rate is the highest in Southeast Europe: 19 per 1000 live births in 2006 (WHO). In the Balkans only Rumania has a higher maternal mortality rate. Limited access to clean water and sanitation services continues to be a health risk. Fewer than 20 percent of rural households have access to running water within their homes while only 41 percent of homes contain a toilet. Only half of all citizens have access to solid waste removal services (World Bank 2006). With 1.3 doctors per 1,000 people, Albania has the lowest coverage in the Balkans. WHO data implies that the number of doctors and nurses has declined since the mid 1990s (World Bank 2006).

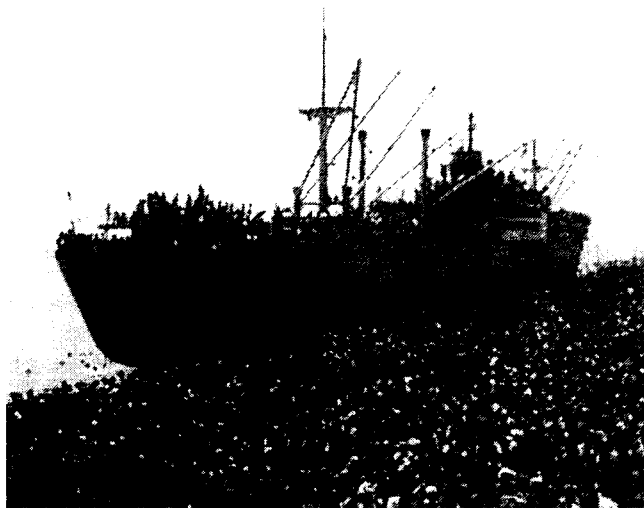
Amid declining public spending on education the gross enrolment rate in secondary education fell from 78.5 percent in 1989 to 43.6 percent in 2002. Enrolment is 15 percent lower in rural areas (IMF PRSP 2006). Underfunding is particularly problematic in secondary education. The agricultural sector initially experienced growth after the end of communism, partly due to the move from collective farms to private holdings, but has since witnessed a slowdown. Production suffers from small land sizes, a lack of modern inputs and infrastructure and poor access to markets. Many remote regions are isolated in a country where "only 12 percent of roads are paved and only 8 percent of all roads can be considered good." (World Bank 2006).

The past 15 years have seen large scale migration from the countryside to the cities. Gezim Nohemi, who left the northern village of Theth, explains why many in the village have had to leave their homes

"It was very, very poor. There was no income, how were we supposed to make a living? Raising cattle? There was no road to the village and no work. We had to leave."

The World Bank's report also finds that urban poverty declined much faster than rural poverty. Tirana has seen an especially large rise in incomes. This suggests that migration towards the cities is likely to continue.

MASS-EXODUS



Albanians trying to flee by any means possible during the transition crisis in 1990-1992. Photo: AP

Albanians had no right to a passport until May 1990. Until the penal code was revised in July 1990, leaving the country was officially an act of treason. Nothing could have prepared Albania and its neighbours for the mass exodus that followed when these barriers were relaxed.

It began when 400 people scaled the gates of the Italian and German Embassies in Tirana in July 1990. Thousands of others followed. In the same month, the first of many ships filled

with people destined for Italy was seized in the port of Durres. Battles between security forces and those desperate to leave were fought on the beaches of Durres. Others set out on foot, to cross the mountainous border with Greece. Everywhere Albania's border controls – whose main purpose had been to keep people from leaving – broke down.

Migration under these conditions was risky. Some perished in the sea, froze in the mountains or were shot at by Greek border guards. Thousands were captured and returned from Greece, only to try their luck again. The authorities lost control of the situation. Under these circumstances, no one kept count, but a rough estimate puts the number of Albanians who left the country from 1990 to 1992 at between 200,000 and 300,000 - almost 10 percent of the total population.

That was just the beginning of the exodus. According to the Migration Policy Institute, a similar number of people left between 1993 and 1996. After the collapse of the pyramid schemes in 1998, there was another exodus of 70,000 within the space of a few months. The number of recent Albanian emigrants living abroad is today estimated at 900,000 - equivalent to 25 percent of the total 1991 population. This group includes more than one third of the total labour force. Most of those who emigrated live in neighbouring Greece (600,000) and Italy (200,000).

"In the period 1990-2003, approximately 45 percent of the professors and researchers at universities and institutions emigrated, as did more than 65 percent of the scholars who received PhDs in the West in the period 1980-1990. Thousands of university graduates left as well. The majority took along their family members." (Migration Policy Institute)

At the same time, the large Albanian diaspora has made an important contribution to Albania's recent economic performance by sending remittances. The Migration Policy Institute reports an increase in remittances from US\$377.9 million in 1994 to \$780 million in 2003. The World Bank estimates that remittances make up as much as 13 percent of Albania's GDP (some \$1.3 billion in 2006).

15 YEARS OF RIVALRY - SALI BERISHA AND FATOS NANO

Ever since Albania began its transition from a socialist dictatorship to a democratic market economy, two men have dominated the political scene – Sali Berisha and Fatos Nano. Nano was Prime Minister from February 1991 to June 1991, from July 1997 to October 1998 and from 2002 to September 2005. Berisha was President from April 1992 to June 1997. He is Albania's current Prime Minister having succeeded Nano in 2005. In 1993 Nano was arrested under Berisha's presidency. Berisha then pardoned him in 1997. In 1998 Nano accused Berisha – then in the opposition – of attempting a coup and tried to have a warrant issued for his arrest. Each man has accused the other of corruption and manipulating elections.



Sali Berisha



Fatos Nano

Following Enver Hoxha's death in 1985, Berisha and others in Albania observed Eastern European countries gradually emerging from Communism, and they became more active in their calls for change. In December 1990 the Albanian government gave in to mounting pressure, which at times spilled over in violent protests, and agreed to a multiparty system. Berisha emerged as the leader of the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party (DP). Parliamentary elections in March 1992 saw the DP win 62 percent of the popular vote. Ramiz Alia, Hoxha's successor, stepped down from his position as President and was succeeded by Sali Berisha.

As president from 1992 to 1997, Berisha presided over Albania's transition from a communist state to a market economy. Berisha's attempts to strengthen the powers of the presidency and to exclude members of the old regime from running in parliamentary elections in 1996 brought allegations of authoritarianism. The DP won the elections, but faced criticism for manipulation and repression of peaceful protests.

When the pyramid schemes collapsed in 1997, many accused the government of having stolen their money. The total investment lost, estimated in the region of \$1.2 billion, represented a significant portion of an impoverished country's savings. Berisha lost control over his own country:

"By March 1997 the situation had become untenable. Rebels had stormed arms depots and were in control of a number of cities. According to an IMF estimate roughly 2000 people were killed in the conflict. Berisha dissolved his own government and declared a state of emergency. The government declared a 'General State of Emergency' on 3 March (1997), which was done within the framework of communist-period legislation designed to mobilise the country against foreign military attack. The Emergency Laws gave the government draconian powers to rule by decree, and to use the army against internal opposition. There was to be complete government control of the media.³

Berisha attempted to stay in power, but finally resigned after the DP lost parliamentary elections in July 1997.

³ Miranda Vickers & James Pettifer, *The Albanian Question: Reshaping the Balkans*, 2007, p.19.

The Democratic Party emerged as the winners of the elections on July 3 2005, taking 74 of 140 seats. Berisha became Prime Minister in September of that year, with an ambitious government programme, and the pledge to promote Albania's bid for NATO and EU membership. The first objective was successfully achieved in April 2008 when Albanian was accepted as a NATO member. Berisha told NATO leaders; *"For me this is a miracle! This is a miracle of freedoms."*

Nano was born in Tirana in 1952. Under the communist regime he was a well known economist at Tirana University where he did his PhD and taught as a professor. In 1991 President Ramiz Alia chose Nano as the prime minister of the technical government meant to prepare the country for democratic elections. He resigned in June amidst calls by trade unions for a general strike. At the tenth congress of the Albanian Labour party, in June 1991, the party was formally dissolved. The Socialist Party became its legal successor and Nano was elected as the new party's first chairman. He held this post for over 14 years, only resigning on September 1 2005.

In July 1993, Nano was imprisoned for misuse of public funds. Former communist leader and Albanian president Ramiz Alia met with the same fate. Berisha finally pardoned and released Nano in the middle of the 1997 crisis and appointed him Prime Minister. After parliamentary elections in July 1997 Rexhep Mexhani succeeded Berisha as president and made Nano his Prime Minister until September 1998.

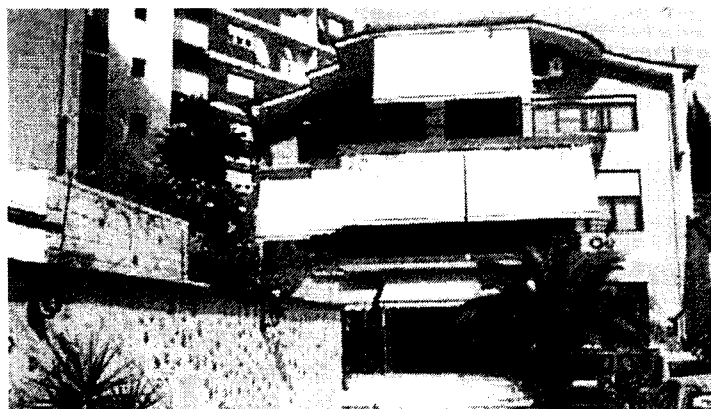
The Socialist Party remained in power and Nano returned for his third term as prime minister in July 2002. In February 2004 the largest demonstrations seen in Albania since 1997 were held, demanding Nano's resignation. The crowds in Tirana, estimated at up to 20,000 people, chanted "Nano, go!". The prime minister was accused of corruption and electoral fraud. His rival Berisha called him *"the enemy of the Albanians...it is he who is stifling the hope of the Albanians"* (BBC article, 2004).

The Socialist Party suffered a heavy defeat in the July 2005 parliamentary elections and Berisha replaced Nano as Prime Minister. Fatos Nano also stepped down as party leader in September 2005.

MJAFT! AND THE CULTURE OF PROTEST

Protest has been a recurring theme over the last two decades of Albania's history. In December 1990, clashes between students and police, followed by riots in northern cities, signalled the waning power of the communist state. In 1997, after the collapse of the pyramid schemes, arms depots were looted of millions of Kalashnikovs and other weapons, triggering civil conflict and an international peacekeeping force. In September 1998, the assassination of the Democratic Party politician Azem Hadjari led to violent demonstrations and the storming of government buildings, causing the Socialist Prime Minister Fatos Nano to resign.

One of the most visible signs of change in Albania in recent years has been the transformation of this violent culture of protest into a phenomenon that has attracted international admiration: a new civic activism targeting concrete issues of everyday life.



MJAF! headquarters in Tirana

This change is most visibly associated with the rise of MJAF! (*Enough!*), a youth movement founded in 2002. Mjaft was set up by four young Albanians: Endri Fuga, Erion Veliaj, Marinela (Ina) Lika, Arbjan Mazniku. Home for the Christmas holidays in 2002, Endri and Erion were sitting in a café with their two friends Arbjan and Ina, when the conversation turned to Albania's problems. The group agreed that apathy supported by widespread cynicism about the ability of ordinary people to bring about change explained most shortcomings of Albanian society. They agreed to launch a campaign for change, choosing as their symbol a stretched palm, a red hand on a black background.

At this time, Fatos Nano was back in power. These were the times of growing cynicism about the extent of governmental corruption and incompetence. Mjaft was originally conceived as a 4-month campaign running on a different theme every 2 weeks, making 8 themes in total. The goal was to combat civil apathy, to make Albania's problems visible, and to force those in power to address them. Each theme had its own poster, TV & Radio spot, and grassroots activities, including protests, street theatre, city hall hearings, marathons, talk shows and public events. The campaign was financed by the Dutch Embassy.

The campaign and its call to break with apathy and challenge mismanagement and corruption stirred up a lot of emotion. MJAF! ads – such as that of a photo of a woman with the slogan "In Albania women are beaten" - became a topic of discussion in schools, cafés and talk-shows. In the following years, Mjaft evolved from a campaign into a movement with 8,000 members, 1,000 volunteers, and branches in 18 cities across Albania. It is now the biggest youth movement in the country, active on issues from violence against women to freedom of the press, from human trafficking to road safety. It took donkeys – a symbol of ignorance in Albania – to the Parliament, calling for an increase in the education budget. It also became a watchdog for local and national government, exposing mismanagement and corruption and confronting politicians and bureaucrats with a more attentive and vocal audience. Another of its projects was the constant monitoring of Parliament through the www.unevotoj.com (ivote)

project, which keeps track of MPs' presence in Parliament, their voting record, their declaration of assets and whether they follow parliamentary rules and procedures.

Mjaft's way of exerting pressure is often humorous and witty – it left empty chairs for underperforming city counsellors in Korca, and mocked incompetent government officials in Tirana with fake "*Be careful, (no) work being done above*" construction signs. This type of protest was often effective, and even led to the resignation of government ministers. As one of Mjaft's founders, Ina Lika, notes:

"Mjaft seems to me to be part of a natural development of our society. During the late 80s and early 90s we learned how to achieve freedom and democracy. The following 10 years showed to us that keeping democracy is as hard as winning it – a hard lesson learned in 1997. Now we have entered a new era, that of strengthening and developing our democracy. In this regard, Mjaft signals a step forward for Albanian citizens. It is time for citizens to be empowered, to find ways to be organized and shape their own future."

FACES OF MJAFT

Erion Veliaj



Erion Veliaj

One of MJAFT!'s founding members, Erion Veliaj headed the movement from 2003 to 2007. Erion was a child when Albania's communist regime collapsed:

"On my way to get drinks for a family lunch, I came across the largest rally ever held in Tirana. This was the rally that culminated in the violent removal of Enver Hoxha's mega-statue from downtown Tirana's Skanderbeg square. It was the most exciting event of my boyhood."

"At the time, I was finishing 4th grade. The system degenerated in front of our eyes even in elementary schools. Shouting that we were 'fighting for the causes of the party – always ready' every morning was no longer mandatory. Reciting communist poems was no longer required."

"In economic terms the situation changed for the worse – at the time only dilled baby-onions were seen in the state-owned stores. The bread queues were a daily agony."

Erion lost his father to a terminal illness in autumn 1991. His mother was left alone to take care of two sons.

"She realised that she could not bring us up alone and had to let go of me. With an uncle I set out to cross into Greece, illegally. After 20 hours walking through the mountains on foot across the southern border near Gjirokaster, always trying to avoid Greek border patrols, we ended up working with relatives. I washed dishes in a restaurant and worked on a farm, for about 6 months.

When I returned to Tirana the steady exodus of people was also visible in my neighbourhood. As we would meet other children for our daily football games we realized that we could not keep our regular teams together. Kids went missing, teams shrunk. It wasn't until later that I realized that our friends had left for good, picked up by their daring parents and headed mostly for Italy and Greece."

Erion left Albania in 1998. He went to the US where he studied at Grand Valley State University (GVSU). After a semester he returned to Albania to help with the Kosovar refugee crisis, working in a refugee camp in Peshkopi.

"After TV images showed Kosovar refugees pouring across the border, Albanians mounted one of the largest hospitality operations of their history. Every city, town and village had a refugee welcoming center, families lined up to take people home and thousands of young volunteers from schools, NGO-s, churches and mosques were involved in running the relief operation of their lives. Many knew they would meet a Kosovar at some point in their life, but none had predicted that the two halves of a nation would have a 'date' of this scale. For most Albanians this marked an unprecedented life-time experience. My mom hosted a young couple from Gjakova, and with other co-workers was permitted a leave from her regular job to help serve in the assigned refugee camps during daytime."

In June 1999 Erion moved to Kosovo to help rebuild and refurbish the six main regional hospitals as well as clinics in the Dukagjini valley. A year later, his university, GVSU, agreed to allow him to work internationally and study through distance learning at the same time. He spent most of 2001 in Central and Latin America, and in 2002 working and doing research for his thesis in Africa. In December 2002, Erion came back home to Tirana and met up with three friends, including his high school friend, Endri Fuga, who was also studying abroad.

"By Christmas 2002, we were all home for the holidays – Endri and myself planning to go back abroad after the New Year. We met at a café, catching up with each-other after years away. At some point, we couldn't avoid the million dollar question: 'What the hell is wrong with this place? Why is it lost in transition and led by incompetent politicians'? Our relatives would argue that the 500 years of Ottoman rule were to blame, or others would blame the communists. Yet, we couldn't help but realize that in few years we'd most likely have our own kids, and we couldn't blame their broken schools and hospitals on the Turks and the communists any more. We must find better answers, there must be something we could do, at least address one problem. Which problem was the question, which was Albania's biggest problem?"

During that Christmas break we made it a mission to find that answer. We met with UNDP to hear how poverty was the biggest problem, the World Bank claiming it was unemployment, the IOM talking trafficking, the Interpol blaming organized crime, UNEP

saying it was the environment, and so on – each organization declaring their turf was Albania's biggest problem.

Granted, all were important, we realized back at our café reunion. But there's probably one invisible thread that connects all of these, we figured. It was APATHY! Indeed, the average person had resigned themselves to a reality they thought they could not change, the everyday citizen had simply ceased to care. One either got a visa and left for the West, or gave up, letting sometimes clueless internationals and certainly incompetent politicians take charge. We had found our niche: a smart, provocative, offensive campaign against civic apathy – call it MJAFI – Albanian for ENOUGH! Enough of this apathy, enough of an agonizing transition, enough of sitting idle while all goes wrong!"

MJAFI's symbol became an instantly recognisable red hand:

"We needed a strong image. A stop sign, a fist, a stretched palm – indeed, the latter worked great. We painted our hands in Ina's red lipstick, then stamped them on A4 white paper to see which one looked best. Later we framed it on the red and black colour scheme of the Albanian flag – why not make activism the new patriotism?"

In February 2003, we printed a few hundred posters with the red hand logo, and the date MARCH 15 beneath it – signalling our launch. It worked well as people got puzzled and wondered what this could mean. Some said it was another 'international day of something', or that U2 was coming to town, or that the Albanian flag would be changed on that date – although this latter one couldn't have come from someone sober. On March 15, together with a few hundred friends and curious onlookers, we launched MJAFI – the new brand of civic activism. Everyone was invited to dip their hands in red paint and sign-up to civic engagement by stamping their palm on a white cloth board."

MJAFI has spoken out whenever it felt it could make a difference:

"There was one unique campaign to stop the construction of a waste incinerator in the heart of Albania, intended to burn imported refuse from southern Italy. A shady group with links to the eco-mafia had bribed Albanian officials into accepting a very rotten deal for the country that would bring a daily intake of tens of containers with unclassified waste. Our role in exposing the deal, mobilizing NGO-s and citizens to take part in large organized protests, changing the legal provisions for the import of waste and ultimately reversing the deal, made this one of our most effective campaigns."

After four years, Erion and his three fellow founders felt that the time had come to pass on the baton. They stepped down in September 2007 from their positions in MJAFI. Since early 2008 Erion is a senior analyst at ESI.

Arbjan Mazniku

Arbjan Mazniku is one of MJAFI's founders and was in charge of its policy department until September 2007. Arbjan recalls the fall of the regime in 1991:

"At the time I was 12. I remember people from the regime talking about 'dark forces' at work to destroy the system. I had these mixed feelings of awe and admiration for these 'dark forces'. Sometimes I pictured them in hoods as thieves that would break into our houses, then as glorious fighters that would change Albania into something similar to the world I saw on Italian television. The day the statue of Hoxha was

toppled, we did not go to school. My dad returned early from work, which was unusual. We learned what was happening from people in the neighbourhood, as TV and radio gave no news of the events.

I sneaked out of the house and went to the rally in the centre of town. There were tens of thousands of people and a sense of liberation gripped the crowd. I ran after the statue that was dragged to the student city. I was in real trouble when I returned home. I have never seen my father angrier and more scared than on that day."



Arbjan Mazniku and Marinela Lika

The year 1997 was another turning point.

"It was a period that seemed like a miracle. Everyone had plenty of money in their hands. People were selling their cars, businesses, houses, or anything they could, to invest the money in "the firms" in the hope that this would allow them to buy better ones later. The 'firms' turned out to be pyramids and collapsed, taking down with them everything people had. There was no public order and for a few weeks we were in a total state of anarchy. Millions of weapons were in people's hands and I remember with grief the nights where the sky would light up from millions of bullets shot into the sky. It was as if we were at war only without an enemy."

"The '97 crises not only hurt the economy and the state it hurt the Albanian's self-esteem. When the Kosovar exodus began, Albanians went out of their way to help their fellows. I remember talking to some of the relief agencies staffers who were saying that the refugee camps they were building were remaining half empty. All over the country, families of four turned overnight into families of seventeen. People were helping with everything from food, clothing and shelter to blood for the wounded. The public reaction to the crisis not only helped the Kosovars, it helped Albanians believe that good things could come out of their common effort."

Arbi studied at the University of Tirana's School of Journalism. He ran the National Debate Association, together with Marinela Lika (another of MJAFT's founders). Arbjen and Marinela (Ina) Lika later became husband and wife.

When the idea for a MJAFT campaign was born, Arbjan and his fellow founders approached the Dutch embassy which had just funded a small tournament within his debate program.

They were stunned when they heard their new much more ambitious proposal had been approved. Arbjan describes the motivation behind MJAFT:

"After you travel a bit around the world and you return to Albania your perspective on things at home changes. People can get used to a lack of electricity, water, pot holes, and even what they expect from doctors and police. We knew that if we wanted to build a future in Albania we had to change that. We needed a way to somehow change what people expected from their everyday life. Even in our wildest dreams at that time we did not think we were starting a movement. We thought we would just run a campaign, send a strong message, give people a pill or reality check."

Like MJAFT's other founders, Arbjan stepped down in 2007. He is confident about Albania's future:

"Albanians are energetic and creative people. The country has gone through a series of misfortunes that have left it lagging in comparison to our neighbours. In the last ten years, Albanian society has been changing and has made colossal steps towards Europeanization. MJAFT would not have been able to exist had it not found a receptive and supportive environment all across Albania."

Elisa Spiropali

Elisa Spiropali joined MJAFT in 2006 and has since become the movement's Policy Director in the second generation of leaders after the founders left in 2007. Like other MJAFT activists she has studied and worked abroad. She completed her undergraduate degree at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts where she obtained a BA in Politics and Economics, and is now doing her Master's at the University of Sussex. In New York Elisa worked for a public interest law firm active in the fields of civil rights and foster care reform. She was also an analyst for a think tank in Pristina, the Kosovo Stability Initiative (IKS). In 2004 she worked for the Center for Social and Legal Studies in Buenos Aires, where she conducted interviews with survivors of the military dictatorship.

In early June 2007 protests and strikes broke out in the Bulqiza mine in Northeastern Albania. Workers in the ferrochrome mines went on strike demanding better working conditions and better pay. The situation was exacerbated when two miners, Hysni Lezi and Avni Durici lost their lives in an accident on June 11th. This was by no means an isolated incident. On 25 June 2007 21 miners went on hunger strike. MJAFT identified with the miners' predicament and was active in organising demonstrations in Tirana.



Elisa Spiropali

Elisa describes MJAFT's involvement:

"We heard about the miners' protest, which had been decided on the first of June, and then of course we heard of the tragic death of two of the miners: they broke the protest and then they went to work, I believe on the 11th of June and two of them died inside the mine.

So that really stirred a lot of emotion in the people at Mjaft but we didn't yet know the situation that well. We were not in contact with the people there... so we decided to come to Bulqiza, and see for ourselves what the conditions for the miners were like, what the protest was about, what their requests were, and why they were not being heard. So we came here and what we found was a very, very sad situation of very poor working and living conditions. We found miners who were working on the 17th level in the mine and were being paid, what we believe is a ridiculous amount, compared to the price, the value of the chrome and of the work that they do.

We saw their living conditions and we were not only touched but we felt that there was something really wrong with the way things were going. Something was wrong with the concession with the firm, the private firm, and also with the government institutions that were supposed to take care of working conditions as well as to negotiate wages with the workers and the syndicates that are their representatives. So we decided to fully support the organisation and the planning of the miners' protest in Tirana. The miners had organised here before, but their voices were really distant, unheard in Tirana. We decided to have them come closer."

And we needed to come back there, you know, twice to get the miners' trust and also to have a chance of bringing them to Tirana. But there were problems of logistics, there were problems of money. Many of the miners had to go into debt and get money, to be able to come to Tirana. We had three busses organised for free, we had managed to do that, to get the busses to come to Bulqiza, get the miners, and come to Tirana. We then had to plan with the confederation that helped them and deal with all the institutions where they were going to protest: the ministry of economy, the ministry of work, and social issues, and also the prime minister's office.

The miners slept two nights in Tirana's streets, and we organised camps for them, we organised sleeping places. It was hard having miners stay in Tirana, with no means of support, with no hotels. We stayed with them, you know, during the evening, during

the night, and organised camping places. All the time we kept asking the media and the TV stations to come and to cover the event. This would make the public voice much stronger, the public voice and our opinion would be a much stronger one. The miners' protest coincided with the election of the president, the negotiations for the elections of the president, so it was hard to get the public attention that we needed.

This was a problem at first, but then, when the government, the politicians and the company saw that the miners were determined to carry their protest on to the end, and that we were determined to support them to the end, I think the public opinion just shifted, attention shifted. All of a sudden there was not only the issue of the politicians choosing their president, but also an issue that needed to be resolved, with a specific group of people, with specific needs, living under harsh conditions.

At the end, the miners were able to enter into negotiations with the company...I feel kind of lucky, having being present during the negotiations because it was an important time, an important turn, the issues came upfront. They were able to articulate their problems directly to the administration, to the owner of the company. [...] To get an answer back so quickly, to be able to resolve that issue right there and open the space for negotiations, was not the end. The workers need to have their union organised, continue with their struggle, have negotiations with the company to get to the point where they feel there is communication.

There used to be no communication, the miners were never heard before. This broke something, you know, it increased their self-consciousness, it increased their, not only their desire, but their opportunity to change things in the future. And that was very emotional for all of us, the Mjaft people. We went out..., people were so happy, we had a celebration at the Mjaft offices. We brought drinks and sat outside while people were filming us. There was a strong, close feeling between the miners and the Mjaft movement. Of course there were critics, there always are, but at the end I think that self-consciousness has increased and that's the most important thing."

EDI RAMA AND THE NEW TIRANA

Edi Rama has been the Mayor of Tirana since 2000, and leader of the Socialist Party of Albania since 2005. He is the son of a sculptor popular in the former communist regime, a former basketball player, and an artist himself who lived and worked in Paris in the mid 1990s.

At the time of the communist regime's collapse, Rama was a professor at the Albanian Academy of Arts. Initially put off by the political scene that formed in the early 1990s Rama preferred commenting from the outside, writing articles while continuing in his role at the Academy. In 1995 he moved to Paris on a scholarship. Returning for a visit in 1997 he was attacked by a group of thugs with a metal pipe, an incident that almost cost him his life.



Edi Rama

In 1998 Rama returned to Albania again, this time for his father's funeral. An unexpected call from Prime Minister Fatos Nano who addressed him as "Mr. Minister of Culture" brought an end to Rama's life as an artist. He accepted Nano's offer to join his council of ministers but did not join the Socialist Party.

In October 2000 Rama was elected to the office of mayor of Tirana, ending the Democratic Party's 10-year control of the city. He had run as an independent candidate, supported by the Socialist Party. Rama took over a city whose infrastructure had collapsed, laws had become meaningless, and the city's public parks were crammed with illegal buildings. Rama says:

"The city was like a train station where everybody was looking how to avoid staying there; where everybody was trying to leave this train station by any means; where everybody was taking care only of their own place and not of their surroundings. So, building a new consciousness was a big deal."

When Rama became mayor, he was confronted with a budget that did not match his ambitions, so he found new ways to bring about change. His project to repaint old facades around Tirana in startlingly bright colours made him famous.

"The colours were an instrument. I've chosen out of a need, the colours were not an aesthetic or artistic operation. Colours were political action, and colours were the sign that something different was possible, and people got it."

Many of the new mayor's most visible policies were aimed at transforming Tirana's appearance and atmosphere. Rama teamed up with students to clean neighbourhoods, parks were restored, trees planted, pavements repaired. The Clean and Green Project created 96,700 sq meters of green land. But nothing symbolises the break with the old, grey Tirana as vividly as the brightly coloured buildings. Rama's efforts aim to create a sense of pride and identification with the city of Tirana:

"After communism and the events in 1997 people were lacking a sense of belonging to the country. There was a rage against everything that was a state building because it was perceived as property of the enemy... We are trying to make people understand that what is public is also yours."

Rama has faced criticism but his support among Tirana's inhabitants earned him re-election in 2003 and 2007. He was chosen as World Mayor 2004 and was included in Time Magazine's list of European Heroes 2005. He joined the Socialist Party of Albania in October 2003 and replaced Fatos Nano as its leader in the wake of the party's electoral defeat in 2005.

Edi Rama is eager to contribute to a new perception of Albania:

"Tirana has become the good news from Albania and has changed the image of the country. People that come here are surely surprised, because the stereotype is very strong, and is very different from the reality. And it's nice to see foreigners coming and being amazed, just amazed."

ALBANIA AND THE EU

Throughout the 1990s the European Union was above all a generous donor to Albania. Between 1991 and 1999 Albania received grants totalling around one billion euros from the European Union budget. This was one of the highest amounts of assistance relative to Albanian GDP for the EU anywhere in the world. It included 256 million euros in humanitarian aid.

A new era started in June 2006 when Albania signed a Stability and Association agreement with the EU as a first step to a very different relationship: a candidate for EU membership. In a document published in March 2008 the European Commission noted progress (Communication Western Balkans: enhancing the European perspective):

"Albania has continued to make progress in reforms and approximation to EU standards. It is implementing well its Interim Agreement under the SAA and is building up a track record. Albania has maintained a balanced position on the Kosovo issue, thus contributing to the regional stability. Political leaders in Albania have pledged to engage in a constructive relationship on key reforms. Electoral reform, particularly in view of the 2009 parliamentary elections, strengthening the rule of law, reform of the judicial system and the fight against corruption and organised crime are central. An improved climate in parliament will contribute to move forward on such issues."

The Albanian political elite is currently preparing for the next step: submitting an official application for EU membership. On Europe Day 2008 (May 9) Prime Minister Sali Berisha and the leader of the opposition Edi Rama both pledged that despite substantial disagreements on domestic issues they would cooperate on this matter as a national priority.