

On the Liminal State and Its Entanglements with Mass Migration and Rural Areas in Albania

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Abstract

This article asks whether there is a relationship between state abandonment and mass migration. The question directs attention to the ways in which the state manifests itself in everyday life and to its role among the diverse causes of migration. The Opar region in Southeast Albania provides an empirical setting marked by mass migration: approximately 94% of the population recorded there in 1990 has migrated. It is a mountainous rural area with underdeveloped infrastructure. Evidence presented here focuses on local government reforms, the lack of investment in roads and infrastructure, and cultural heritage. To further understand how the state manifests itself at both the national and local levels, this article employs the concept of the *liminal state*, proposed here as a new theoretical concept that seeks to expand our understanding of the relationship between the state and migration during the post-socialist transition. The theoretical assumption underpinning this analysis is that the liminal state, once its mission-oriented function and ethos are undermined by failure, broken promises, and repeated tricksterisation, becomes an exclusionary entity that sustains migration and discourages the return of those who have already migrated.

Keywords: liminal state; migration; state presence and absence; tricksterisation; state abandonment.

Methodological Considerations and Theoretical Framework

Exploring the relationship between state abandonment and mass emigration from a particular locality forms the central concern of this article. This exploration directs attention to the ways in which the state manifests itself in everyday life and to its place among the multiple factors shaping migration processes. The analysis proceeds through two interrelated dimensions: the geographical and the relational. From a geographical perspective, the ethnographic research focuses on a specific locality. In this case, *relational* refers to the relationships between citizens and the state. The analysis focuses on the following specific themes: local governance, land decollectivisation, roads and infrastructure, and, finally, the condition of a church considered as an object of cultural heritage. Across all three cases, the central analytical concern is the nature of the relationship between citizens and the state, examined through the presence, disruption, or denial of reciprocal exchange.

In July 2019, I conducted fieldwork in Opar. In order to verify some of the data I had previously collected and to observe possible changes over time, I returned for a five-day

field visit in October 2024. Opar is a region in southeastern Albania where, according to calculations based on official data, approximately 94 % of the population recorded in 1990 has since emigrated. Although I will use the name Opar throughout the text, it is important to clarify that the Opar region consists of two parts, known as Upper Opar and Lower Opar. My ethnographic research was conducted primarily in Upper Opar. For practical purposes, however, I will refer to the region simply as Opar throughout the remainder of this study. In addition to this field site, further data on both internal and international migration were gathered as part of another research project, the *Social Atlas of the Contemporary Albanian Village*.¹ As part of this project, I had the opportunity to visit more than forty villages across Albania². From south to north, abandoned villages and mountainous areas similar to Opar can be found throughout the country. Opar was therefore not selected in order to exoticise the area or to construct a negative image of it. Rather, the principal aim is to present one manifestation of the state and its relationship with residents in an abandoned region, together with the consequences of that relationship, through an ethnographic realist perspective.³

Additional ethnographic material incorporated into this article derives from participant observation during the Flamingo Revolution (30 May–September 2026 and ongoing), which began as a reaction to the proposed luxury resort associated with Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump in the protected Vjosa–Narta area, particularly in Zvërnec, as well as on Sazan Island. Gradually, however, the protests acquired a broader social and anti-establishment character.⁴ The Narta Lagoon is a unique habitat for flamingos, which migrate to this habitat and also nest there. It is for this reason that the movement came to be known as the Flamingo Revolution.

The Flamingo Revolution consists of peaceful protests in Tirana and intermittent protests organised by the Albanian diaspora in cities across Europe, the United States of America (USA), Canada, Australia, and elsewhere. Its main demands concern liberation from oligarchic control of the economy and the creation of a state governed by the rule of law, centred on human dignity and the protection of nature. Of particular relevance to this article are concerns over the country's depopulation, particularly youth emigration, the lack of medical services and infrastructure, the difficult social and economic conditions of pensioners, and the inadequate protection of cultural heritage. The data sources used in this article were collected through participant observation conducted by the author himself.

The fieldwork was focused on data collection, combining classical ethnographic methods with the ethnography of migration⁵ and stategraphy.⁶ Stategraphy, as employed here, seeks to trace the social practices of the state within the national context of the *liminal state*, in an area characterised by mass emigration.

In the anthropology of the state, three major analytical approaches have been developed, each emerging from anthropology's dialogue with political theory. These approaches have

¹ Kaçi, Ervin. 2023. Jeta në fill e një shoqërie në ikje: Disa shënime etnografike mbi emigrimin. *Revista Antropologji* 6(1–2), 79–97.

² Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2023. Ndryshime dhe shndërrime të marrëdhënieve sociale. Tiranë, *Revista Antropologji* 6(1–2), 25–62.

³ Herzfeld, Michael. 2018. Anthropological realism in a scientific age. *Anthropological Theory* 18(1), 129–150.

⁴ Kucharski, Michal. 2026. The Flamingo Revolution: Anti-government protests in Albania. *Analyses OSW*. Center for Eastern Studies.

⁵ Vullnetari, Julia. 2012. *Albania on the move: Links between internal and international migration*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press; King, Russell, and Julie Vullnetari. 2016. From shortage economy to second economy: An historical ethnography of rural life in communist Albania. *Journal of Rural Studies* 44, 198–207.

⁶ Thelen, Tatjana / Vetter, Larissa, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann, (eds.). 2017. *Stategraphy: Toward a relational anthropology of the state*. New York: Berghahn Books.

generated important contributions to the anthropology of the state, drawing on traditions of political philosophy, including Neo-Marxist, Foucauldian, Agambenian and related perspectives.⁷ Nevertheless, in this article I follow a different theoretical path. My analysis draws on two classical concepts in anthropology: liminality and gift theory. The concept of liminality was originally developed by Arnold van Gennep as part of his theory of *rites de passage*.⁸

The concept itself re-entered anthropological theory through Victor Turner's enriched interpretation.⁹ Meanwhile, in contemporary anthropology, this theoretical concept has been further developed by scholars of political anthropology who have established a substantial body of work demonstrating how the concept of liminality can be applied to the sphere of political relations in modern societies.¹⁰

Another analytical concept, but also a state practice that has contributed to mass migration, is that of state abandonment. I approach state abandonment through the lens of exchange theory, drawing on the anthropology of the gift. Among the studies that bring together the anthropology of the state and gift theory.¹¹ According to this perspective, exchange creates social relationships, and to generate social bonds, participants must perceive it as fair within a given socio-cultural context. I would particularly highlight the work of anthropologist Kriti Kapila, whose analysis provides a theoretical model that can be further developed while also lending itself to broader comparative application.¹² This article adopts several of her key concepts to illuminate the context examined here, including her reinterpretation of the constitutional promise, state sovereignty, and the exercise of state power through the capacity to transform people or things into *nullius*. Building on this framework, I propose replacing Kapila's notion of the *constitutional promise*, which refers directly to the Constitution of India, with the concept of a *constitutive promise* articulated through political discourse—namely, the promise of achieving liberal democracy and integration into the European Union. Likewise, I suggest that state abandonment produces a form of *misrecognition* that creates a hybrid condition between recognition and non-recognition of human presence within the area under study. State abandonment itself can therefore be understood as an undeclared form of silence, or as an instrumental suspension of reciprocity between the state and the citizen.

The concept of *liminality* nevertheless occupies a central place in this article. It is used both to identify the defining characteristics of the post-socialist transitional period and to conceptualise a particular modality of the state. Approaching the analysis through the theoretical lens of liminality, together with state abandonment as an expression of the state's unilateral suspension of fair reciprocity, enables a critical dialogue with the

⁷ Stepputat, Finn, and Monique Nuijten. 2018. Anthropology and the enigma of the state, in *Handbook of political anthropology*, edited by Wydra, Harald and Bjørn Thomassen. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 127–144.

⁸ van Gennep, Arnold. [1909] 1960. *The rites of passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁹ Turner, Victor. 1967. *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press; Turner, Victor. 1969. *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction; Turner, Victor, and Edward M. Bruner, (eds.). 1989. *The anthropology of experience*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

¹⁰ Thomassen, Bjørn. 2009. The uses and meanings of liminality. *International Political Anthropology* 2(1), 5–27; Thomassen, Bjørn. 2014. *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Farnham: Ashgate; Horvath, Agnes / Thomassen, Bjørn, and Harald Wydra. 2009. Introduction: Liminality and cultures of change. *International Political Anthropology* 2(1), 3–4; Kapferer, Bruce, and Marina Gold (eds.). 2024. *Egalitarian dynamics: Liminality, and Victor Turner's contribution to the understanding of socio-historical process*. New York & Oxford: Berghahn.

¹¹ Mauss, Marcel. [1925] 2016. *The gift*. Chicago: HAU Books.

¹² Kapila, Kriti. 2022. *Nullius: The anthropology of ownership, sovereignty, and law in India*. Chicago: HAU Books.

neoliberal order upon which post-socialist governance was founded and legitimised.¹³ At the same time, it helps explain how liminality became part of the state's ethos and how this process relates to migration.

Within anthropological theory, and more broadly in social theory, modernity has often been conceptualised as a condition of permanent liminality.¹⁴ In my view, however, this proposition requires reconsideration. By its very nature, modernity presupposes the completion of liminal phases and the emergence of new beginnings.¹⁵ Human communities likewise need to believe that every liminal phase has an end. Rather than speaking of *permanent liminality*, I therefore propose thinking in terms of successive liminal phases. Indeed, such phases often define themselves in opposition to one another, as socialism did in relation to the regimes that preceded it. Equally important, from an anthropological perspective, is the local dimension of these liminal phases. When applied to the state, this dimension is simultaneously territorial and sociological—or, more precisely, a combination of the two—within which the liminal state becomes historically and contextually situated.

Albania offers a particularly instructive case for understanding the dynamics of historical liminality, owing to both the intensity of its transformations and its geographical and geopolitical position.¹⁶ As the last state to emerge from the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans (1912), Albania faced the challenge of constructing a modern nation-state oriented towards the West, while simultaneously passing through the Balkan Wars, the First World War, and the westernisation policies of the interwar period. Fascist and Nazi occupation (1939–1944) was followed by the establishment of Stalinist state socialism, which conceived both itself and the socialist order as transitional stages on the path towards a communist utopia. The collapse of the communist regime in 1990 marked the end of yet another cycle of transformations that never fully reached their intended destination, making Albania's modern history a continuous illustration of liminal periods in the anthropological sense.

Although all previous historical periods were represented as transitional, none was explicitly designated as a *transition* in the way the post-socialist period came to be known. The transition period encompassed two interconnected passages. The first involved the shift from a Stalinist totalitarian regime to liberal democracy as a form of governance; the second concerned accession to the European Union. Both objectives appeared clearly in the protests of 1990 against the communist regime. The two most enduring slogans, used from the early 1990s until the Flamingo Revolution, were “Freedom, Democracy!” and “We Want Albania to Be Like the Whole of Europe!” These slogans imposed themselves upon all post-communist political parties and gave shape to a promise that acquired a constitutive significance within society.¹⁷

Because the ideas of liberal democratisation and European Union integration enjoyed broad popular support, political parties gradually transformed both their electoral pledges and their own political mission into what was presented as the mission of the state itself.

¹³ Slobodian, Quinn. 2018. *Globalists: The end of empire and the birth of neoliberalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Morningstar, Natalie. 2023. *Neoliberalism*, in *The open encyclopedia of anthropology*, edited by Stein, Felix.

¹⁴ Szakolczai, Arpad. 2009. Liminality and experience: Structuring transitory situations and transformative events. *International Political Anthropology* 1, 141–172; Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern*; See also Griffin, Roger. 2007. *Modernism and fascism: The sense of a beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁵ Griffin, *Modernism and fascism*.

¹⁶ Fischer, Bernd J., and Oliver Jens Schmitt. 2022. *A concise history of Albania*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ Fischer, and Schmitt. *A Concise History*. 323–377.

In both popular discourse and the narratives promoted by the political elite, freedom and equality emerged as the dominant ideals. Within this context, freedom primarily meant freedom from state interference and individual autonomy, understood as liberation from the pervasive control previously exercised by the Party and society. Meanwhile, equality shifted towards the idea of equality before the law for individual citizens and, subsequently, equality among nations.¹⁸

These ideals, however—freedom from state control and equality before the law—soon proved difficult to realise because of a weak economy and a failing state. At the same time, the political elite increasingly instrumentalised them. One prominent example concerned the principle of free movement. What was presented as the liberal right to freedom of movement became an instrument of political strategy. Under this banner, the President of the Republic, Sali Berisha, who also served as the country's dominant political and institutional leader from the 1992 elections until the crisis of 1997, promoted the policy known as “With Our Eyes Towards the Sea!”.¹⁹ This policy, like several of his earlier decrees, merely endorsed a process that was already well underway. By then, people had already begun moving from the mountainous regions to the lowlands and from villages to urban centres. By publicly supporting this migration, Berisha sought to consolidate electoral support and secure votes in return for that endorsement.²⁰

One of the defining characteristics of the political sphere during this period was the profound gap between people's expectations and the realities of everyday life. The image of the state took shape within a social field resembling a pendulum, where collective expectations intertwined with the spectacular promises made by competing political parties. It is difficult to determine which came first—political promises or social expectations. What is clear, however, is that a social condition gradually emerged in which expectations became saturated with promises of a rapid transition: a competition over who could deliver the end of the transition more quickly. The human condition of moving from one social order to another creates both the space and the need for almost sacred formulas and for charismatic political leaders who claim to possess the means to fulfil them. Social reality, however, became a field characterised less by fulfilled promises than by their continual violation. Broken promises were often preceded either by deliberate deception or by commitments that were objectively impossible to realise. Thus, beyond the almost universal tension between politics and truth, the promise of a rapid transition, embodied in charismatic political figures, increasingly gave way to political formulas that amounted to little more than empty promises or tricks. In this sense, the figure of the politician came to resemble that of the trickster.²¹

The liminal state, therefore, may be defined as any state, regardless of its form of government, whose fundamental source of legitimacy rests on reforms and developmental strategies that promise to transform both itself and society into a higher stage than the existing one, yet never reach their intended conclusion. Instead, both state and society remain suspended in a condition of liminality. History repeatedly demonstrates that, in practice, the liminal state often becomes the very opposite of the mission through which its ethos is legitimised, because the ideology of rapid transition becomes instrumentalised. This inversion represents the most extreme expression of the liminal state. More commonly,

¹⁸ Vickers, Miranda. 1997. *The Albanians: Modern history*. London: I.B. Tauris.

¹⁹ De Waal, Clarissa. 2005. *Albania today: A portrait of post-communist turbulence*. London: I.B. Tauris.

²⁰ Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2011. The citizen and the transformation period in Albania: The case of Tirana's periphery, in *Citizenship and the legitimacy of governance: Anthropology in the Mediterranean region*, edited by Pardo, Italo, and Giuliana B. Prato. London: Routledge, 115–132.

²¹ Szokolczai, Arpad. 2022. *Post-truth society: A political anthropology of trickster logic*. London: Routledge.

however, the liminal state assumes hybrid forms in which elements of its transformative mission coexist with practices that diverge from it. Even in its most contradictory manifestation, the state does not openly abandon its founding mission. On the contrary, it continues to invoke and sustain its transformative promise, precisely because that promise remains a powerful source of legitimacy for all those who participate in the political sphere.

The experience of the liminal state as the very opposite of the constitutive ideal of a democratic and European society is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the principal demands articulated during the Flamingo Revolution in Albania (2026). For 45 consecutive days,²² its central message called for an end to the transition period and the beginning of a new era, designated as the New Albania (*Shqipëri e Re*). The citizens' mobilisation encompassed a wide range of grievances, all of which converged on what they perceived as the exclusionary and degrading nature of state policies towards citizens. Particular emphasis was placed on dispossession policies affecting both private and public property, commons, the state's neglect of nature, the deterioration of hospital services, injustice in employment, and the ruling party's pervasive control over society. Within the discourse of the Flamingo Revolution, the prevailing political order was explicitly identified as an oligarchic order. Emigration, in turn, was presented as one of the principal consequences of this political order, characterised by social exclusion and systemic degradation.²³

An exclusionary character of the state was expressed in slogans, banners, and speeches delivered by participants throughout the protests. It became even more prominent during the mass gatherings dedicated specifically to emigrants. A central message repeatedly articulated at these events was that people had been compelled to emigrate and that what had begun in 1992 as a genuine effort to break with the dictatorial order had ultimately failed. The present 'revolution' was therefore understood politically as a return to the aspirations of 1992, while simultaneously marking a new beginning: the conclusion of the transition period and the inauguration of a new historical epoch, symbolically named the New Albania. These aspirations were clearly reflected in the formal demands of the Revolution, among which featured the call for a New Constitution and a new social contract.

The following section provides an overview of migration during Albania's post-socialist period in order to establish a broader picture of the dynamics and trajectories of both internal and international migration.

On Migration in Post-Socialist Contexts and the Liminal State

The abandoned rural areas that constitute the focus of this article represent a widespread post-socialist phenomenon. They have emerged through the combination of multiple factors that have generated both international and internal migration.²⁴

Internal and external migration have been among the central issues around which the two main political camps in Albania have structured their debates.²⁵ The political controversy between these two camps has focused primarily on the management of internal population movements. The main debate concerned how the settlement of a population, largely coming from rural areas, in the main urban centres should be addressed legally and

²² This note was written on the 40th day of the Flamingo Revolution, 30 May–13 July 2026

²³ According to the National Institute for statistics in Albania in year 2021-2, 43.9 % of individuals are experiencing social exclusion. See INSTAT. 2026. *Dokumenti i politikave të përfshirjes sociale*. Tiranë: INSTAT.

²⁴ Vullnetari, Julie. 2007. *Albanian migration and development: State of the art review*. IMISCOE Working Paper Series.

²⁵ Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2024. Mbi Antropologjinë urbane dhe filmin etnografik. Tiranë, *Revista Antropologji* 7(1–2), 5–28.

administratively. The debate focused on the legality of this movement, particularly the establishment and development of informal settlements. The Democratic Party supported these movements under the principle of “freedom of movement,” while the Socialist Party opposed them as actions contrary to the “rule of law.” From 2004 onwards, despite their differing views on the procedures that should be followed to achieve legalisation, the two main political forces agreed that houses and businesses built in informal settlements should be legalised. Legalisation entailed a specific legal procedure through which ownership titles could be granted to residents who had built houses or businesses without complying with the law and the legally prescribed procedures.²⁶

When the subject of debate turns to international migration, opposition forces—whether from the left or the right—have consistently accused the governing parties or political forces of failing to formulate policies capable of making Albania a country that generates hope and provides opportunities for a better life. Governing political forces, by contrast, have generally adopted a discourse that, beyond the specific policies a government may implement, presents emigration as an unavoidable consequence of global mobility, while portraying criticism as anachronistic and incompatible with the principle of free movement. The ethnographic data collected during fieldwork reveal a dominant perception that all political parties, and the Albanian state itself, have been among the primary factors contributing to mass emigration abroad. This perception was articulated most clearly during the days of the Flamingo Revolution, mentioned earlier in this article.

Viewed retrospectively, in 1989—one year before the fall of communism—Albania was considered an exemplary case of a state that had achieved maximum control over population movements. To the point that, in a somewhat sarcastic tone, Zolberg once said that if all countries were to resemble Albania (with Japan also added by the author), there would be no need for migration studies.²⁷ Only two years later, Albania would become one of the most illustrative cases of mass migration in relation to its population size. Since 1990, debates have continued regarding the exact scale of international migration;²⁸ nevertheless, there is broad agreement that at least half of the population has emigrated.

It is self-evident that migration in Albania has been strongly shaped by, and remains closely intertwined with, internal economic, social, and political crises. These crises have national dimensions and causes, while at the same time being connected to regional and global transformations. The state has found itself positioned between these multiple pressures, originating both externally and from within its own social and political structures.

The crisis of 1990–1992 was directly associated with the collapse of the communist order, which also had its own global dimension. Meanwhile, the crisis of 1997, by contrast, was primarily rooted in domestic factors, particularly two main causes. On the one hand, it was triggered by the collapse of Ponzi schemes, which affected society at a deeply social and economic level. On the other hand, it was also a political crisis, generated by the tendency of Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party to govern in an increasingly authoritarian manner, contradicting the very promise of democracy and the rule of law upon which their legitimacy had been built.²⁹ One year later, the crises that unfolded from September 1998

²⁶ Bardhoshi, *The Citizens*.

²⁷ Castles, Stephen, and Mark J. Miller. 1998. *The age of migration*. London: Macmillan Press.

²⁸ Azzarri, Carlo, and Calogero Carletto. 2009. *Modeling migration dynamics in Albania: A hazard function approach*. Policy Research Working Paper 4945. World Bank.

²⁹ Abrahams, Fred C. 2015. *Modern Albania: From dictatorship to democracy in Europe*. New York: New York University Press.

onwards were triggered by the assassination of Azem Hajdari, a Member of Parliament and a figure widely regarded as a leader emerging from the student movement against the communist regime. At the same time, this internal political crisis coincided with the Kosova War (1998–1999), which represented a continuation of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the emergence of new states. The Kosova War had a profound, almost cellular, impact on Albanian society and politics. Another crisis that affected, and continued to shape, Albanian migration trajectories was the financial crisis of 2008, whose consequences were particularly severe in Greece, the country to which more than 700,000 Albanians had migrated.³⁰ Each of these crises directly affected both the image and the practices of the state, a process manifested in everyday life.

A significant transformation in Albanian migration trajectories occurred after the liberalisation of the Schengen visa regime for Albanian citizens in 2010. This visa liberalisation marked the end of one of the longest-standing restrictions on the movement of Albanian citizens towards Western European countries. Nevertheless, from that moment until today, Albanians have retained the right to travel within the Schengen Area only for a limited period of three months. The hope of a complete removal of the barriers imposed by the visa regime remains linked to Albania's eventual full membership of the European Union.

Since 2025, a renewed sense of hope has emerged that Albania may achieve EU integration. According to the most optimistic scenario promoted by the Albanian government, this could take place by 2027. Another projected timeframe refers to 2030. Both dates, however, carry a degree of optimism. The basis for this optimism lies in a new strategic vision that the EU may apply towards the integration processes of the Western Balkans, particularly in response to tectonic geopolitical shifts following Russia's invasion of Ukrainian territories on 24 February 2022, as well as the war between the USA and Iran in 2026.

Another fundamental dimension of population movements during the post-socialist period has been internal migration. Albania is among the societies that experienced some of the fastest and most dramatic rates of internal migration in the post-communist period.³¹ The dominant trajectory was migration from rural areas towards urban centres at the national level, with Tirana, the country's capital, becoming the primary destination. In 1990, more than 65 % of Albania's population lived in rural areas, making it the most rural society in Southeast Europe. This situation was largely the result of demographic policies and the communist state's strict control over population movement from villages to towns. By comparison, other countries in the region experienced much higher levels of urbanisation during the socialist period, with Bulgaria ranking among the most urbanised.

The retention of population in rural areas throughout socialism generated significant social pressure by overcrowding rural communities, intensifying the exploitation of agricultural resources, and creating the preconditions for a strong desire to leave the countryside. When communism collapsed in Albania, and the Albanian state, like many other post-socialist states, embraced neoliberalism as its dominant ideological framework, society was

³⁰ Gemi, Eda. 2017. Albanian migration in Greece: Understanding irregularity in a time of crises. *European Journal of Migration and Law* 19(1), 12–33.

³¹ Vullnetari, Julie. 2014. Internal migration in Albania: A critical overview, in *Legacy and change: Albania's transformation from multidisciplinary perspectives*, edited by Pichler, Robert. Vienna: LIT Verlag, vol. 15 of series Studies on South East Europe, edited by Kaser, Karl, 47–67; Göler, Daniel, and Dhimitër Doka. 2014. Should I stay or should I go? Out-migration and development in Albania: The migration development nexus at a dangerous crossroads, in *Legacy and change: Albania's transformation from multidisciplinary perspectives*, edited by Pichler, Robert. Vienna: LIT Verlag, vol. 15 of series Studies on South East Europe, edited by Kaser, Karl, 69–77.

characterised by a high concentration of population in rural areas.³² Communist rural economy in Albania was primarily based on cooperatives, state farms, and various industrial enterprises. Officially, Stalinist³³ model applied in Albania was defined as an agrarian-industrial state, and its population had reached approximately three million inhabitants.

Opar, which constitutes the focus of this analysis, was a mountainous rural area. The cooperative economy in this region was primarily based on livestock farming and agriculture.³⁴ In 1991, de-collectivisation took place, which simultaneously meant the dissolution of cooperative membership and employment relations. In place of the cooperative system emerged the private family economy, and in place of the socialist economy came the capitalist economy.

On Opar: A General Overview of Population, Economic Resources and Local Governance

Upper Opar falls under the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Korçë and officially consists of 13 villages. The administrative centre is located in Lekas, a village situated at an approximately equal distance from the other settlements. The villages that constitute this administrative unit are: Lekas, Gjergjovicë, Gurrmuas, Gjonbabasi, Marjan, Denas, Xërje, Tudas, Lavdar, Garbanjoz, Brozdovec, Opar, and Mazrekë.

The largest settlement among them is Lekas, which also serves as the administrative centre and currently has approximately 15–16 resident households. Villages such as Gjergjovicë, Marjan, Gjonbabasi, and Tudas have around 4–5 households each, with the majority of residents being elderly people. During the winter months, the population is reduced by approximately half. Many inhabitants of these villages have either purchased or built houses in different cities across Albania, or they spend the winter months living with their children. According to my own estimation, the maximum population during the summer season reaches approximately 300 inhabitants.

In the 1930s, the population of Opar fluctuated between 3,000 and 3,500 inhabitants. By 1970, this number had increased to approximately 4,193 inhabitants, reaching its peak of 5,019 inhabitants in 1985. During the interwar period, the local economy relied primarily on livestock farming and the craft of house construction, while agriculture played a comparatively smaller role. Similar to other mountainous regions of the Balkans, traditional economic resources were transformed by processes of industrialisation, the emergence of an urban working class, and, even more significantly, by the imposition of national borders.³⁵

During socialism, the population experienced moderate growth. According to the 1989 census, published in 1990, the entire Upper Opar region had approximately 4,825 inhabitants. During the late socialist period, the villages of Upper Opar were organised into two United Agricultural Cooperatives, with administrative centres located respectively in Lekas and Brozdovec. The main sources of income came from employment

³² Hann, Chris (ed.). 2002. *Postsocialism: Ideals, ideologies and practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.

³³ Schnytzer, Adi. 1982. *Stalinist economic strategy in practice: The case of Albania*. New York: New York University Press.

³⁴ Meçollari, Ekrem. 2017. *Enciklopedia e vogël e Oparit: Vëllimi i dytë*. Korçë: Shtypshkronja Kotti, 300–328.

³⁵ Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2002. Families and mountains in the Balkans: Christian and Muslim household structures in the Rhodopes, 19th–20th century. *History of the Family* 7(3), 327–350; Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2004. Environment, markets, and the state: Human adaptation in the Balkan Mountains, 19th–early 20th centuries. *Ethnologia Balkanica* 8, 129–154.

within the cooperatives, their administrations, and other local institutions established in these villages.³⁶

Following the collapse of socialism and continuing to the present day, the primary source of income in Opar has been remittances sent by emigrants. Nevertheless, there are several families for whom income generated from livestock farming is more significant than that received through remittances. In Opar, cattle are the most widespread livestock, due to the availability of extensive grazing areas, both private and communal, as well as the transformation of agricultural land belonging to families who left the region long ago into pastureland. Cattle farming, rather than sheep breeding, is more suitable for the ageing population that remains in the area.

Until 2015, Opar, with its administrative centre in Lekas, retained the status of a municipality, a status it had acquired in 1991. This status was removed through the new law on the reorganisation of administrative units (2014), together with the new legislation on local governance in Albania (2015), which aimed to rationalise state structures and reduce administrative costs in accordance with the European Charter of Local Self-Government (2015).³⁷ One of the declared objectives of this reform was to increase the “efficiency” of local government institutions. In theory, the reform envisaged a broader state presence through improved service provision and the strengthening of local mechanisms of participation.

In practice, however, the opposite occurred: the reform reduced the state's role in service provision while increasing control, particularly over the political will and choices of citizens. Rural areas were the most affected by the loss of services, and this was even more pronounced in abandoned regions. This occurred because services became concentrated in urban centres, while investments allocated by local government tended to prioritise more densely populated areas. At first glance, such prioritisation may appear to be based on the principle of proportionality in the distribution of services and public expenditure. In practice, however, residents experience it as a deepening of state abandonment—a form of abandonment accompanied by the narrative that these reforms are simultaneously economic, democratising, and necessary conditions for integration into the European Union.

According to official data, from an economic perspective, the cost of local government has neither decreased nor has the number of employees in local administration been reduced. At the national level, the number of staff employed in local government increased from 19,625 bureaucrats in 2015 to 33,500 in the 2018 register. By 2023, this figure had almost doubled compared to 2015, reaching 38,872 employees. Opposition parties and critics argue that this expansion of the workforce has been driven by the employment of members and supporters of the governing Socialist Party, which has been in power since 2013 and, in 2019, won elections in all municipalities across the country after opposition parties withdrew from the electoral process.³⁸

The issue of politically motivated and unlawful employment practices within local administration gained even greater public attention following the leak of information concerning the patronage system established by the Socialist Party. The system became a matter of public debate when information emerged that the Socialist Party had created a network, composed largely of young people. According to public statements by the Socialist

³⁶ Meçollari, 2017, *Enciklopedia e Vogël*, 300.

³⁷ Republika e Shqipërisë. 2015. *Ligji nr. 139, datë 17 dhjetor 2015, për vetëqeverisjen vendore*.

³⁸ Haxhimali, Agron. 2025. *Local government in Albania: Status report 2025*. Tirana: Institute for Albanian Municipalities.

Party, this patronage network was tasked with collecting data on Albanian citizens, including their political preferences and activities. Formally, patronage agents (alb.: *patronazhistët*) perform this role on a voluntary basis; in practice, however, they receive various forms of benefit, one of the most significant being employment in public administration. Their role, however, extends beyond the collection of data. Citizens have reported cases in which such information has been used to intimidate voters.³⁹

Regarding the role of patronage agents in Opar, I was able to collect only limited information, as residents discussed this issue with considerable hesitation and caution. Nevertheless, the material gathered confirms wider public concerns regarding the intimidating function of this system. The most significant observation from an anthropological perspective is the growing reluctance among residents to speak about this issue, a hesitation that has also extended to discussions about state practices more generally. In fact, the most widespread public reaction—and perhaps the strongest expression of opposition—to this regime of control through patronage networks emerged during the Flamingo Revolution. One of the principal slogans was “Down with the Patronage Agents!” Protesters have also repeatedly referred in their speeches to their own experiences of being subjected to patronage practices (understood as political intimidation and control), while others have carried banners addressing this issue directly.

Another aspect illustrating the reduction of local democracy can be found directly in the law on local governance. The head of the administrative unit is appointed by the mayor of the municipality. In other words, this position is appointed rather than elected, as the head of the former municipality used to be. The administrative staff, which previously consisted of around thirty employees, has been reduced to four people. The only local bodies elected through voting are the village head and the village council. Even the village elders (*kryepleqtë*) are, in practice, selected by the head of the administrative unit, as the process is effectively controlled by them. None of the village elders has been elected through a genuine electoral process. Similarly, other fundamental principles enshrined in this law, such as gender equality—which requires equal gender representation in village councils—are not implemented.

Other examples demonstrating the growing distance between the state and local residents, and revealing the connection between state presence and service provision, can be observed in everyday administrative practices. Since 2012, pension payments have no longer been delivered through the finance office of the municipality or, today, the administrative unit, but through banks. Banks do not provide this service in Opar, meaning that pensioners must travel to Korçë in order to receive their pensions. The same applies to basic administrative services, such as obtaining birth certificates or property documents. Even when these documents can be obtained online, they still need to be formally submitted or processed through administrative offices located in the city of Korçë or other cities.

There are also what I would describe as cynical regulations. Private banks that provide pension services have established a rule according to which pensioners over the age of seventy must appear in person at least twice a year solely to confirm that they are still alive. In many cases, elderly people are required to wait in queues for this procedure, despite the fact that it is presented as a service provided to clients.

On 10 April 2026, a Joint Parliamentary Committee was established, which has initiated discussions on reviewing the effects of law on territorial administration, which also

³⁹ Myftari, Julian / Çullhaj, Florian, and Ervin Kaçiu. 2026. Information control and electoral advantage in Albania. *Journal of Political Power*. Online first: 25 May 2026.

included the law of local self-governance.⁴⁰ The purpose of this commission was to draft a new administrative reform, as the reform of 2014–2015 had proved unsuccessful. However, instead of taking measures to increase the availability of public services, the new draft proposed by the Socialist Party suggests precisely the opposite. This has led, and continues to lead, to protests in several municipalities that are expected to be dissolved, including Peqin, Maliq, Prrenjas, and Demal. In all four municipalities, residents have raised concerns that the new draft will further stimulate the depopulation of these regions.

Land De-collectivisation: Distribution, Restitution, Legal Insecurity and the Production of a Limited Citizenship

Land de-collectivisation will be discussed briefly here, as land ownership is understood as a fundamental indicator of the relationship between the state and citizens in rural areas. De-collectivisation marked the transition from socialist collective ownership towards private ownership, and, simultaneously, the transformation of a population that had previously been subjected to proletarianisation⁴¹ into a body of citizens. The proletariat represented the figure that constituted the social body of state sovereignty under the dictatorship of the proletariat, whereas the citizen was expected to become the central figure of the liberal democratic order which started after the communist regime's collapse. The main question examined here is: upon what principle was this transition of rights carried out, and how was this relationship experienced in rural communities?

Land de-collectivisation in Albania in 1991, implemented through Law 7501, marked the beginning of a profound transformation in property and social structures.⁴² The impact of this law has been so significant that it remains the only piece of legislation to which people refer in everyday life by its official number as published in the *Official Gazette*—"7501". The central principle upon which land distribution was based was equal allocation, specifically according to the *per capita* principle. Under the principle of restitution, by contrast, the primary concern is the recognition of previous property rights rather than the equality proposed by the law.⁴³

The adoption of the distribution principle based on equality (*per capita*) was supported by both major political forces. Both parties sought to establish as their primary principle the securing of popular support through electoral legitimacy. When residents are asked today which principle would have been morally more just, almost all acknowledge that the implementation of restitution would have been the more ethically appropriate solution. Rather than restitution, the application of the distribution principle disrupted both the temporal and spatial dimensions of property ownership. In temporal terms, genealogical connections to inherited family land were not recognised by state law, as it did not acknowledge the right to reclaim property according to the boundaries that existed before the socialist period. In this sense, land distribution under this law effectively restarted history from year zero, creating a new temporal beginning.

At the spatial and economic level, a fragmented landscape emerged, composed of small land parcels that made the development of a viable agricultural economy difficult. The fragmentation of land was initially encouraged by the fact that land would be privatised

⁴⁰ Qeverisja Vendore. 2026. *Komisioni i Posacëm për Reformën Administrativo-Territoriale*. 10 April 2026.

⁴¹ Lelaj, Olsi. 2014. The proletarianisation of the peasantry: A narrative of socialist modernity in Albania. *Etnologica Balkanica* 16, 1–20; Verdery, Katherine, and Gail Kligman. 2011. *Peasants under siege: The collectivization of Romanian agriculture, 1949–1962*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁴² Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2011. *Gurtë e kufinit: Kanuni, pronësia, strukturimi sociale*. Tiranë: European University of Tirana Press.

⁴³ Verdery, Katherine. 1994. The elasticity of land: Problems of restitution in Transylvania. *Slavic Review* 53(4), 1047–1109.

regardless of the principle upon which its distribution was based. However, it will be shown that the principles applied by land distribution commissions that operated under Law 7501 generated an even more intensive process of fragmentation.⁴⁴

Law 7501 was not implemented throughout Albania. In the villages of Opar, however, it was applied with regard to agricultural land. Later, around 1995, residents shared forests and pastures, relying more heavily on local customary practices.⁴⁵ Agricultural land in Opar was distributed according to Law 7501 and, consequently, according to the principle of allocation.⁴⁶ Under this arrangement, each family received a plot of land based on the number of its members. This principle was applied in practice; however, families did not receive their land in a single location. Instead, the commission decided to distribute plots according to differences in productive quality and according to whether the land consisted of orchards, agricultural fields, or areas with or without irrigation systems.

As a result, a single family could receive four or five separate plots of land scattered across different locations, each requiring access roads, water channels, and other forms of infrastructure. All these factors created significant difficulties for cultivating the land. Even when machinery was available, its use was often impractical due to the small size of the plots.

Beyond the other difficulties generated by this system, this condition appears to have encouraged mass migration from the region. Although the system that produced such fragmentation was based on the principle of equality, in practice it created stronger conditions for leaving than for sustaining rural life in the area. In public debate in Albania, the alternative proposed to this model has consistently been the idea of restoring property rights to the heirs of former owners. The legitimacy of the principle of property restitution is based on both historical and moral arguments. Historically, it refers to property titles that existed prior to collectivisation; morally, it considers collectivisation and other forms of expropriation as violent processes. In 1994, the Law on the Restitution and Compensation of Property was adopted.⁴⁷ In Opar, there are families who, had property restitution been implemented, would have possessed significantly larger land holdings. Yet, to date, only one family has managed to obtain a form of compensation from the pastureland compensation fund.

From that period until the present, both in Opar and at the national level, there has been a persistent impasse between these two models: the distribution of property rights and the restoration of previous ownership rights.

This form of legal uncertainty surrounding property has been publicly acknowledged and recognised by the political elite and is undoubtedly one of the issues that contributed to the Flamingo Revolution. Alongside environmental concerns, property rights in the Narta Lagoon area, including the village of Zvërnec, represented another major issue raised during the mobilisation. Beyond the inability to achieve political or social consensus—or perhaps precisely because of this unresolved condition—political parties have continuously instrumentalised legal uncertainty in property relations, seeking in return political

⁴⁴ Sikor, Thomas / Müller, Daniel, and Johannes Stahl. 2009. Land fragmentation and cropland abandonment in Albania: Implications for the roles of state and community in post-socialist land consolidation. *World Development* 37(8), 1411–1423; Duijzings, Ger. 2013. Introduction, in *Global villages: Rural and urban transformations in contemporary Bulgaria*, edited by Duijzings, Ger. London: Anthem Press, 1–31.

⁴⁵ Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2009. Njeriu i kanunit në një shoqëri post-socialist. *Polis* 8: 114–132; Bardhoshi, Nebi. 2011. *Gurtë e kufinit*; Stahl, Johannes, 2012. *The rent for the land: A political ecology of post-Socialist Transformation*, London, Anthem Pr.

⁴⁶ Kuvendi Popullor i Republikës së Shqipërisë. 1991. *Ligji nr. 7501, datë 19.7.1991, për tokën*.

⁴⁷ Kuvendi i Republikës së Shqipërisë. 1994. *Ligji nr. 9235, datë 29.7.1994, për kthimin dhe kompensimin e pronës*.

support or political submission. A citizen with insecure property rights, both in relation to private and common property, appears to be almost a deliberate product of political processes, where the aim is to keep property-based subjectivity incomplete and permanently awaiting fulfilment. This condition of incomplete citizenship creates a fertile sociological ground for the production of electoral clientelism.

From time to time, development models based on agrotourism are promoted; the most recent example is the Mountain Package,⁴⁸ which is intended to be implemented in mountainous areas throughout Albania and for which Opar could represent an ideal location. Pastures, forests, and water resources are, according to the law, public property. This means that the state holds ownership titles and property rights, local government institutions are responsible for their administration, while local communities are the everyday users and beneficiaries. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, residents, referring to customary traditions, have divided pastures and forests that are considered common property of the village.

The Mountain Package, approved by the Albanian government in 2024, has increased anxiety in rural areas, particularly in abandoned regions where communities are either absent or dispersed across different locations. The government presents this package as an alternative for the economic “development” of rural areas, claiming that it will reduce or overcome potential property conflicts. According to this policy framework, priority is given to investors seeking access to public land, and if competing claims emerge, these are to be resolved through the courts without preventing the investment from proceeding. This package has been perceived by local residents and by many critics in the public sphere as a policy that primarily serves to strengthen the political clientelism of the governing party. Due to the widespread opposition it has encountered, it became one of the demands raised during the Flamingo Revolution, which called for its cancellation.

During my visit to Opar in 2024, I heard claims that large “businessmen” might be seeking to acquire property rights over Mount Ostrovicë and in areas along the shores of the lake created by the Moglicë Hydroelectric Power Plant. However, I have not yet been able to verify these accounts.

Alongside the effects produced by state approaches to property, other consequences have emerged as a result of migration and additional social factors, such as the increase in the number of heirs and the fragmentation of families. More than 90 % of the members of families who inherited land parcels in Opar have migrated outside the region, where they have established their own households and raised children. Many of them now live in different countries and have acquired citizenship in the countries where they reside. This situation has further complicated the management and use of inherited family property, while deepening the uncertainty and complexity surrounding the relationship between property ownership and citizenship in abandoned areas.

Roads in Opar as a Measure and Evidence of State Presence

The following section briefly discusses the issue of the road connecting Opar with Korçë, as well as the network of roads linking the villages within this region. This topic is undoubtedly among the most important for understanding, in an unequivocal manner, questions of mobility and the possibility of sustaining social and economic life in the area.

⁴⁸ Mountain Package. [Official homepage of Mountain Package](#) (accessed: 13 September 2026).

Such an analysis sheds light on how the presence or absence of the state is manifested in practice and, in this sense, on the phenomenon of state abandonment.⁴⁹

It was the end of July 2019. I was sitting in a café in Korçë, near a place that people had told me was the “station” where one could find a vehicle to travel up the road towards Lekas, the administrative centre of Opar. July is the most demanding period of the year for Opar’s residents, but it is also the time when the region has its highest number of inhabitants. During this period, people cut hay, collected medicinal plants and wild fruits, and for those engaged in beekeeping and the production of *kaçkavall* cheese, it was likewise an intense working season.

At the station, several residents from different villages of Opar were waiting for a vehicle. They were elderly people who had come down from Opar in the morning and were now returning home. Among those waiting was Dhimitri, who was travelling back to cut grass for payment, but also, as he told me himself, to satisfy his longing for his birthplace. Hay was essential for feeding livestock during the long winter months, while products collected from nature provided additional sources of income for families. To reach Opar, one had to travel by car for approximately four hours. The journey began at around 14:00. The driver and owner of the vehicle was a resident of Lekas, who, during socialism, had worked as the driver of the cooperative. His vehicle transported passengers to Lekas, the administrative centre of the Opar region. From Lekas to the other villages, residents mostly travelled on foot or by horse. The distance to each village varied: Marjan 5 km, Gjonbabasi 3.5 km, Denas 3 km, Xërje 2.5 km, Tudas 4 km, Lavdar 5 km, Garbanjoz 7 km, Brozdovec 8.4 km, Opar village 15 km, and Mazrekë 12.8 km.

When asked why someone would migrate from Opar, Taçi interrupted: “People left Opar because of the road,” and then added: “but Oparaks are good people. We have traditions. We have a very old church”.⁵⁰ Others at the table, some sitting nearby, joined the conversation and began to emphasise the consequences of *kur shteti nuk është shtet* (when the state is not a state), an expression used to describe the absence of a genuine state, illustrated through the lack of road construction and, ultimately, through the state’s abandonment. Amid sarcasm and silences, and the sense that there was little point in speaking further about the issue, the conversation moved in different directions. From the road, it shifted towards the church and cultural heritage, but eventually returned to what remained the central concern and the social lament of Opar: the absence of a paved, or at least properly maintained, road connecting Opar with surrounding areas.

The existing road was first constructed during an initiative organised by the agricultural cooperatives in 1967–1968.⁵¹ Since then, occasional maintenance has been carried out, but these interventions have not withstood even the first heavy rainfall. Consequently, travelling through the area requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Given its vital importance for the economy and social life of the region, concern over the road emerges whenever residents are given the opportunity to express their views. The fact that I was a researcher coming from Tirana also created an opportunity for them to articulate their concerns. In Opar, as in other parts of Albania, the term “electoral road” has entered informal discourse to describe the temporary and conditional nature of state infrastructure projects.

⁴⁹ Dalakoglou, Dimitris. 2017. *The road: An ethnography of [im]mobility, space, and cross-border infrastructure in the Balkans*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

⁵⁰ Interview with Garbanjozi, Taçi, carpenter, conducted by author, 10 July, 2019.

⁵¹ Meçollari, Eqrem. 2018. *Enciklopedia e vogël e Oparit: Vëllimi i katërt*. Korçë: Shtypshkronja Kotti.

In every electoral campaign, political parties in power, as well as candidates for parliament or mayoral positions, promise or carry out some form of road investment. The dominant practice, however, is either the failure to fulfil these pledges or their partial implementation. In themselves, half-finished roads constitute traces of the behaviour and image of political representatives, but also of the authority of the state itself. Throughout Opar, as across Albania, one encounters accounts of bridges repaired, health centres renovated, or road segments completed during electoral seasons, often with the support of businessmen expecting political benefits in exchange for votes, either for themselves or for their allies. Such investments are not presented as matters of rights or moral obligation, but rather as the only available opportunity to obtain something in return from state representatives and, to some extent, from the state itself.

The recurring refrain everywhere is: “They come for votes and then leave. If they do something during the campaign, fine. If they do not, they disappear and never ask again. We are few, and we are old; they [those in power] are not interested in us. There is no state now; this is not a state; our state is a joke,” and so on. The emptiness of electoral promises and the futility of hoping for state investment have generated new interpretations, reflections shaped by distrust, disappointment, and what many residents now describe as an “awareness” of the state’s real intentions. According to many villagers, what was once perceived as neglect resulting from institutional weakness or state failure is now experienced as a deliberate policy of not fulfilling promises. Many express a firm belief that there is a state agenda aimed at depopulating this area and Albania as a whole. Within certain interpretative frameworks, the narrative of depopulation intertwines with conspiracy theories and schemes that portray the state and its elites as captured by a deliberate project of demographic emptying of Albania.

Within this broader narrative of the state, residents also emphasise that “this state”, encompassing the entire period of transition, has shown no genuine interest in protecting the country’s cultural heritage. On the contrary, they argue that the state has abandoned it and seeks not only demographic depopulation but also the erosion of collective memory.

The Church as a Signifier and the Materiality of State Abandonment

In this final ethnographic description, the focus will be on the Church of the Holy Trinity, located in the village of Tudas and therefore known as the Church of Tudas. The church dates back to the fifteenth century and belongs to the Orthodox-Byzantine cultural heritage. It is considered the most charismatic cultural heritage site in the region.

Not long ago, in the mid-twentieth century, the region was inhabited by both Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities.⁵² Today, the inhabitants of Opar are predominantly Muslim, with many identifying specifically as Bektashi. Bektashism is a distinct Sufi order within Islam that expanded its presence significantly in southern Albania,⁵³ including Opar, particularly during the rule of Ali Pasha Tepelena in the early nineteenth century. The reason for this change in the religious composition of the population of Opar is internal migration. According to local residents, the Orthodox inhabitants continued to migrate, particularly from the 1960s through the early 1980s. They mainly moved to urban areas, including Korçë, but many more settled in Tirana and Durrës. Nevertheless, the connection between the inhabitants and the Church of Tudas remains very strong. All residents with

⁵² Gjergji, Andromaqi, and Rrok Zojzi. 1952. Vështrim etnografik mbi krahinën e Oparit. *Buletin për Shkencat Shoqërore* 2, 34–46.

⁵³ Elsie, Robert. 2019. *Bektashism: History and culture of a dervish order in the Balkans*. London: I.B. Tauris.

whom I have spoken express respect and admiration for the church, recognising it both as a sacred place and as part of the national heritage.

During the communist state campaign against religious institutions that followed Enver Hoxha's speech of 6 February 1967, when many religious buildings throughout Albania were destroyed, this church escaped demolition. Its preservation appears to have been related to its exceptional historical and cultural value. Within the framework of national history, the church is a fifteenth-century construction associated with the noble Muzaka family, which ruled parts of medieval Arbëria from 13th to 15th century.⁵⁴ Because of its status as a cultural monument, it was protected throughout the socialist period. In the post-socialist period, the church became exposed to state abandonment, while simultaneously undergoing a gradual reappropriation as a place of religious significance by local inhabitants. Only occasionally does the Orthodox Church organise religious services there, while, more generally, there is no priest or officially appointed person responsible for its care and maintenance.

Occasional attempts have been made to undertake some restoration work, or at least basic maintenance. These interventions have mainly consisted of repairing the roof and walls. An intervention to preserve the roof was undertaken in 2013, with financial support from the Metropolis of Korçë and in coordination with the Regional Directorate of Cultural Heritage of Korçë. This is said to have been the first such intervention since 1960. However, no restoration work has been carried out on the iconostasis, icons, or murals.⁵⁵

In response to this situation, some residents of Lekas have taken responsibility for caring for the church. Among them, Beluli and Milazimi from the village of Lekas, both of Muslim background, stand out as particularly active figures. They have installed concrete flooring in several parts of the church, provided basic furnishings, placed a table, and even constructed a nearby water fountain to offer refreshment to visitors. I have had lengthy conversations with Beluli. He is an emblematic figure in Opar. He has reconstructed dozens of water fountains, doing so both voluntarily and as a personal commitment to his homeland. He does not openly state whether he is a believer or not. However, from our conversations, it becomes clear that his care for the church is motivated, first, by respect for his wife, who believed in the miraculous power of this church and second, by his appreciation for cultural heritage.

Beluli himself remains deeply connected to the socialist period. He organises gatherings marking the anniversary of the Liberation of Opar during the Second World War, as well as other commemorative dates from the calendar established during socialism. Since he works as a barman at the café in Lekas, on these historical dates he places photographs of Enver Hoxha at the entrance of the bar and invites friends, including former members of the Party of Labour. I brought this example because it illustrates a form of syncretism through which people live with and reconstruct memories and images of both communism and the state during the socialist period.

For the inhabitants of Opar's different villages, after the 1990s, at a time when religious freedom was restored, people from across the region gathered on 6 May to celebrate Saint George. Others testify that even today, when they are about to migrate or before important family or personal events, they visit the church to pray and seek blessing. It is also believed that the church provides healing for serious illnesses, both physical and psychological.

⁵⁴ Elsie, Robert. 2003. *Early Albania: A reader of historical texts, 11th–17th centuries*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

⁵⁵ Meçollari, 2018, *Enciklopedia e Vogël*, 218.

Regardless of religious affiliation, everyone describes it as a “place of God”. A frequently used expression illustrating this perspective is that “God is one”.

At the same time, the presence of this church has contributed to the emergence of an imagination concerning the existence of hidden treasures in the area. Alongside popular beliefs, there are also historical references that mention the existence of a jewellery workshop under the Muzaka principality. At the end of the 1980s, a group of researchers studying rare minerals conducted investigations in the surrounding area, but the results were never published. The reasons for the non-publication of these findings remain unknown, but it may have been related either to state secrecy or simply to the possibility that the research did not produce results considered valuable.⁵⁶ Today, throughout Opar, and particularly near the area where the Church of Tudas is located or where other churches once stood, one can find excavations carried out by illegal treasure hunters.

The way the state has dealt with the Church of Tudas as an object of cultural heritage does not correspond to the requirements of either national legislation or European standards, which function as an important axis of legitimacy. Consequently, this situation has contributed to the consolidation of a broader narrative of abandonment, according to which the state has neglected both the region and the people of Opar, particularly due to the absence of effective protection against real or imagined treasure seekers.

Here, once again, a form of storytelling emerges that combines elements of social experience with ideas originating from different forms of conspiracy narratives. For example, for some time in Albania and, at least, across several Balkan countries, there has existed a conspiracy theory connected with the idea of the “theft of history”. According to this narrative, the state’s neglect of the church is interpreted as part of a broader pattern of abandonment, allegedly converging with the policies of neighbouring states that supposedly seek to erase or appropriate Albanian history and cultural heritage.

The perception of deliberate state abandonment is reinforced by the lack of investment in other cultural heritage sites in the Opar region, such as several houses that once held the status of cultural monuments. Some of these no longer exist, having completely collapsed, while others are on the verge of ruin. This interpretation further intertwines with other narratives rooted in conspiracy theories, as well as with expressions of long-term disappointment with politics and criticism of Albanian society for failing to respond adequately to poor governance.

In the context of political disappointment and the perceived inability to respond effectively to state failure in relation to the protection of cultural heritage, interpretations shaped by narratives influenced by depopulation-related conspiracy theories have increasingly emerged. These conspiratorial interpretations have different sources and undergo different adaptations according to local circumstances. In the specific case, that is, in a situation marked by the experience of state abandonment, conspiracy theories take on the function of providing an explanation for why state abandonment occurs, presenting it as part of a carefully designed agenda. To put it differently, I have the impression that, in this setting, conspiracy theories have contributed to a further tricksterisation⁵⁷ of the way the state is spoken about and experienced in everyday life, while also serving as an interpretative mechanism through which to make sense of state abandonment.

⁵⁶ Meçollari, 2018, *Enciklopedia e Vogël*, 146.

⁵⁷ Szokolczai, *Post-Truth Society*.

As has been observed in various studies, the relationship between politics and truth is not an easy one. Nevertheless, the fundamental criterion through which political authority continues to be assessed as legitimate remains its relationship with truth.

A brief conclusion and a theoretical remark

The central question examined in this article has been how a state that has adopted a liminal ethos and function manifests itself in practice, and how this manifestation relates to migration. To address this question, the analysis has focused on state–citizen relations within a specific locality characterised by mass migration, while the theoretical discussion has been developed primarily through the concepts of the liminal state and state abandonment.

Ethnographic cases examined in this article demonstrate that state abandonment is manifested through different practices and levels, including local governance, property relations, road infrastructure, and the treatment of cultural heritage. Although these practices vary in form, they converge in producing a condition in which pledges remain unfulfilled, while trickery replaces commitment, giving rise to the tricksterisation of state–citizen relations. In this sense, rather than a citizen–state exchange grounded in lawful and legitimate commitments, different forms of state abandonment emerge. State abandonment thereby becomes one of the modalities through which the liminal state reproduces itself as the opposite of the state envisioned by its constitutive promise to *become*: a democratic and European state grounded in the rule of law, legitimate commitments, and reciprocal relations with its citizens. At the same time, it continues to derive legitimacy at the national level from this foundational pledge of democratisation and Europeanisation.

This social condition, created by this type of liminal state, pushes citizens to become clients of political parties, placing them in a continuous condition of abandonment and re-appropriation through their existential need for citizenship. Therefore, this social condition inevitably becomes a key factor in the continuation of migration.

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