THE 1990S AS A TIME OF UNMAKING AND REMAKING ALBANIA
28-29 November 2025, Senatsaal (E 106 and E 110) - Ludwig Maximilian University, Geschwister-Scholl Platz 1 Munich, Germany

SYNOPSIS OF THE CONFERENCE

The aim of the conference is to critically (re)examine one of the most transformative decades in Albanian modern history, namely the 1990s, by focusing on the intertwining processes of the violent dismantling of the socialist legacy and the equally violent remaking of the country's cultural, economic, and political spheres under the supervision of the European Union's institutions, the United States, and all manner of international organisations.

The conference will bring together scholars from various disciplines, including anthropology and sociology, art history and cultural studies, history, and political science. By pooling our collective expertise and insights, we hope that the conference will make a significant contribution to the emerging critique of Albania's shift towards neoliberalism in the post-socialist period — a case study for what similarly occurred across the post-socialist space in Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

ORGANISERS

Ylber Marku is a Marie-Curie Research Fellow at the Department of History of the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and a Researcher at the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences of Albania. Prior to the current appointments, Dr. Marku has had academic positions in Xiamen and Hangzhou, China, and has spent some time at the Wilson Center, Washington. D.C, USA, for the Center's program Cold War International History Project. Dr. Marku is a Cold War historian with research interests in Albania's communist past, the circulation of expertise during the Cold War, and the international communist movement. His research has been published in many international journals, including *Cold War History*, *The International History Review* and the *Journal of Cold War Studies.* Dr. Marku obtained his PhD in history from Lingnan University in Hong Kong and is currently working on his book project, tentatively titled *Serving the Revolution: Educational Networks in Communist Albania* which explores Albania's international educational networks during the communist period. Email: ylber.marku@lmu.de / ylbermarku@protonmail.com.

Jonida Gashi is a Senior Researcher at the Centre for Art Studies at the Academy of Sciences of Albania. She has a PhD in Humanities and Cultural Studies from the University of London. Her research explores contemporary art theory and criticism, film theory and the history of the cinema, as well as the artistic experience of post-socialism in Albania. Her work has been published in academic journals and edited volumes, as well as art newspapers and exhibition catalogues, among them: *Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems*, *D'un écran à l'autre, les mutations du spectateur*, *Arts of the Working Class*, *Transnational Crime Cinema*, and *Radical Children's Film and Television*. Her first monograph, *Kinemaja para gjyqit: Nga kinokronika e gjyqeve të popullit te filmat e vigjilencës revolucionare të masave* (*Cinema on Trial: From the Newsreels of the Communist Show Trials to the Revolutionary Vigilance Films*) was published by Pika pa sipërfaqe in 2025. Gashi is editor-in-chief of the journal *Art Studies*, published annually by the Academy of Sciences of Albania, and a founding member of DebatikCenter of Contemporary Art. Email: jonida.gashi@akad.gov.al / jonidag@gmail.com.

SUMMARY OF THE PANELS

Panel I. Art and Politics. (Fri, Nov 28th—morning session / 09:30 - 12:45) Speakers: Raino Isto, Sashenka Lleshaj, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei. *Respondent: Louisa Avgita.*

Panel II. Crisis and Consolidation. (Fri, Nov 28th—afternoon session / 14:30 - 17:30). Speakers: Adrian Brisku, Smoki Musaraj, Maurizio Albahari. *Respondent: Nick Mai.*

Panel III. Regional and International Dimensions. (Sat, Nov 29th—morning session / 09:30 - 12:30). Speakers: Enis Sulstarova, Piro Rexhepi, Isa Blumi. *Respondent: Vjosa Musliu.*

Plenary Session (Sat, Nov 29th —afternoon session, 14:30 – 16:15): With the participation of the organizers, the panellists, the respondents, and the audience.

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DETAILED PROGRAM OF THE CONFERENCE

Day One, 28 November 2025

09:00 - 09:30	Registration	
09:30 - 09:45	Opening Remarks	**Ylber Marku** – *Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich*

Panel I: Art and Politics / Chair: Jonida Gashi

TIME	TITLE	SPEAKER
09:45 - 10:15	The Contemporary Art Society and Its Enemies, or, The High Tide of Prophecy and the Promise of Autumn	**Raino Isto** – *University of Maryland and the American University, Washington D.C., USA*
10:15 - 10:45	The Demolition of the National Theater: Place, Transition, and Reform	**Sashenka Lleshaj** – *Independent scholar, Montreal, Canada*
10:45 - 11:15	From Instability to Utopia: The Art and Politics Emerging from 1990s Albania	**Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei** – *Independent scholar, Tirana*
11:15 - 11:30	**COFFEE BREAK**	
11:30 - 12:00	Presentation of the respondent's report	**Louisa Avgita** – *Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece*
12:00 - 12:45	Q & A	**Panellists + Respondent**
12:45 – 14:30	**LUNCH BREAK**	

Panel II: Crisis and Consolidation / Chair: Ylber Marku

TIME	TITLE	SPEAKER
14:30 - 15:00	Varieties of Economic Nationalism in the Communist Albania of the late 1970s	**Adrian Brisku** – *Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic*
15:00 - 15:30	Neoliberal Capitalism, Ponzi Logics of Accumulation, and Informal Economic Repertoires: The Great Transformations of the 1990s in Albania	**Smoki Musaraj** – *Ohio University, Ohio, USA*

15:30 - 16:00	Democracy and the Bordered Horizon: Notes from the Other Side	**Maurizio Albahari** – *Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA*
16:00 - 16:15	**COFFEE BREAK**	
16:15 - 16:45	Presentation of the respondent's report	**Nick Mai** – *University of Leicester, United Kingdom*
16:45 - 17:30	Q & A	**Panellists + Respondent**

Day Two, 29 November 2025

Panel III: Regional and International Dimensions
Chair: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

TIME	TITLE	SPEAKER
09:30 - 10:00	From Socialism to Europe: Framing Post-Communist Transition in Parliamentary Debates in Albania, 1991-1992	**Enis Sulstarova** – *University of Tirana, Albania*
10:00 - 10:30	Resurfacing Remains of 1990s Albanian Islamophobia	**Piro Rexhepi** – *School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SEES), University College London, United Kingdom*
10:30 - 11:00	Trapped in a Neo-imperial Whirlpool: Albania, Globalization and the Post-Cold War World	**Isa Blumi** – *Stockholm University, Sweden*
11:00 - 11:15	**COFFEE BREAK**	
11:15 - 11:45	Presentation of the respondent's report	**Vjosa Musliu** – *Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Belgium*
11:45 - 12:30	Q & A	**Panellists + Respondent**
12:30 – 14:30	**LUNCH BREAK**	

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Plenary Session / Chair: Jonida Gashi

Time	Title	Speaker
14:30 - 16:00	Plenary Session	With the participation of the organizers, the panellists, the respondents, and the audience.
16:00 - 16:15	Closing Remarks	**Jonida Gashi** – *Centre for Art Studies, Academy of Sciences of Albania, Tirana/Albania*

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ABSTRACTS[1]

- o **The Contemporary Art Society and Its Enemies, or, The High Tide of Prophecy and the Promise of Autumn** – Raino Isto, *University of Maryland / American University*

In 1992, the Soros Foundation co-organized (with the Association of Independent Painters) the National Exhibition of Contemporary Albanian Painting, titled *Autumn '92 (Vjeshtë '92)*. The title of the exhibition cannot help but be read against one of the most famous exhibitions held during the socialist era in Albania, the *Spring* exhibition first held in the early 1970s and more recently re-instituted in 1989, to significant critical discussion in the field of visual arts. The seasonal shift indicated by the naming of the Soros-funded exhibition promised a broader shift, one that would become even more direct by the close of the 1990s, with the Soros Foundation's support of another exhibition, *Ri-Orientation (Ri-Orientim)*, presented in 1997 with the support of Donika Bardha and curated by Edi Muka in the premises of the former Porcelain factory.

What were the stakes of this re-orientation, and what new art forms (and new art infrastructures) did this seasonal shift propose in the Albanian context? This paper sets out to investigate these questions, and more specifically to investigate a broader question. The actions of the Open Society Foundation and the Soros Centers for Contemporary Art (or SCCAs) have often been discussed (in recent studies by Octavian Esanu and Aaron Moulton, for example) as bringing "contemporary art" to Eastern Europe in the so-called era of "transition". Esanu in particular has traced the intellectual trajectory of Soros' investment in culture as a key aspect of the "Open Society" proposed by Popper, and has suggested that "contemporary art" was in fact as much an institutionally defined phenomenon as an aesthetic one, and its institutional form was defined by the importation of neoliberalism into the former socialist world. Here, I am interested in investigating what kinds of definitions of "contemporaneity" were brought into the Albanian context, in particular through the events and discourses promoted by Soros' foundations. While Albania did not have a dedicated SCCA (and was one of few East-Central European countries *not* to have one), it is nonetheless clear that many of the institutional transformations wrought by the SCCAs in other countries were also brought into the Albanian context during with 90s decade, by the Soros Foundation and other funders/organizers.

At the same time, however, I remain mildly skeptical of the arguments put forward by authors like Esanu, who envision the institutional and discursive system put in place through the Soros centers as something radically different from earlier models of culture. As such, I would like to provide a lightly longer history for the idea of an institutional history of "contemporaneity" in art, to consider some of the similarities between socialist-era exhibition-

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[1] [1]Listed in the order of the panel presentations.

making and the discourses that were promoted during the 90s, to see if there are also meaningful strands of continuity between them.

- o **The Demolition of the National Theater: Place, Transition, and Reform** – Sashenka Lleshaj, *independent scholar*

In this paper, I tell the story of the demolition of the National Theater of Albania (17th May 2020) as a story of the *disavowal* of the central art institution as it was inherited from the state socialist system and partially "shielded" during the early transition (1992–1997/8). I use the concept of *place* (Mitchell 2003; Rose-Redwood et al. 2022) to capture demolition as an action directed towards both *a building* and *the central art institution*. Demolition confronted the communist dictatorship, the early transition, and the late transition in different ways, periods I further conceptualize and operationalize in my paper. Through a "genealogy of place" tracing space, building, restructuring, cultural sector reforms, laws, Council of Europe inputs, regulations, and discursive traces that accompanied soft and tectonic changes, I discover that demolition and the "reforming of the arts and culture" go hand in hand, with disavowal of the centrality of art production through the central art institution, as well as of the institution-artist link that the communist regime had engendered, a connection that had initially been shielded during the early transition, especially within the national theater(s).

Instead, Edi Rama embraced a more independent art scene along with redeploying the logic of restructuring from the early transition which had not been taken to its logical conclusion in the central art institutions, in the national theater(s) in particular. In addition, Rama embraced and re-deployed his own turn towards neoliberal cultural sector reforms as Minister of Culture and then Mayor in the late 1990s and early 2000, coupled with an intent to demolish the building ever since. I also bring to scrutiny the involvement of the Council of Europe and their prescriptive "suggestions" about the relationship of the post-communist state to the cultural sector, inquiring further on the "arms length" principle and its intended consequences and bringing a critique of this principle in the Eastern European arts and culture space. Finally, I return to the demolition of the National Theater and its layers through a lens of *displacement, replacement* and *culmination*.

- o **From Instability to Utopia: The Art and Politics Emerging from 1990s Albania – Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei**, *independent scholar*

With the rise of artist–politician Edi Rama to power in the wake of the social and economic collapse of 1997, Albania saw the development of a particular form of propaganda, which married the political narrative of Third Way neoliberal social-democracy to the artistic movement of Relational Esthetics. The power of this discourse resided in the cooptation of a particular esthetics of contemporary art, its edginess and intellectualism – in particular its "ambiguity" – in defense of what was basically yet another form of authoritarianism.

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This paper explores the political and artistic developments of the 1990s that provided the foundations for this unlikely alliance, in particular the transformation of an entire generation of middle cadre "nepo babies" that were thrust into a shock-doctrine capitalist casino system dominated by foreign donor subsistence, Ponzi schemes, and eventual near-civil war. It addresses the question of what precisely is meant with the concept of "transition", and what forms of artistic and political alliance are sustained by it.

There are several points of entry that culminate into the Tirana Biennale project of the early 2000s and the concomitant rise of Edi Rama to a political supremacy that lasts until today. One of those is the story of the collapse of the socialist dictatorship over the course of several months in 1990–1991, and the role of several protagonists from the Art Academy in Tirana, including Edi Rama, in the student protests against the regime and the subsequent introduction of democracy and capitalist shock doctrine. Another thread can be located in the development of foreign connections of the Albanian art scene, mainly through a series of dispatches written by curator Edi Muka on the early but influential and widely read listserv Nettime.

The introduction of Albanian art on the global art stage happens at the 48th Venice Biennale from 1999, which, curated in a "new format" by Harald Szeemann, hosts the first Albanian pavilion under the title "Albania Today", curated by Giancarlo Politi and featuring the works of Gazmend Muka, Alban Hajdinaj, Edi Hila, Astrit Vatnikaj, Lala Meredith-Vula, Sislej Xhafa, Adrian Paci, Edi Rama, and Anri Sala. The same biennale features in its main exhibition many of the new generation of artists that would later be associated with the movement of "Relational Esthetics" and make their appearance at the Tirana Biennale and other projects fostered by Rama: Rirkrit Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, and Olafur Eliasson. The link between the discourse of irony and ambiguity attached to this movement and the Albanian artists presented in Venice is first established by Muka in his 1999 review of the Albanian pavilion under the header of "ironic optimism".

In the same period of the late 1990s and early 2000s we see the ascendancy of "Third Way" social-democratic politics championed by Tony Blair and his influential spin doctor Alastair Campbell. This ideological brand, popularized in the region in part because of Blair's active engagement with the Kosovo Liberation War, then becomes the template for Edi Rama's own political rebranding of the Socialist Party, thus creating within his figure a union between a political ideology and esthetic paradigm.

- o **Varieties of Economic Nationalism in the Communist Albania of the late 1970s** – Adrian Brisku, *Charles University (Prague)/Ilia State University (Tbilisi)*

The very few economic history accounts on communist Albania offer a similar perspective on the country's path to national economic development – a centrally-planned drive to autarchic self-sufficiency that ultimately led to the country's economic implosion and bankruptcy. This perspective might well describe some of the economic impulses this small socialist economy shared with other socialist economies of the Eastern bloc, and not necessarily a similar outcome

for all of them. However, it does not provide a full account of the national economic alternatives of development before the country succumbed to this variant of 'extreme' economic nationalism in the last decade, i.e., the 1980s, of the communist regime. Deploying the conceptual framework that I have recently developed of varieties of economic nationalism, which conceives the political-economic phenomenon of economic nationalism – defined as interventions (in investment, productions, redistribution, and (de) regulations within national economic contexts – manifesting in variant forms, as 'liberal (nations in competition)/progressive (nations in cooperation),' as 'conservative/defensive (nations in a zero-sum game),' and 'extreme' (aggressive/expansionist and/or autarkic nations), this contribution posits that especially in the late 1970s when the small economy could no longer shelter under the large Soviet and subsequent Chinese economies, such alternatives became available and contested. To reconstruct such alternatives, this contribution primarily will draw on archival material containing discussions and debates in the economic committees of late 1970s communist Albania.

- o **Neoliberal Capitalism, Ponzi Logics of Accumulation, and Informal Economic Repertoires: The Great Transformations of the 1990s in Albania** – Smoki Musaraj, *Ohio University*

The 1990s brought a tumultuous wave of political, economic, and social transformations across Eastern Europe and other countries of the former socialist world. Some declared the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) and the triumph of capitalism over its alternatives. Others described the postcommunist transformations as yet another wave of "great transformations," echoing Karl Polanyi's (1944) characterization of earlier capitalist transformations in pre-war England. Albania, a country that pursued one of the most extreme tracks of communism, was eager to embrace the new capitalist promise. Alongside other postcommunist countries, Albania embraced shock-therapy reforms despite a lack of a recent history of capitalist institutions such as private property and commercial banking. Hailed by the international community in 1995 as a leader in democratization and capitalist transformations, by 1997, Albania faced a near "total collapse of the state" (Çupi 2005), an economic collapse and total anarchy that followed the collapse of a dozen Ponzi schemes. These contradictions were also captured in local discourse. In the early nineties, residents described the Ponzi scheme period as one of abundance (*bollëk*) by noting that "even the dogs were eating *petulla*"; following the schemes' collapse, people recalled a sense of a second loss, even more devastating than the collapse of communism.
While the transformations of the early 1990s in Albania may seem to be particular to the site, in this presentation, I argue that the economic and social formations that emerged at this time were a combination of global forces and local repertoires. This presentation will outline the intertwined global and local economic and social institutions and repertoires.
I focus more specifically on global neoliberal policies and economies that emerged at this time, including a push for adopting structural adjustment policies that advised (and strongarmed)

countries to deregulate, privatize, and financialize. I discuss how, in Albania, such policies generated various economic gaps that people and businesses sought to fill through informal economies. These included speculative economic practices (such as the Ponzi schemes), informal business arrangements (such as the use of *sekserë* and of *klering*), and unofficial transfers of remittances from immigrating countries. Some of these economic repertoires, I argue, built earlier economic institutions and practices (such as the communist *llotari* and previous remittance patterns); others were new practices that mimicked neoliberal economic logics (such as the Ponzi logics of accumulation in the pyramid schemes). I discuss the genealogies of these economic repertoires and their persistence, throughout the last three decades, as pillars of the Albanian postcommunist neoliberal economy. While providing insights into Albania's postcommunist trajectory, these reflections also seek to speak to the broader contemporary logics of neoliberal capitalism—which I understand, taking after the work of other anthropologists (Tsing 2015) as an assemblage of capitalist and non-capitalist logics of wealth accumulation and economic life.

- o **Democracy and the Bordered Horizon: Notes from the Other Side** – Maurizio Albahari, *University of Notre Dame*

Efforts against maritime or otherwise purportedly unwanted immigration are routinely pursued not only at sea and on the coast of EU countries, but also well beyond national and EU territory. In the emergence of what today is called border externalization, the Katër i Radës shipwreck (March 28, 1997) stands out in the pioneering context of Italian blockades and pushback operations. More broadly, Italian-Albanian bilateral agreements foreshadow Italian-Libyan and Italian-Tunisian agreements, as well as a panoply of other national and EU "deals" (e.g., with Turkey). Rather than halting or calling into question dubious procedures and unrealistic policy objectives, that lethal collision between an Italian warship and the Katër i Radës was used to further entrench and escalate a system that continues to produce "crimes of peace," as I called them.

Following a basic outline of the events and their legal and artistic legacy, my overarching argument is that the surge in bilateral, "technical", and intergovernmental agreements fostered, and continues to foster, a depoliticization and technicalization of (border) governance. For example, the surge of militantly bordering technodemocracy may allow governments and migration officials to avoid some of the judicial scrutiny they ordinarily face nationally, and to take costly decisions that remain opaque to the vast majority of citizens and media. At the same time, border externalization and the consolidation of emergency and crisis governance modes may reshuffle power relations between countries (or is it merely their governments?). In one example: the Italian establishment of detention/processing/repatriation facilities on Albanian soil points to historical continuities, discontinuities, and perhaps reversals of more or less stereotypical tropes of gratitude. Be that as it may, consolidated regional migration governance, the externalization of borders (and their internalization—more on this if space/time allow), and

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neoliberal governance more generally, shatter the political promise that, perhaps ephemerally, emerged across the Strait of Otranto as a plural, equal, and open space.

- o **From Socialism to Europe: Framing Post-Communist Transition in Parliamentary Debates in Albania, 1991-1992** – Enis Sulstarova, *University of Tirana (Albania)*

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe was not followed by a large-scale assistance program similar to the Marshall Plan, which helped rebuild war-torn Europe after World War II. In the early 1990s, the West instead extended to Eastern Europe the neoliberal policies that had been implemented in the US, Latin America, and Western Europe in the preceding decades. The expectation was that privatizing state assets and marketizing capital, labor, and services would foster capitalism, the rule of law, and democratization. At the same time, members of the European Economic Community (EEC) were strengthening internal integration and moving toward the creation of the European Union, formalized by the Maastricht Treaty of 1993. For the former communist countries, the prospect of joining the EEC offered a form of legitimacy after the collapse of the socialist project. "Europe" became synonymous with the West, representing personal freedom, material wealth, liberation from Soviet/Russian control, and international legitimacy. With the promise of eventually becoming part of "Europe", and under the watchful eye of the West, the new post-communist states began implementing painful economic reforms. These reforms led to rising unemployment, massive emigration, the dismantling of much of the social safety net, social polarization, rural-to-urban migration, and an increase in crime, corruption, and kleptocracy. Emerging political parties in the newly established parliaments debated the direction of these reforms, often using populist rhetoric and nationalism.

Political pluralism in Albania began in late 1990, and the first parliamentary elections were held on March 31, 1991. However, the anti-communist coalition came to power only after the second parliamentary elections on March 22, 1992. During the first two turbulent years of transition, Albania—a xenophobic, impoverished, Stalinist state—saw its parliament play a key role in establishing the legal framework for a market economy open to foreign investment. It also served as a training ground for the new political elite that would govern the country in the decades to come. The first parliamentary sessions were often the focus of public attention, with many debates broadcast live on state television and speeches by MPs published in newspapers. In these parliamentary debates, "Europe" was frequently mentioned alongside ritual condemnations of communism, collectivism, and the "East". This paper examines how the idea of Europe was articulated in Albania's parliament during 1991-1992. The goal is to shed light on the role that the idea of Europe played in legitimizing the reforms of the post-communist transition. The timeframe allows for an analysis of the discourses of the two main parties—the Party of Labor (later the Socialist Party) and the Democratic Party—both in government and in opposition. A preliminary conclusion is that the idea of Europe served as a tool of legitimation for the new system, carrying normative power and acting as a point of consensus across the

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political spectrum. However, it was also used as a discursive strategy in debates over rival conceptions of socio-economic reform. In 1991, for example, the Democratic Party, in opposition, advocated for a "shock therapy" approach to reform, while the Party of Labor supported a "mixed economy". The position of one's party was framed as aligning with contemporary Europe, while the opposing party's stance was disparaged as "Eastern" and backward.

In the political context of that time, the "East" came to symbolize opposition to Western/European modernity: primarily communism and dictatorship/despotism, but increasingly also Islamism, which was imagined as a challenge to European liberty and democracy. Although a self-Orientalizing attitude was evident in many parliamentary speeches ("we should become European"), the target of internal Orientalism was often the underprivileged groups negatively affected by neoliberal reforms, especially during periods of intense political conflict outside the parliament (such as strikes, street demonstrations, and road blockades).

The data for this investigation will consist of the proceedings of parliamentary speeches from 1991-1992, available in Word format. The tentative research method will be content/discourse analysis. The online database, containing about 5,000 pages, will be searched using keywords such as "Europe", "West", "East", "Orient", "Asia", "Africa", and "Islam". The phrases where these words appear will be identified along with the speaker's name, party affiliation, date of the speech, and the relevant parliamentary session. The data will then be reviewed to eliminate irrelevant or repetitive entries, and the remaining phrases will be categorized by topic and coded. In some cases, to better contextualize the meaning, it may be necessary to review the entire speech or the full proceedings of the relevant parliamentary session. The typology of the most significant uses of the idea of Europe will be interpreted in relation to the research question, with the help of secondary literature.

o **Resurfacing Remains of 1990s Albanian Islamophobia** – Piro Rexhepi, *School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL)*

On December 12th, 1985, six members of the Popaj family from Durrës approached the Italian embassy on Elbasan Street in Tirana speaking in Italian. They had taken extra care to conceal their Albanianess by dressing up as tourists. Their plot worked as the Albanian security of the embassy assumed them to be Italians and allowed them to enter the embassy grounds casually. Once inside, they claimed political asylum and for the next five years would go on to live under the protection of the Italian government. It was only in May of 1990 in the context of the larger transformations of the Cold War, that the Albanian government gave in to Italian and UN pressure to allow the family to transit to the airport and depart for Italy. By June 1990, around 10,000 Albanian citizens entered Western embassies in Tirana seeking political asylum. As the socialist state started to crumble, unaccounted numbers of Albanians made their way by land into Greece and Yugoslavia with the largest numbers departing with ships from the ports

of Vlora and Durrës towards Italy. By March 1991, 25,708 Albanians had reached Italy and sought political asylum. In August of that same year, an additional 10,000 Albanians reached Italy with the commercial vessel "Vlora". In Albanian, the massive crossing into Italy as well as Greece came to be known as the exodus of the 1990s, as the socialist state collapsed under the student chants "We want Albania like the rest of Europe".

In 2019, Pajtim Statovci's book *Crossings* made headlines in literary circles in Europe and the United States. The novel's protagonist Bujar, an Albanian who wishes to be anything but Albanian, moves through Europe as a migrant, able to transpass gender, sexuality and class by acquiring "a new way of walking, a new body language… or [just by] dressing differently". Albanians, the protagonist reflects, have been telling themselves so many lies about who they are "in such a way that it's not lying at all" and the lies have become so real that they are not lies at all but a "way of being". There is nearly nothing that the protagonist can't become, "I do, however, believe" reflects Bujar, "that a person's desire to look a particular way and behave in a certain manner can directly impact the breadth of a shoulder, the amount of body hair, the size of a foot, one's talent and choice of profession. Everything else can be learned, acquired – a new way of walking, a new body language, you can practice speaking at a higher pitch or dressing differently, telling lies in such a way that it's not lying at all. It's just a way of being". Reviewing the novel in the *New Yorker* as part of a "literary tradition in which identity is seen as fluid and performative", Garth Greenwell notes "Statovci's critique of identity politics" as his main protagonist "consistently rejects collective identities, from the classification of refugees as 'barbaric' to the liberal championing of minorities". Yet what allows Bujar to move seamlessly through these spaces and evade the regulatory racist gaze, in a narrative set in the supposed post-racial and colour-blind Europe, is his seemingly white but ostensibly racialised body that achieves freedom to do as it pleases in a moment of intensified racial anxiety that makes distinction of east and west European bodies inconsequential. Yet, for his body to attain transmutability and passing, any indication of non-whiteness and non-westerness or relation to the new others must be cancelled and concealed. In changing his identity, Bujar can and wants to be "French or German or Greek, but never Albanian".

Crossings could be a convenient narrative about migration, mutation, movement and the monstrosities of Europeaness, but it is not because it falls short of mentioning racism, the undercommons and the necropolitics of borders, instead it offers a cheery diversity novel about the supposed ability of everyone to pass and mask – because if an Albanian passes in Europe, why shouldn't everyone else? It is a colour-blind celebration of queerness not as an act of defiance of hegemonic white heterotopias but an instruction manual on how to accommodate our bodies, gestures and genders to it not against it.

In the last thirty years, Albanian bodies have started to vibrate and communicate the kind of white matter that conveniently matters to Western white curators, publishers and audiences, because we can seemingly look like them while simultaneously offering some necessary safe and small difference needed for the neoliberal discourse on diversity to work. At a time when subjecthood in the West is reduced to what new materialism calls *vibrating*

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matter, Albanian white bodies appear apt to reproduce that vibration to be saved, capitalized and celebrated in light of their slight difference. It is not surprising perhaps that in the age of white 'woke' audiences in the West, Albanian stars like Rita Ora, Dua Lipa, Bebe Rexha or Loredana emulate the kind of off-whiteness that meets the minimal criteria for difference and diversity with a side appeal of 'queerness'. But what makes Rita Ora, Dua Lipa or Pajtim Statovci or Petrit Halilaj desirable, is not only the post-racial pop that affirms white Western audiences' disdain for 'identity politics', but also their narratives of being saved by the West with all four artists being promoted as models of saved refugees turned into successful stars.

This presentation works through Frantz Fanon's *The So-Called Dependency Complex of the Colonized*, to examine how the colonized subject is encouraged to replicate the colonizer's identity in a deeply alienating and aspirational effort to "become white". For Fanon, this aspiration is fraught with shame, overcompensation, self-hatred, and trauma – all of which serve to perpetuate the inferiority and dependency complex of the colonized. Specifically, it engages with Fanon's argument that the colonized subject's sense of inferiority manifests in a yearning to be loved by the white subject, even when that love is unattainable, to examine the aspirational Europeanness of Albanians in the last three decades.

o **Trapped in a Neo-imperial Whirlpool: Albania, Globalization and the Post-Cold War World** – Isa Blumi, *Stockholm University*

Underlying any study of transitional Balkans after the Cold War must be a quest to identify causes and effects to the obvious disruptions, dislocations and resulting violence. This contribution will be heavily invested in such a search with the suggestion that we can also resign to telling an ultimately confusing set of narratives drawing from the perspectives of often distinctive agents of the events/processes under analysis. What the conflicting stories surfacing when exploring transitions of considerable socio-economic disruption ultimately imply is that the discourse around Islam and its place in Albania since the early 1990s functions as a critical animating factor behind the narrowing arena for political, cultural and economic action. As observed by way of appreciating how religious heritage becomes the arena for new forms of institutional capture emblematic of globalization, the objectification of Muslims and the animating role of liberal-era, global Islam becomes its own irresistible force of change.

By linking the events occurring in the larger Balkans in the 1990s (especially in respect to the destruction of Yugoslavia and the controlled demolition of much of Eurasia's social contract with the vanishing sovereign state) has critical, if hesitatingly acknowledged, links to the events in the larger world. With a specific focus on how events in the Middle East in this transitional era intersect with those in regions inhabited by Albanians, the highly evolved mechanisms of power commandeering entire socio-cultural and political-economic infrastructures manifest in critical ways by way of an ontological Islam functional in all liberal societies. In particular, formulas to empower both bigoted rivals and a new class of Muslims emerging from the collapse of the Cold War regime provides the arena for analyzing Islamophobia as a tool of

invasive structures of predatorial capitalism. The emergent neoliberal hegemon commandeering Albania and Albanians invariably links the region with the larger world in ways that may prove better understood through a specific focus on how Islam would become the new means by which global capital subordinates indigenous Muslims (and their equally impacted Christian neighbors, cousins, and fellow countrymen).

As such, this proposed chapter will seek to add to the complications of the larger contemporary story of Albania by considering some of the conflicting agendas among those fluid Balkan authoritarian regimes that emerged during the launching of neoliberal reforms and requisite subvention of democratic alternatives. With Islamophobia presenting a necessary animating rationale, the subversion of Albanians' hard-earned, if only temporary, autonomy from global forces would rapidly take place in the context of the Balkans interjection into the larger "War on Terror" engineered to platform the narrow range of transition on offer moving into the 2000s and beyond. Ultimately, the arguments made is that neoliberalism instrumentalizes Islamophobia to justify radical market deregulation while undermining democratic contestation to the destructive process. By bringing in new and undemocratic political forums such as the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, and NATO/EU agencies, as much as Gulf or Turkish NGOs that preclude democratic representation from the outset, invariably sucks large numbers of destroyed individuals, like a whirlpool, into the strategically limited confines of possible collective action. The dislocation of many Albanians from their own religious heritage, a pre-liberal ethics and their resettlement into arenas fully servicing global forces becomes the ultimate conclusion of this reflective, still exploratory, study.

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPEAKERS[2]

Raino Isto is an art historian, editor, artist, and curator currently based in Alexandria, VA. They are currently editor-in-chief at *ARTMargins Online*, and a member of the editorial board of *ARTMargins* print journal. They are a lecturer at the University of Maryland, College Park, and American University, Washington D.C. Their work has been published in *Art History, Third Text, RACAR, ARTMargins,* the *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, *Science Fiction Studies*, *Extrapolation*, *Open Philosophy*, *The International Journal for History, Culture, and Modernity*, *International Labour and Working-Class History*, and *The Getty Research Journal*. Raino Isto received their PhD from the University of Maryland, College Park, where their dissertation focused on the development of monumental sculpture in postwar Southeastern Europe, and the continuing resonance of socialist monumentality evident in the work of contemporary artists responding to the recent past.

From 2016 to 2018, Raino was coordinator and curator at the Stamp Gallery, the University of Maryland's premier contemporary art space. They are currently working on a book about realism, engaged art, and the global Cold War in postwar Albania. They have curated multiple exhibitions, including *Pleurad Xhafa: Irreconcilability as an Act of Love* (2022) at ZETA Contemporary Art Center, and *False Monarchy* (2018) at the Stamp Gallery, University of Maryland, and co-curator of *Unto Itself: Kameelah Janan Rasheed* (2017) at the Herman Maril Gallery, University of Maryland. Raino also has published several catalogue essays on Albanian postwar art, and worked as a consultant on a municipal public art plan for Tirana. They are a founding member of the Laboratory for Albanian Art and Culture (LACA). Email: Risto@umd.edu.

Sashenka Lleshaj completed her PhD in Political Science at McGill University (Montreal, QC), where she received the Vanier Canada Graduate Scholarship (2019-22) from the Federal Government of Canada (SSHRC). Her dissertation, titled *The Politics of Contested Heritage: Memory, Place, and Power in Post-Communist Albania*, was shortlisted by the Canadian Political Science Association for the Vincent Lemieux Prize for the best dissertation in political science submitted at a Canadian institution. Sasha's research traces heritage politics as memory politics, post-communist elite competition and authoritative heritage, and memory discourses, while exploring and advancing principles of plurality and agonistic memory contestation. Her article, coming out of her dissertation, "Torture to Their Ears, Music to Ours: Memory Regimes and the Ordering of Political Space," was published by *Perspectives on Politics*. Prior to McGill, Sasha completed a Master of Science in Russian & East European Studies (REES) at the University of Oxford. She is currently working on Climate Diplomacy as the International Just Transition Coordinator at Climate Action Network Canada. Email: sashenka.lleshaj@mail.mcgill.ca.

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[2] Listed in the order of the panel presentations.

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei received formal training in linguistics (MA General Linguistics, Leiden University), multimedia art (MMus ArtScience, Royal Conservatory, The Hague), and philosophy (PhD Media & Communication, European Graduate School; PhD Modern Thought, University of Aberdeen), as well as group-analytic psychotherapy (Group Work Practitioner, Institute of Group Analysis). He is currently the director/CFO of open-access publishing house punctum books and the founding director/CEO of software company Thoth Open Metadata. Van Gerven Oei has published widely in the fields of philology and art criticism, and recently published *Rënia e së ardhmes: Arti, korrupsioni dhe fundi i tranzicionit shqiptar* (*The Collapse of the Future: Art, Corruption and the End of the Albanian Transition*) (Pika pa sipërfaqe, 2023). He continues to write about Albanian art and politics on his blog *The Albanian Mechanism*. Email: vincent@vangervenoei.com.

Louisa Avgita is Assistant Professor in Art History at the School of Visual and Applied Arts at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Lecturer in European Arts at the Hellenic Open University. She holds a PhD in Art Criticism from City University London. Her research focuses on the critical analysis of identity discourses and issues related to the politics of representation and display in contemporary visual arts, artistic labour, as well as the curatorial conceptualisations of history and geography in contemporary art. She co-edited, with Juliet Steyn, the special issue "Balkans" of the academic journal *Third Text* (vol. 21, no. 2, March 2007). She is also the co-editor, with Areti Adamopoulou, of the volume *Τέχνη, Εργασία, Αγορά* (*Art, Labour, Market*), published by AICA-Hellas in 2019.

Avgita has worked as a curator in London and Greece and was the coordinator of the series of events 'Art Under Construction: the Balkans in Context'. In her PhD thesis, titled *The Remaking of the Balkans in Contemporary Art Exhibitions: A Critical View*, she examined contemporary visual art exhibitions that have addressed the Balkans as a structure of representation. These exhibitions, fourteen in number, were organised by international and local curators in Western and Central European cities, as well as in the Balkan region, between 1999 and 2006. Avgita considers these exhibitions as ideological mechanisms which, in their effects, formulate Balkan "otherness" and sustain neoliberal policies and market cultural particularities. Curatorial discourses are examined in relation to critiques of stereotypical representations of the Balkans, systematised in the discourse of Balkanism. Email: lavgita@vis.auth.gr.

Adrian Brisku is Associate Professor of History at the Department of Russian and East European Studies at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. His research interests include intellectual and comparative history, empire, European identity and the transnational history of contemporary Europe, reform, political (national) economy, ethno-political conflicts, modern Albanian and Georgian history, the history of the modern Caucasus, nineteenth-century Ottoman and Russian history, and Czechoslovak history.

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In his book, *Political Reform in the Ottoman and Russian Empires: A Comparative Approach* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), he has contributed to the debates around the reformation of the Ottoman and Russian Empires. Additionally, he has investigated, from a comparative perspective, the discourses on Europe in Albania and Georgia in his book *Bittersweet Europe: Albanian and Georgian Discourses on Europe, 1878-2008* (Berghahn Books, 2013). He has also co-edited the volume *Varieties of Economic Nationalism in Cold War Europe. Small State Responses to Economic Changes, 1960s-1980s* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2025. Email: adrian.brisku@fsv.cuni.cz.

Smoki Musaraj is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University, Ohio, USA. She is a cultural anthropologist specializing in economic and legal anthropology. Her research focuses on theories of money and value, speculative bubbles, anthropology of corruption and the rule of law, migration and remittances, postsocialist transformations, and societies of the Mediterranean. She has researched and published on Ponzi schemes, mobile money, corruption indicators, media whistleblowers, speculative economies and remittances, and urban temporalities and materialities in postsocialist spaces. Her findings are reflected, among others, in her book *Tales from Albarado: Ponzi Logics of Accumulation in Postsocialist Albania*, published by Cornell University Press in 2020. Smoki has also co-edited the volumes *Remitting, Restoring, and Building Contemporary Albania* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), co-edited with Nataša Gregorić Bon, and the volume *Money at the Margins: Global Perspectives on Technology, Inclusion, and Design* (Berghahn Books, 2018), co-edited with Bill Maurer and Ivan Small.

Currently, Smoki Musaraj is beginning a new project titled *Mediterranean Dreaming: Migration and Tourism in Maritime Cities*. In Fall 2023, she was the Germaine Tillon Chair of Mediterranean Tomorrow Fellowship at the IMéRA Institute of Advanced Studies in Marseille, France. Email: musaraj@ohio.edu.

Maurizio Albahari (Ph.D., UC Irvine) is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the College of Arts and Letters of Notre Dame University, Indiana, USA. He also serves as a concurrent Associate Professor in the Keough School of Global Affairs and as a Faculty Fellow at the Kellogg, Kroc, and Nanovic Institutes.

Albahari's research, teaching, and public work focus on migrant and refugee mobility, as well as antiracist democratic engagements, particularly in the Euro-Mediterranean region. A political anthropology lens illuminates ongoing experiences and predicaments of borders, urban citizenship, and emergent democracy, tackling broader tensions between structural injustices and the decolonisation of European and Mediterranean relations. Related articles, op-eds, interviews, and chapters have appeared in a variety of social science, humanities, art, and global news forums. Albahari is the author of the book *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World's Deadliest Border* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015). Recent reviews of the latter have appeared in venues including *International Migration Review*, *American*

Ethnologist, *POLAR*, *City and Society*, *International Political Science Review*, *International Criminal Justice Review*, *International Affairs*, the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*, *Human Rights Quarterly*, *Cultures et Conflicts*, *Social Anthropology*, *Migration Studies*, *Political Studies Review*, the *Boston Globe*, *Choice*, and *Times Literary Supplement*. Email: malbahar@nd.edu.

Nick Mai is Professor of Criminology at the University of Leicester, United Kingdom. His research straddles criminology, sociology, and anthropology, focusing on the experiences and representations of criminalised, marginalised, and stigmatised migrant groups. His work is qualitative and based on a long-term ethnographic engagement with the people and communities with whom he has undertaken his research. Nick Mai is the author of the book *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work, and Humanitarian Borders* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018). The book received the American Sociological Association Sexualities Section 2020 Distinguished Book Award. Prof. Mai has also co-authored the book *Migration and Social Cohesion in the* UK (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). He is also a co-author of the book *Out of Albania. From Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy* (Berghahn Books, 2008).

Professor Mai is also a filmmaker, an engagement that complements his academic writing and emerges through the collaboration with migrants and sex workers, by expressing their perspectives, priorities, and needs. Nick Mai believes that collaborative filmmaking is a way to create knowledge together with people who are directly concerned and to make sure that they own the terms of their representations. In the future, Nick Mai would like to continue his work on migration by focusing on the relationship with climate change, the transition to green societies, and the displacements and mobilities that are emerging in the process. Email: nick.mai@leicester.ac.uk.

Enis Sulstarova is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Tirana, where he works in the Department of Political Science. In 2000 he graduated from the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. In 2002, he gained a master's degree in Political Science and Public Administration from the same university. In 2011, he successfully finished his doctoral studies at the University of Tirana. Between 2013 and 2015, he was a Marie Curie Fellow at the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research in Braunschweig, Germany. His research interests include nationalism, identity politics, political sociology, politics and culture in the Balkans, and citizenship.

His publications include several books in the Albanian language, as well as numerous chapters and articles published in international journals. Among his many scholarly contributions, his book *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja* (*Escape from the East: Albanian Orientalism from Naim to Kadare*) was published in Tirana in 2006 and reprinted several times since then. He is also the author of the volume *Jam Europe. Intelektualët dhe ideja e Evropës në vitet 1918-1939 dhe 1989-200*6 (To Be Europe. The intellectuals and the

idea of Europe in the years 1918-1939 and 1989-2006) (Logos A, 2012) Email: enis.sulstarova@unitir.edu.al.

Piro Rexhepi is a Research Fellow at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at UCL, London. Dr. Rexhepi holds a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of Strathclyde, and before his current appointment, has held research fellowships at the Davis Center for for Russian and Euroasian Studies, at Harvard University, Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz, the Center for Advanced Studies of Southeastern Europe at the University of Rijeka, and teaching positions at the State University of New York, City University of New York, and New York University. He has also held the position of Assistant Professor in Global Studies at Northampton Community College.

His research focuses on decoloniality, sexuality and Islam, the politics of religion, sexuality and coloniality in international relations, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the Balkans and the Middle East. Previously, his work has examined the intersection of EU enlargement politics with sexual rights, exploring the production of Islamophobia in Muslim-majority countries in the Balkans. He is the author of *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route,* (Duke University Press, 2023). Email: p.rexhepi@ucl.ac.uk.

Isa Blumi, is Professor of Balkan and Middle Eastern Studies at Stockholm University within the Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. He holds a PhD in History and Middle Eastern/Islamic Studies from New York University (NYU-2005) and a Master of Political Science and Historical Studies (1995) from The New School for Social Research, New York.

Isa Blumi researches societies in the throes of social, economic, and political transformation. In the past, he compared how Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Italian, British, Dutch, Spanish, and French imperialist projects in the Islamic world intersected with, and were thus informed by, events within the Ottoman Empire. These projects have been funded by numerous institutions and remains one of his core areas of research and collaboration, including with research groups in Denmark, Greece, Lebanon, Portugal, Austria, and Turkey. He is currently working with a team of scholars on how transformations from the 18th to 20th centuries across five empires--Portuguese, Spanish, Ottoman, Russian, and Habsburg--reflected processes of adaptation and new investments in state power. The results of such research aim to help bring greater appreciation to present-day policies that may threaten to move toward authoritarianism as global or regional crisis are confronted by reformers. His latest work covers the late Ottoman period and successor regimes, arguing that events in the Balkans and Middle East are the engines of change in the larger world. In this respect, he explores in a comparative, integrated manner how (post-)Ottoman societies found in, for instance, Albania/Yugoslavia, Turkey, the Gulf, and Yemen fit into what is a global story of transition. This in turn informs the story of the Atlantic world, especially the emergence of modern European imperialism and the Americas. His research into migration as a primary lens to understand such processes has

resulted in numerous articles and the book: *Ottoman Refugees, 1878-1939: Migration in a Post-Imperial World* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Among many publications, Blumi is also the author of the book *Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia tells us About the World* (University of California Press, 2018).

Finally, reflecting an interest in the Cold War, Blumi is additionally working on understanding how Muslims from throughout the world contributed to the Cold War with special focus on the interactions between the Lusophone World (in the context of the anti-colonial wars in Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Timor, and Cabo Verde) and communist parties in Portugal, Italy, Brazil, Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Albania, and Yugoslavia. Exploring such interactions through this global perspective helps us question how we understand modern identity and social organization, themes Blumi focuses on in the courses he teaches. In addition to his historical research, Blumi also regularly writes and lectures on contemporary Balkan and Middle Eastern politics (especially Kosovo, Turkey and Yemen) and political Islam in relation to Europe. Email: isa.blumi@su.se.

Vjosa Musliu is Associate Professor of International Relations at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Brussels, Belgium. Her research interests include international and European interventions, conflicts, and international political economy. Her area of focus is primarily the Balkans and post-Soviet space.

She is a co-editor of the Routledge Series of Studies in Intervention and Statebuilding and co-founder of Yugoslawomen+ Collective. She is author of *Girlhood at War: Interpreting War and Liberation in Kosovo* (Bloomsbury, 2025); *Europeanization and Statebuilding as Everyday Practices: Performing Europe in the Western Balkans* (Routledge, 2021); co-editor of *Unravelling Liberal Interventionism: Local Critiques of Statebuilding in Kosovo* (Routledge, 2019) and *Feminist Encounters in Statebuilding: The Role of Women in Making the State in Kosovo* (Routledge, 2024). Email: vjosa.musliu@vub.be.