

# THE ALBANIAN MIGRATION OF 1991

## Abstract

Between March and August 1991, two waves of migrants coming from Albania clashed against the daily life of the Italian people.

About 40.000 Albanians have faced the Adriatic Sea waters in order to land on the Italian coast and escape from the oppressive reality that characterized their homeland and seek luck in the West. To welcome them a country which, until those dramatic events, was characterized by outgoing migratory flows and therefore unprepared to face the proverbial flip of the coin.

On March 7, 1991, while the regime of Ramiz Alia was opening up to democratic transition under the pressure of reform-minded student movements, thousands of Albanian migrants landed on the Italian coast. According to the *Quotidiano* of Brindisi<sup>1</sup>, their number was approaching 30 thousand, crammed in the freighters Tirana and Lirija. After a first stop to the disembarkation carried out by the Italian government, which was waiting to deal with the Albanian authorities, they were given the opportunity to be rescued and welcomed by the Brindisi dwellers.

An equally dramatic scenario will occur in August, with the arrival of other Albanian migrants in a context, however, profoundly different from that of the first wave. Before proceeding with the reconstruction of those dramatic months, it is appropriate to outline the motives that led the Albanian fugitives to face the Adriatic Sea in order to reach the west, or at least its antechamber.

This essay aims at reconstructing the events surrounding the 1991 Albanian migration, highlighting the motivations that led migrants to flee their homes to Italy. It will be analysed the impact of their arrival on the lives of Italians and the political line of the Italian and Albanian governments in managing the case.

## Sailing towards West

Several reasons are behind the decision of the Albanians to leave their homeland, at a crucial moment in the history of Albania.

The death of Enver Hoxha and the subsequent rise to power of Ramiz Alia in 1985 is certainly one of these reasons. At the head of the Party of Labour, Hoxha became the dictator of Albania in 1944, establishing one of the harshest Stalinist regimes in the world. A rigidity furtherly accentuated with the break with the Yugoslavia of Tito and, later, even with Nikita Khrushchev, guilty of having conducted a political line “far from that for which Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin fought”<sup>2</sup>.

The dictator, of Marxist-Leninist faith, quickly got rid of any effective or potential opponent, erasing any trace of opposition. Having broken off relations with the leader of the Soviet Union, he completely isolated Albania from both the communist regimes of the western world, whose culture was severely prohibited in all of its forms. He also banned all religious worships, placing the working class in the foreground instead.

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<sup>1</sup> “L'esodo/ Quando Brindisi, 25 anni fa, scopri d'avere un cuore d'oro”.(2016). in *Quotidiano di Puglia* <https://www.quotidianodipuglia.it/brindisi/l-esodo-degli-albanesi-solidale-generosa-quando-brindisi-25-anni-fa-scopri-d-un-cuore-d-oro-1591403.html>

<sup>2</sup> Bowers, S. R. (1989). Stalinism in Albania: Domestic Affairs under Enver Hoxha. *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 87. [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov\\_fac\\_pubs/87](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/87)

The life of the Albanians was heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the Labour Party and the rigid dogmas of Hoxha. Citizens were not allowed to leave the country and to come into contact with the diabolical culture of the outside, judged as "decadent".

The party claimed to control people in every aspect of their lives, going so far as to consider gossip or even jealousy as punishable behaviours. The goal for the Albanian head of state was to create a lineage of revolutionaries that could prosper, even after his death. His successor, Ramiz Alia, on one hand wholeheartedly opposed political change in Albania, on the other hand knew that the country needed to lose its restraints towards the outside world. Since 1984, allegedly with Enver Hoxha's blessing, Alia started to normalize English-Albanian diplomatic relations and expressed his desire to create links with Spain.

Alia indeed realized that Albania needed to overcome its political and economic isolation, which perdured since 1978 with the break with China, and seek allies. The end of the relations with Beijing, in fact, forced the country to follow a policy of extreme self-sufficiency, relying only on the internal resources and manpower. He thus allowed abroad investments and tried to revitalize the economy through perestroika-like reforms, which were proved to be tardive and unsuccessful: the chrome production, Albania's industrial staple, critically slowed. Factories, rural cooperatives, small and medium enterprises had to work in contrast with the law of demand, with obsolete and consequently irreparable Soviet and Chinese machinery. Finally, the dry summer of 1990 further worsened the situation: Albania's rivers were parched, interrupting the hydroelectric factories and depriving the country of most of its energetic reserves. Those factors led to massive unemployment, food shortages and social unrest, which culminated in several demonstrations<sup>3</sup>.

During one of the aforementioned protests, on the 2nd of July 1990, tens of thousands of mostly young people took to the streets of Tirana and invaded 14 ambassies, asking for asylum. After an initial obstruction, the Albanian police started to tolerate and even encourage the flood of citizens towards the diplomatic buildings. Under pressure from the reformist wing of the Labour Party and advised by UN representatives, Alia finally allowed the so-called "hooligans" to leave the country.

This event would be the first piece of a domino that will culminate in the migration of March 1991 in Italy. The choice of destination implies a series of reasons, beyond the mere geographical proximity.

## **Italians and Albanians: the early contacts**

Italians and Albanians had already come into contact before the landing at Brindisi, during the colonial experience of Fascist Italy: from 1939 to 1943, that is, the capitulation of the Italian army, Albania was an Italian protectorate with a considerable strategic value in the war against Greece.

Despite the so-called Albanian Kingdom had a short life, the Italian authorities invested significantly on Albanian infrastructure, showing how "the Italians built as though they intended to remain in Albania for a long time."<sup>4</sup> Assistant Professor of Transnational Italian Studies Stephanie Malia Hom argues that hospitality "became the dominant trope of colonial rhetoric in Italian-occupied Albania. As such, Albanians were framed as willing hosts to their Italian colonizer-guests and, implicitly, their hospitality indicated a willingness to become subjugated to Italian rule."<sup>5</sup>

To this is added the work carried out by the Dante Alighieri society, starting in 1930, which contributed to the spread of Italian culture and language, organizing photographic exhibitions celebrating fascism and creating Italian schools and libraries.

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<sup>3</sup> Rama, S.A. (Ed.). (2019). *The End of Communist Rule in Albania: Political Change and the Role of the Student Movement* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429242991>

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, P. (2015). *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans*. *Mc Farland*. P.145.

<sup>5</sup> Hom, S. M. (2012). Empires of Tourism: Travel and Rhetoric in Italian Colonial Libya and Albania, 1911–1943, *Journal of Tourism History* 4, 3 (2012): 281–300 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2012.711374>

Although many of the initiatives of "italianization" were not effective, a large number of Italian citizens, in addition to soldiers, migrated to Albania to work in schools, in the public administration of the protectorate or as a labor force for the construction of roads and railways. Some of them moved with their family, many others married Albanian women, thinking of starting a new life. According to Alessandro Serra, one of the Italian-Albanian residents, the Italians settled in the Baltic state enjoyed a standard of living significantly superior to what their war-torn homeland could offer.<sup>6</sup>

With the seizure of power by Enver Hoxha, the situation for the Italians in Albania changed drastically. Despite the fact that many Italians fought alongside the Albanian Liberation Front, as in the case of the Gramsci Battalion, Hoxha began confiscating their assets and those of their firms, arresting and executing those accused of sabotage. Even after the "Hoxha-Palermo agreement", which was meant to regulate the issue of the repatriation of the Italians, many of them were forced to stay, partly because of the clauses that allowed the stay of specialists for the reconstruction of the country, partly because the newly formed Italian government had no other means than diplomacy to break the iron curtain placed by the Albanian Dictator. For this reason, it is plausible that among the 800 Albanians helped by the Italian embassy in Tirana there were the same Italians unable to return in 1945, or in any case their descendants.<sup>7</sup>

## **Italian TV: a colourful utopia**

Several historians agree that Italian television played an important role in the choice of Albanians. Until 1990, Albanian national television consisted of only one channel, broadcasting between 6 and 10 p.m. The program included only Albanian or Soviet films, strongly focused on pro-regime propaganda, whose purpose was to indoctrinate the audience rather than to entertain it. The viewing of Italian programs was banned in 1973, when the broadcasting of television sets and discontent with the isolationism of Tirana was increasing dangerously, according to Hoxha. The dictator launched an official campaign to discourage the viewing of external content, tried to disturb the frequencies and began to arrest all citizens in possession of equipment meant to receive foreign broadcasts. Although Hoxha's death had led to a general relaxation in this area, the penalties for offenders remained extremely harsh until 1990: anyone who tuned into foreign TV or radio programs was liable to 8 or 9 years in prison, even talking about such shows was considered a subversive activity. The reason behind such a rigour is on the one hand the obsession of the regime to totally screen the outside world, on the other the incredible popularity enjoyed by Italian programs among the Albanian population. They were fascinated by the difference in the content, variety and quality of the broadcasts, which conveyed the image of a utopian country, a window on the West and on all that the regime had deprived them.

The reality in Italy and the West in general was profoundly different from the beauty that captured the Albanians, as they would discover once landed on the Adriatic coast as the landings increased, but at the same time Western television was crucial in Albanian political change, as evidenced by the protests that led to the end of communism even in its last European stronghold.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Serra, A. (1974). *Albania 8 Settembre 1943–9 Marzo 1944*. Longanesi. Milano

<sup>7</sup> Ballinger, P. (2018). A Sea of Difference, a History of Gaps: Migrations between Italy and Albania, 1939–1992. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60(1), 90-118. doi:10.1017/S0010417517000421

<sup>8</sup> Mai, N. (2004). 'Looking for a More Modern Life...': the Role of Italian Television in the Albanian Migration to Italy. Westminster Papers in *Communication and Culture*. Doi:[10.16997/wpsc.200](https://doi.org/10.16997/wpsc.200)

## The first wave

On the morning of March 7, when the city of Brindisi found itself flooded with Albanian migrants, the locals found themselves in a state of emergency, without the help of the central government, unable to mobilize quickly. Once the Albanians were taken to tents, built mainly in the regions of southern Italy, while the government suffered harsh criticism from the locals for its lack of organization and alleged corruption in the management of the issue.

The Italian executive, led by the Christian Democrat Giulio Andreotti, was in fact faced with an impasse. The Stalinist regime, from which they fled, was giving way to a multi-party and democratic system, so there was uncertainty as to whether the Albanians were asylum seekers or economic migrants. The said uncertainty complicated the action of the Italian government, considering that the then-in-force Martelli law allowed only refugees to remain and receive a subsidy equal to 750,000 Lire per month, while the remaining ones had to have guaranteed work and housing upon their arrival in order to stay.

Eventually, a special exception was made to the Martelli law, ensuring the permanence in Italy to all those who had found work by July 31. In the months following the first wave the Italians showed solidarity and commitment towards the "Adriatic brothers", as they were defined by the Italian Prime Minister. Andreotti himself adopted two of the many Albanian children without parents who landed in March. Many Italians and the national press showed spontaneous support for the Albanians, while the government, albeit late, decided to move according to humanitarian logic.

Nevertheless, the feeling of communion with the rediscovered "Adriatic brothers" was not fully shared among the citizens of the Italian peninsula. Cultural Anthropology Professor Dorothy Louise Zinn reports that only 10% of Italians, in surveys conducted by *Corriere della Sera*, showed interest in the Albanian Crisis. Moreover, the study conducted by Professor Zinn in the region of Basilicata, one of the regions of southern Italy where the Albanians have been settled, emerges a shared feeling of impatience for the presence of guests and, above all, for the daily subsidy of 25,000 lire intended for these. In areas with low employment and a shortage of opportunities, the arrival of the Albanians has inevitably brought to the surface the still unresolved Southern Question, which, combined with the difficult integration with the Albanian fugitives, has aroused discontent in the local population.<sup>9</sup> Considering these factors, it is not surprising the change of direction implemented by Italy with regard to the events of the following August 1991, the second wave of Albanian migrants.

## The second wave

Among the most evocative images of the Albanian migration of 1991, the landing in the port of Bari of the overcrowded ship *Vlora*, which was attacked and hijacked by thousands of desperate Albanians the previous day, is certainly one of the most impactful.

After a journey of about 36 hours in miserable conditions, the *Vlora* and other equally crowded ships arrived on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August in the Italian port, where their joy for having reached the free west met with a clearly changed context, compared to the events of March.

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<sup>9</sup> Zinn, D. L. (1996). *Adriatic Brethren or Black Sheep?: Migration in Italy and the Albanian Crisis, 1991*. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 3(3), 241–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096977649600300304>

First, the public opinion, from a positive position towards the refugees, who emphasized the connection between Italians and Albanians at the historical, cultural and ethnic level, turned to a more bitter and intolerant towards the Albanian question. The Italian media, likewise, began to highlight the problems caused by the newcomers and how the increase in landings was slowly assuming the traits of a real invasion.

Second, The Italian and Albanian governments had intensified their relations in the months following the first landings. On March 12, the Italian Vice President of the Council Martelli had been in conversation with the Albanian President Alia and his Prime Minister Nano in Tirana. The Italian deputy obtained the release of political prisoners detained in Albania, the commitment of the Albanian government to stop further departures and the promise of new elections and impunity for returnees, in exchange for food and pharmaceutical resources<sup>10</sup>. In this way Italy and Albania had laid the foundations for a collaboration in the management of the crisis and in the definition of a common objective: to stop the migration flow and prevent further unrest, in both countries. For his part, the Andreotti government had been able to understand that hospitality had a limit, both for the State's finances and for its citizens.

Third, as Albania progressed in its path of democratization, in the former Yugoslavia the Balkan wars had brought to light horrors that rivalled those of the Second World War. It can be argued that Italy was in danger of becoming a sort of beacon of hope for all asylum seekers, a title that was rather uncomfortable for a country of emigration rather than immigration, therefore unprepared, as the events of March have demonstrated. It is also necessary to recall that Italy, like the other members of the European Community, had joined the Schengen acquis, so becoming a safe haven for the fugitives from the war or a channel for them to arrive in Europe would have penalized the Italian reputation in the international context.

For the above reasons the attitude of the Italian government changed towards a political line of rigour towards migrants and assistance towards the new Albanian democracy, considering as irregular all the Albanians who landed in Bari and collaborating with Tirana for repatriation. More than 7000 asylum seekers were grouped in the Della Vittoria stadium in the Apulian capital, in a condition that international observers, in addition to a part of the Italians themselves, judged as "inhuman", flanking the image of the stadium that of a lager<sup>11</sup>. A part of the migrants at the stadium, the so-called "hardliners"<sup>12</sup>, firmly resisted the deportation, even arriving at the clash with the Italian police forces. These had already confiscated a large number of weapons that the Albanians brought with them, further increasing the climate of tension that was breathed those fateful days. The Andreotti government decided to carry out what would soon be revealed as "Operation Sardinia", promising to confer the asylum seekers the status of refugees, in order to lure them out of the stadium and proceed with repatriation<sup>13</sup>. A move considered by the foreign press as vile and incorrect, but that proved functional to the purpose and, above all, in line with what had been agreed with Tirana.

## Conclusions

The Albanian crisis has certainly marked Italian history, suddenly and with an unexpected harshness. What seemed like a story that ended with the classic happy ending, has quickly turned into a critical situation, with

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<sup>10</sup> Mazzone, S. (2018). *Narrare le migrazioni tra diritto, politica, economia*. Bonanno.

<sup>11</sup> "Diecimila in rivolta nello stadio lager". (1991). in *Corriere della Sera*, [https://archivio.corriere.it/ArchivioPreProd/interface/view\\_preview.shtml#!/NjovZXMvaXQvcnNzZGF0aS9AODY2NDU=](https://archivio.corriere.it/ArchivioPreProd/interface/view_preview.shtml#!/NjovZXMvaXQvcnNzZGF0aS9AODY2NDU=)

<sup>12</sup> Longo, A. (1991). "E gli italiani a Tirana temono la rappresaglia" in *La Repubblica*, <https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/1991/08/18/gli-italiani-tirana-temono-la-rappresaglia.html>

<sup>13</sup> Zinn, D. L. (1996). *Adriatic Brethren or Black Sheep?: Migration in Italy and the Albanian Crisis, 1991*. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 3(3), 241–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096977649600300304>

Italy as reluctant protagonist. The country had to face not only the incessant migratory flows from a country in disorder, but also a heavy reflection on its own condition, resulting from the discomfort caused by the reception and settlement of the first refugees.

from a country of emigrants to the promised land of immigrants, Italy had to close its doors to those who, in the light of the difficult Albanian political situation, decided to leave the past behind and start a new life in Italy, that from television appeared colourful, joyful and full of hope and that the homeland could no longer give them.

Those who instead managed to obtain political asylum had to face a complex integration process, given the impact that the "Albanian invasion" had on public opinion, but that can be considered completed today. Most Albanians, generation after generation, have been integrated perfectly into the Italian social fabric. Others have kept their cultural identity alive by forming communities, such as the Arbresh community.

Therefore, it can be discussed that the Albanian crisis, despite the inevitable initial Italian difficulties and subsequent criticism from international public opinion and the Italians themselves, has been managed effectively by the Andreotti government which, although forced to drastic measures, was able to protect its own country and relations with the European community, while at the same time establish stable diplomatic and economic relations with the Albanian state. This renewed collaboration between Italy and Albania contributed to the recovery of the latter's economy, showing how, in the long term, the Italian action has supported the Albanians and their future. This applies both to the refugees who became Italian citizens and to those who have been rejected as economic migrants, separated by a strict and necessary distinction that, even today, is extremely controversial.

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