

**ALBANIA IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND IN THE FIRST YEARS OF
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COMMUNISTS IN POWER.**

**TREATMENT OF JEWS IN ALBANIA BEFORE AND DURING WORLD
WAR II**

In my presentation I would like to give a general overview of the History of Albania in the Second World War and in the two years that followed the departure of German troops from this country.

In the same time, I will try to compile some definitions about the way of treatment of fellow Albanians of Jewish origin in my country, understood as State Albania as a whole.

I want to clarify that the attitudes and perspectives that I will present here today, are not the official position of the Albanian Official Historiography, but there are mine. All that has been achieved and realized through a profound archival research for more than a decade.

As this is published in a book, in two volumes entitled: “Albania and Liberated Lands, 1939-1946”:

This analysis, is focused in the years 1939-1940 for the territory of the Albanian state known even today, while for the period from 1941 until 1945 for the National State of Albania extended with other territories inhabited by Albanians, which means Kosovo, Dibra, Tetovo, Struga, Ulcinj and Malësia, territories that today are part of the Republic of Kosovo, the Republic of Northern Macedonia and the Republic of Montenegro.

Albania was the first victim of the aggression of a fascist power, namely Mussolini's Italy, which occupied it on April 7, 1939, which means 5

months before Hitler's aggression against Poland, an event that officially marks the beginning of World War II.

The occupation of Albania by fascist Italy brought about the destruction of the internal constitutional structure of Albanian State known internationally, the reversal of the international status of my country, the cessation of the evolution of a nation with a complex state birth and difficult national conception, due to the different cultural compositions derived from the five-century Ottoman rule.

However, we must say that in 1939, despite the prominent authoritarianism of the semi-dictatorial royal regime led by King Zog, for 20 years, the country had managed to build the state union, had established a legal, political, social, educational, cultural order with a tendency to clearly Europeanizing, had managed to form an Albanianist and secular tradition, which respected, in addition to the King's close circle, also a circle of tradition values and the intellectual hierarchy of Albania. Albania had become a normal European country, but this path was interrupted by the brutal intervention of Fascist Italy in April 1939.

The Italian fascist occupation of Albania caused an interruption of the previous state and social tradition, which had been so necessary for the strengthening of the state and of the national conception of the long-suffering Albanian people.

The Italian occupation of Albania and especially, the use of Albanian territory by Mussolini to attack the neighboring country, Greece, the defeat of Italy in this war, not only implicated into the conflict a poor country and still unformed in terms of stability, but almost completely devastated southern part of Albania, created a permanent hotbed of extreme poverty in an already very poor area.

Albania's implication in the conflict, in the Italian-Greek War, built in the south of the country, the bases of an insurgent movement, which was gradually manipulated by the Albanian communists for their special purposes, related to the COMINFORM network operating from Moscow, at Tito's headquarters and finally at Albanian Communist Party's headquarters.

Even the composition of Albania on the generally national borders in April 1941 by the Central Bloc powers, has not been an easy undertaking for the governing structure of Tirana, still unconsolidated for months of Italian occupation.

The executive authority of the collaborationist government has been extended with great difficulty among the new lands included in the Albanian state after April 1941, while the military control structures have been maintained thanks to the Italian army and the nationalist-voluntary forces. Also, the processes of economic and financial unification of the new territories in the united Albanian state after 1941 have been associated with great challenges.

I have evaluated the analysis of Albania's domestic policy in the Second World War from two perspectives:

1. from the perspective of the official policies of the collaborationist governing authorities, which were installed initially by the Italians from April 7, 1939 to September 9, 1943, and then, by the Germans, after this date until their final departure from Albania on November 29, 1944;
2. The second plan examines the history from the perspectives of the anti-fascist resistance, which has its own peculiarities, its own chronology in terms of attitudes and some constituent components

from a political point of view, unlike many other European countries and similar to Yugoslavia and Greece.

Let us start with the first plan of analysis, focused on the period of the Italian fascist occupation of Albania:

The fascist establishment of Rome built and realized a special model of Albania's integration, under the framework of the Fascist Roman Empire, preserved a formal facade of Albania's independence, drafted and approved a new fascist constitution of Albanian state, dated June 4, 1939.

Mussolini and Count Ciano, through a series of institutional and economic reform measures, managed to create in Albania, a model of state, similar to that of Fascist Italy. But, in fact, with all their great efforts, this model did not penetrate substantially into the life of the country. It is understandable that this model, in a country so backward like Albania, remained only in the form of exposure, without ever penetrating into the general consciousness of Albanian peoples.

A special moment of the fascist occupation of Albania is the Italian-Greek War, which lasted from October 28, 1940 until April 1941.

In this period, the folly of the Roman establishment in Albania and in the Balkans will stop, despite the fact that the final result of April 1941, created the impression of a victory and expansion of the Italian occupation and possessions in the Balkans, in Greece and Yugoslavia.

In fact, it was an expansion realized thanks to the Hitler's war machine and not because of the power of the Royal Italian Army, which showed all its impossibility to be a great power in the Mediterranean Sea.

Direct result of the end of the Italian-Greek War and the German occupation of Yugoslavia and Greece was the unification of Old Albania

with so called “Liberated Albanian Lands” from the two disintegrated neighboring countries Those lands were unjustly left in Yugoslavia and Greece in 1913 and 1921, before and after the First World War.

In this way, from April 1941, we can talk about the creation of an expanded Albanian state, a really National Albanian State under protection of Italy, with a guarantee from German Nazi State.

Thus, after April 23, 1941, a new phase of the Italian occupation of Greater Albania under Italy began. This period, in terms of domestic political life, is characterized by a gradual exhaustion of the first collaborationist government directed by Prime Minister Shefqet Verlaci and a new attempt to re-establish the Italian fascist authority, through a new Prime Minister, a prominent humanist scientist, Professor Mustafa Merlika.

But even the second Albanian government under Italy failed to stabilize the country during 1942.

During 1943 the Italian occupation was characterized by cyclical political and governing crises, and by the unstoppable growth of the resistance movement. Also, in the middle of this period we have an attempt for policy correction by the part of Italians in Albania: During this time we have managed to notice some reform interventions, which aimed to give to the Albanians a greater state autonomy within the Roman Imperial Community, which is accompanied by the change of the “cavalry” of Italian politics in Albania (Vicegerent Jakomoni has been replaced by General Alberto Pariani).

But, in March 1943 it was too late. Together with the decadence of Mussolini’s power and General Badoglio after him in Rome, there will be the end of the occupation of the country by Italy on 9 September 1943.

What happened during the German occupation of Albania?

The second period is the time of the German occupation of Albania:

It is a bit strange, but it is a fact that the Germans followed in Albania a completely special method of treating their occupation in this country, in all aspects, except public safety, in comparison with all other countries.

They recognized the Albanian State from an institutional point of view, as this state was built before 1939. They recognized Albanian independence on ethnic borders of April 1941;

They recognize the neutrality of the Albanian state in international relations;

They established diplomatic relations between Albania and Germany and allowed the Albanian authorities to enter into diplomatic relations with all other states;

Speaking generally, they did not interfere in the internal executive affairs as the Italians did, and piloted the establishment of a Government, Parliament and Royal Regency composed by the brightest people of the country from the intellectual point of view and from the aspects of the purity of the figure, including the founders of the Albanian state in 1912, who had not been compromised at all with the Italian fascist occupation.

Even in the period of German occupation, the Regency regime in Albania has had full internal autonomy and has exercised almost complete sovereignty in all aspects, except for issues of strategic security. German requests for financial contributions have also been reduced, and, in terms of protecting of the Albanian Jews, the Regency Regime has not responded to the German military authorities; they have

carefully protected its citizens of Jewish origin and others who have come to seek housing on the Albanian territory.

Undoubtedly, we are dealing with a trap of the Nazis, who used the reputation of these intellectuals, their well-known patriotism, for the strategic objectives of keeping open the communication routes that connected the South Balkans with the North.

In this way, the country's elite fell victim to this trap, but the people who led Albania in 1944 took on this task, as a rescue mission for the country, as they knew quite well the problems that Albania would face due to the interventions of chauvinist forces of neighboring Balkan countries, which had always fought to divide this country.

The preservation of public order and the protection of the territorial integrity of the lands inhabited by Albanians in a national state became their mission, against which acted simultaneously all the political-military forces in Yugoslavia, both Tito's communists and Drazha Mihajlovic's nationalists' forces.

In this trap Albanian intellectuals who governed the country during 1944, remained, as martyrs of the homeland, unable to save the homeland from the new aggression that was being prepared after the escape of the Germans, from the communists led by Tito's headquarters.

The mission of stabilizing the political order, restoring independence, recomposing the ruling political elite, calming the country, keeping Albania within its natural national borders, resulted in an impossible political and administrative operation, somewhat naive, unrealistic, due to the circumstances of the start and continuation of the reconstruction work, due to a world war with balances that changed outside Albania, due to the "trap" created by the German Nazis and the communists in their clash in the country and in the Balkans.

In this way, the utopian attempt of the nationalist forces, in the autumn of 1943, to restore Legality on September 1, 1928 (The date of the proclamation of Constitutional Monarchy of King Zog I), proved impossible, naive, and unrealistic.

Regarding the examination of resistance against fascism:

Until September 1943, the Albanian guerrillas, regardless of political affiliation, nationalist or communist, remained united and did not fall victim of quarrels with each other.

The collapse of Italy occurred at the very time when the National Liberation Movement led by Communists rejected the Agreement reached in August 1943 between the multi-colored nationalist resistance and the communists, and issued in September 1943, the call for war against nationalist forces.

It is the time when, in Albania, unlike many other European countries, the resistance forces, instead of creating and maintaining a united front against the German Armies that were knocking on the doors of the country, were involved in an internal civil war, at least from November 1943 until November 1944.

This civil war accompanied the entire period of German occupation of Albania and gave to the events that happen in this country, the different characteristics from other countries.

By this definition I will not say that the Albanian partisans did not wage a fierce war against the occupier, but they, in an attempt to seize the monopoly of war and power, expended most of their energy against the nationalist forces that were also trying to fight the occupier.

Thus, in Albania, during 1944, two wars took place simultaneously: the national liberation war and the most important, the civil war between two fractions.

A completely unforeseen phenomenon occurred in Albania: The nationalist resistance forces, under the attack of the partisans, during 1944, decided to stop the actions against the occupying forces and to

take a wait-and-see attitude towards 20000 soldiers of the German Army. This phenomenon is not absolute but happened with most nationalist's forces.

With the full withdrawal of German forces, in the circumstances when there was no Anglo-American landing in Albania, so much welcomed by the people and nationalist forces, the partisans, commanded by the communists, found themselves in control of power in Albania.

The events of the Second World War in Albania took place within a large international scheme, about which the Albanians not only could not appreciate and perhaps did not even understand.

According to the assessments of the British observers of the SOE who were on a mission in Albania, there are two political and military traps in which the political wings of Albania were placed during the German occupation, from September 1943 to November 1944:

First, the German scheme has been focused on promoting traditional nationalism and patriotism, through the promise of independence and neutrality of the Albanian state on the ethnic borders and the unmasking of the extremist policy of the National Liberation Movement leaded by communists, against traditional Albania, against National Elite, to those who founded Albanian State.

Secondly, the British have defined the Tito's delegates to the Albanian communists, as the instigators and initiator of the Civil War in Albania, which means as instigators of the extremist policies of Enver Hoxha, the future dictator of Albania. The intervention of the Serbian communists broke the alliance between the forces of the Albanian resistance and led to the incitement of fratricide. The beginning of this internal turmoil of anti-fascist forces relocated the main focus of the war, which was the

fight against the Nazi war machine in Albania, a transit country for the Wehrmacht.

The question is why the Yugoslav communists intervene in the disruption of the Albanian resistance?

Is this intervention related to the different perspectives of the territorial definition of the Albanian state by the communist in one part and nationalists in another side?

We must remember that after the collapse of Italy and the arrival of German troops, there was a possibility of Anglo- American landing in Albania and the Balkans. This meant that nationalist forces had to be strengthened and projected towards power in the post-war period. Consequently, the Yugoslavian communists from who depended the Albanian Communist had designed a return of the borders of Albania to the definitions of 1913 and 1921.

But a Western Allied forces' landing in Albania and a government of Albanian nationalists in Tirana would call into question the entire Yugoslavian project for the recapture of Kosovo and other Albanian lands once again in the new Yugoslavia.

Precisely for this reason, in September 1943, instigated by Tito, Enver Hoxha ordered the start of the war against rival nationalist political organizations of the Albanian resistance. The above is evidenced from the documentary point of view by the Members of the British military mission operating in Albania in the two camps of the anti-fascist resistance.

Also, the end of the Second World War for Albania, brought not only the end of public hopes for the return of constitutional precedence and order of the country, but also the irreversible destruction of social order,

social hierarchy, inter-provincial political balance for due to the violent overlap of partisan brigades from Southern Albania to the North of the country.

The entry of Albanian and Yugoslav partisans into northern Albania and Kosovo brought about the destruction of the cultural values that the prominent urban centers of Albania had built in several decades; brought into the destruction of Northern Albania and its historical cities: Shkodra, Tirana, Durrës, Gjakova, Prizrendi and the areas governed with undeclared autonomy, such as: Mirdita, Dukagjini, Malësia in general.

Along with them, they irreversibly disrupt and destroyed the institutions of freedom, constitutionalism, political pluralism, customary law, religious institutions and the entire intellectual class, the middle class of the country.

This regressive process turned Albania into a major stain of poverty and backwardness for 7 decades in Europe.

The third issue I want to address is the treatment of Jews during the Second World War in Albania.

According to the 1930' Albanian census, 204 Albanian citizens of Jewish origin lived in Albania.

Historical state documents in Albania confirm that during the 1930s, before the start of the war, Albania and the Albanian state served as a place of refuge and transit for thousands of Jews persecuted in Germany and Austria.

In the years 1933-1935, with the initiative of the American ambassador in Tirana, Herman Bernstein, a project was developed for the settlement in Albania, respectively in the Myzeqe (Muzaka) area of Jewish families from Germany and Austria.

The documents of 1938 show that the number of Jewish families intending to settle in the area of Myzeqe in Albania, had reached 5000. However, the precipitation of events in Europe and the miserable situation of Albania under the occupying pressure of Mussolini, hindered this project.

In 1930 a large number of Jewish inhabitants from the city of Thessaloniki came and settled in Albania.

In 1937, the Jewish community was officially recognized by the Albanian state, as a religious community, with all the rights as other religious communities in Albania. So, in the peak of Jewish persecution in Europe, the Albanian State gave legally protection to them, as a community in total.

From 1937 a large number of Jews came to Albania from Poland and Czechoslovakia. During 1939 the number of immigrants increased considerably with more arrivals from Vienna and Germany, 95 families.

It is a completely special treatment compared to other Balkan countries

This is not only about the hospitable and protective attitude of the Albanian people, but also about the completely different attitude held by the so-called collaborationist governments, both under the Italians and under the Germans towards the Jews in Albania.

The first definition I want to state, is that there has been no anti-Semitic policy in Albania before and during the Second World War.

The governments considered quisling, both during the period of Italian occupation and those during the control of the German Army, did not carry out any purge against the Jews, but issued protection orders for them, which is a very big change, from what has happened in other countries with typical collaborationist governments, such as: Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania.¹

I want to bring three examples for the audience:

1. The effort of the Minister of Education of Albania Ernest Koliqi, the national poet Pader Gjergj Fishta and the writer Lasgush Poradeci for the salvation of the greatest albanologist of Jewish origin, Profesor Norbert Jokl, since September 1939. Norbert Jokl was professor at University of Vienna, and after the Anschluss, was endangered by the Nazis.
2. Issuance of Albanian passports to about 2000 Jews in Albania by the Minister of Interior Kole Bib Mirakaj, August 1943.

¹ Shih: Sabrina P. Ramet, Ola Listhaug (editors), *Serbia and the Serbs in World War Two*, Palgrave Macmillan 2011.

3. No Jew has been handed over by the civilian population in Albania. They found shelter and protection from the common people of Albania. The greatest defenders of Jewish families became the common Albanian families, which, at the height of the aggression of the Gestapo forces in Albania, did not surrender any single Jew within the territory of Albania. The names of these Albanian families who saved the Jews are listed in the Yad Vashem Museum – The World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

It is estimated that Interior Minister Kole Bib Mirakaj have helped rescue of some 2,000 Jews in Albania during the last period of the Italian occupation. It was 1943, when German forces were arriving in Albania. A considerable number of Jews were in Albanian territory and were endangered by the German Nazis. At that time, it was the Minister of Interior Kole Bibë Mirakaj, who headed this department in the period May 1943 - September 1943. An order of him, dated August 31, 1943, obliged the issuance of Albanian passports to all Jews in the territory of our country at that time.

Through Albanian passports they could travel and find refuge in the Southern Italy, part of what was then liberated by allied Anglo-American forces.²

Minister Mirakaj's decision reveals the level of independence from the fascist authorities, the characteristic humanism of the traditional Albanians, who respects trust and hospitality.

And during the German Occupation, the traditional code of trust and hospitality of Albanians was generally respected in this subject, albeit in silence by the German Nazi Army. From the documents of the time it

² Faik Quku, *“Qëndresa Shqiptare gjatë Luftës së Dytë Botnore” (1941-1944)*, Tiranë, 2006.

results that the Albanian government during the German occupation refused to submit to the occupation authorities neither the lists of the Jews that were in Albania nor to make any registration. This attitude of the Albanian government in the period of the German occupation towards the Jews, was a continuation of a similar and special attitude, which had kept the previous Albanian governments before and under the Italian occupation, towards the Jewish community located in Albania. This attitude was constructive part of the Albanian Besa, (keeping the word given among human beings regardless of affiliation) towards persecuted people everywhere, who had lived in its bosom for many decades.

Otherwise, the existence of an official line of state protection towards the Jews, by the Albanian governments for the entire period of the years (1939-1944), is a complete fact of a well-known official line, which can not be left out without encouraged to think about the existence of significant executive autonomy in defining the lines of domestic policy.

The attitude of the Albanian governments under occupation towards the Jews is completely different from the attitudes held by other collaborationist governments in the Balkan countries.

The protection of the Jews by the governments under occupation in Albania, a fact that makes us proud even today, is a proof that within the official Albanian elite, accused so far indiscriminately as a genuine part of the fascist machine, after there was a nucleus civilized and humane, who has behaved independently of foreign rulers.

However, this does not mean that during the occupation within the territory administered by the Albanian state there were no surrenders of Jews by the Italian occupation authorities. During my archival research I managed to find at least one case of surrender of Jews in exchange, by

the Italian Carabinieri in the border area between Kosovo administered by Albania and Kosovo administered by Serbia, with the direct knowledge of Jakomoni, Mussolini and Conti Çiano ³

It is understood from the documentation that there were 51 Jews exchanged by Italian Carabinieri in 1943 in Mitrovica. However, the attempt of the Italians to exchange another 200 Jews who were in the Pristina Concentration Camp, was stopped by the former Prime Minister and Senator Mustafa Kruja, who intervened with the Italian authorities. They were transferred to the interior of Albania and saved.

³ ASDME, fondi: Gabinetto Albania 1938-1945, busta 125. Nga telegramin e Mëkëmbësisë së Përgjithshme të datës 31 mars 1942 drejtuar Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme, Gabinetto Albania, tregohet se me datën 18 mars 1942 në Prishtinë, nga Nën Kolonel De Leo është zbatuar urdhëri i dorëzimit të 51 hebregjeve autoriteteve policore gjermane, ndërkohë që në dispozicion të karabinierisë italiane në Prishtinë janë ende edhe 100 hebreg të tjerë të gatshëm për t'u shkëmbyer, në bazë të marrëveshjeje për shkëmbim të personave tëndjekur nga ligji në Shqipëri. Të implikuar rezultojnë Jakomoni, Legati i Italisë në Beograd Memeli dhe vetë Conti Çiano.



MBRETNIJA SHQIPTARE

Ministria e Arsimit

Tiranë, më 6/X/1941

Nr. Prot. 370/33

Shkurtimi:

Gjegje e shkresës Nr. dt.

Të nderueshmit Zotni

Dr. Prof. Norbert Jokl

Vjenë

Tue çmuem veprimtarin t'Uej, qi tash sa vjetë keni zhvilluem rreth ditunis gjuhësore shqipe me anë botimesh të randsishme, Këshilli i Ministravet me vendimim e vet Nr. II28, me 3 Shtatuer 1941-XIX pranoi proponimin e Ministris e Arsimit për të Ju marrun në shërbim me kontratë për një vjetë kohë, d. m. th. prej 1 Korrikut 1941 deri me 30 Qershuer 1942-XIX si organizatuer të bibjotekavet të Shqipnis me rrogë muejore prej fr. shq. 600 (gjashtëqind).

Jemi të sigurtë se prej veprimit t'Uej arsimit i ynë dhe i tanë populli shqiptar do të nxjerrë një përfitim të madh shkencuer. Ju lutemi qi porsa t'a merrni këtë shkresë, të kryeni formalitetet e udhtimit e të niseni sa më parë për në Tiranë.



MINISTRI:

[Handwritten signature]

279/45-4



MBRETNIJA SHQIPTARE
 MINISTRIJA E P. TË MBRENDËSHME
 ZYRA POLITIKE

Tiranë, më 3. 11. 194

Nr. 110

REZERVAT

TELEGRAM SHIFËR

PREFEKTURAVE
 DREJTORIS PËRGJITHSHME POLICIS

Tiranë

SHKURTIMI:

Lutemi qe gjithë ebrejve nenshtetas shqiptar që kërkojnë pasaperta për Itali, t'u lshohen pa u sjellë asnjë pengim për vende dhe per familjet e tyre.

Tu presiten Kuesturat qe të shkapercejnë qde formalitet, mbassi çashtja ka randësi të veçantë politike.

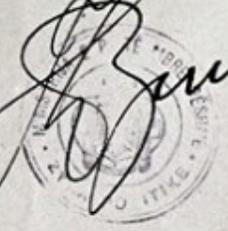
Për vistikim nga Delegacioni Italian t'interesuemit kujdesen vetë.

MINISTRI:

Ministri Shkurtar,
Regj. Pasaportave,

Per-udhëtores - rreptues
Regj. Prefektur.

[Signature]



31/11/44

Pres.

After the departure of German troops from Albania, on November 29, 1944, instead of the liberation and victory of freedom, the Albanian people, victims of the invasions of Italy and Germany, gradually succumbed to a dictatorship regime, much more brutal than the previous invasions.

The autumn of 1944 is the time of the accelerated decline of the traditional ruling elite of the country, under the blow of the weapons of the communist partisans and in the circumstances of the precipitation of legal and ordinal vacuum.

The end of the Second World War for Albania, i.e. the liberation of the country, the fall of the government of patriots labeled as "traitors", brought the end of public hopes for the return of constitutional precedence under King Zog, the order of normalcy in the country.

There was an irreversible destruction of the social order, of the social hierarchy, of the inter-provincial political imbalance of the leadership; there was an immediate destruction of free civic communities and, along with them, all the cultural values that Albania's most prominent urban centers had built for decades.

However, the coming of the communists to power undermined Albania's independence, turning it, first into an annex to the Yugoslav state and then into a Moscow satellite.

All the previous state tradition, the institutional order, the nation state was destroyed and together with that, this story that I brought to you here, was taught completely differently to Albanian students for at least 5 decades.

This regressive process will turn Albania into a great stain of poverty and backwardness for seven decades in Europe, a place of Soviet Gulags, mass extermination camps:

I want to mention some of the concentration camps that the communists built and administered in Albania for almost half a century:

Tepelena, or as it was called, Buhenwald of Albanian communism,

Gjinokastras Catacomb Prison

Vlora's Prison

Shtyllas Camp,

Radostina Camp,

Zadrima Camp,

Shkodra Prisons, located as ironically, in the holy places of the Catholic Church, Construction Camp in Tirana,

Burrel Prison (where 400 prisoners died, including the prime minister who built that prison, Koço Kote).

The terrible camps of the Maliq Swamp, Orman Pojan; Vloçisht Camp, Gradisht Camp, Savres Camp, Spaç Prison, etc.

I want to draw your attention even for another serious fact of persecution:

Starting from 1945 in Albania, a differentiated strike began against Catholic Church and Albanian Catholics community.

Missionary activity was paralysed, and priests were isolated and killed.

Church records show that during 46 years of dictatorship, 228 clerics were interrogated, deported to internment camps or imprisoned.

An estimated 139 catholic priests were executed or died in prison.

In total, Catholic leaders spent some 1,250 years in prison or concentration camps.

In the early years of the Hoxha regime, the church's educational structure was destroyed. Its contribution to Albanian culture, from prior to the Ottoman invasion to the modern era, was denied. The regime put particular emphasis on erasing the church's role in Albanian literature and in the foundation of the first Albanian language schools; the role of Catholic priests and intellectuals to Albanian nation building was suppressed. Hoxha's hatred of the Church partly derived from the role that the clergy had played in Albania's cultural and political rebirth.

Most Albanian priests had been educated in foreign universities, and they represented a vital part of the country's intellectual elite. They simultaneously protected local customs and integrated Albania into a European context.

Their political goal was freedom and equality within the state for all citizens and as such they represented a serious threat to Communist rule - and in our own day, to the less than fully democratic governments in Tirana (Albania) and Pristina (Kosovo).

The oppression that the Church suffered in Albania under Communism was all-encompassing, at its worst during the early years, 1945-8, and in the Albanian Cultural Revolution, 1967-8, when religious institutions

and activities were outlawed, culminating in Hoxha's proclamation in 1967 of the world's first constitutionally atheist state. The damage inflicted in the Sixties is almost indescribable. All the Church's material assets were confiscated or destroyed, the buildings either razed or converted to other uses, including a number of historic churches built by Franciscans and Dominicans when they first came to Albania.

The Catholic community suffered exclusion from social and political life and education and from the destruction of private property. Catholics were completely excluded from political representation and continue to be to this day.

With the fall of the dictatorship in 1991, the situation of the Catholic community in Albania was very difficult after 46 years of exclusion from education and employment. Most of the Catholic community in the capital of northern Albania, Shkodra, emigrated. Since then, there has been only partial progress towards representative leadership and integration in the state and in my view, progress has slowed particularly when Socialists are in government. They have never apologised for the persecution of the Church under Communism.

The very welcome visit by Pope Francis to Tirana in 2016 and the Vatican's canonisation of the 38 Albanian martyrs of the Communist era was not just an official confirmation of a dark chapter in Albania's history, but also a sign of support for the proper integration of Albania's Catholic population into political and social life - integration that has faltered, in my view.

I want to draw your attention that Today, the Albanian Catholic community in Albania is undergoing dramatic decline, because of failures to ensure its fair representation in administration and government.

In Kosovo, in the post-Yugoslav era, almost 60 per cent of the community has emigrated, mainly to Croatia, Switzerland and Germany. There are currently 35,000 Catholics in Kosovo and an estimated 40,000 abroad. In rare cases, Catholics have fled direct persecution; their

departure is due more to insecurity and unemployment, the absence of fair competition and political corruption. The Catholic Church, however, has a good reputation in Kosovo and there are no curbs on its activities. However, since independence, the international focus on the rights of the Serb minority has meant little emphasis on the rights of Catholics. A bill to provide legal status for religious communities in Kosovo has still not been passed.

As a conclusion:

The Second World War and Cold War that followed, the involvement of the Albanian Communist regime of Tirana within the Soviet Bloc, brought about the destruction of social and state normalcy of Albania, the destruction of the country's ruling elite and cessation of the process of the state Europeanisation for more than 50 years.

The current situation of Albania, which fails to integrate in EU, is, among the other reasons, a product of this long- term restraint.