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Polarization without radicalization: political radicalism in Albania in a comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

Since the collapse of communism, political radicalism has been an important part of the political scene in Europe. The 2008 financial crisis furthered this trend, giving rise to new waves of radicalization. Albania appears to be a curious exception to this trend. Unlike most other countries in Eastern Europe, there have been no successful radical parties in Albania since the collapse of communism in 1991. In the same fashion, social protests in Albania in recent years have been fleeting and far less radical than other protest movements in other countries in the region (Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey). This article argues that the relative lack of political radicalization in Albania is due to its traumatic communist past combined with a high level of bipolarization. The bitter experience with national–communism reduced the attractiveness of both far right and far left discourses in Albania. The high levels of political bipolarization, on the other hand, divided the Albanian political sphere into two antagonistic camps. Such a deep division subsumed other possible cleavages.

KEYWORDS

Political radicalization;
bipolarization; communism;
Albania

Introduction: the Albanian puzzle

During the last 25 years, since the collapse of the communist system, almost every country in the Balkans and beyond has had at least one relatively successful radical party. Following Minkenbergh (2013, 6), I define right-wing radicalism as ‘a political ideology, the core element of which is a myth of a homogenous nation, a romantic and populist ultra-nationalism which is directed against the concept of liberal and pluralistic democracy and its underlying principles of individualism and universalism’. Left-wing radical parties, on the other hand, are those that ‘reject the underlying socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices... [and] advocate alternative economic and power structures involving a major redistribution of resources from existing political elites’ (March 2011, 23). In Eastern Europe, the left–right distinction is hard to draw, as most radical parties utilize the ‘red-brown’ ideology that combines the anti-capitalist ideology of the left with the nationalist rhetoric of the right (Ishiyama 2009). Some typical examples here would be radical parties such as Ataka in Bulgaria, Greater Romania Party, Jobbik in Hungary and Serbian Radical Party in Serbia.

This is not to say that all radical political parties are the same. Political radicalism can be progressive insofar as it contests the status quo by emphasizing inclusion, openness and solidarity or regressive when provoking resentment, hatred and exclusion (Voutyras 2016, this issue, see also Karakatsanis and Herzog, 2016). My aim here is simply to highlight the fact that unlike in most countries in the region, there have been no successful radical parties in Albania since the fall of communism in 1991. On the left, the best electoral result of the radical Albanian Communist Party was merely 0.91% of the general vote in the 2001 parliamentary elections (Çeka 2013, p 58). This is a meagre result compared to the 8.5% of the Communist Party of Greece in the May 2012 parliamentary elections in Greece (ElectionGuide 2015a). On the right, the nationalist and monarchist Movement for Legality peaked at 3.25% in the 1997 Albanian parliamentary elections (Çeka 2013, 55). This result is well below the 16.29% of the Nationalist Action Party in the 2015 parliamentary elections in Turkey (ElectionGuide, 2015b). During the last 25 years, the radical right in Albania has been far less successful than in most other Balkan countries. See Table 1.

As the table shows, Albania is one of the few former communist countries in the region where the combined vote share for the radical right did not exceed 5% of the general vote. The most recent radical nationalist political movement in Albania called the *Red and Black Alliance*, which received wide media coverage and publicity during the 2013 parliamentary elections, won only 0.59% of the vote (WorldElections 2015). In this respect, Albania seems to be exceptional in the region and beyond.

This particular feature of the Albanian political scene is quite puzzling, given that the country enjoys most of the conditions deemed conducive to political radicalization by most analysts. Such conditions can be divided into five interrelated categories: difficult and disappointing transition, high levels of corruption, delayed nation-building, communist legacy and limited political choice due to EU integration. First, political radicalism in Eastern Europe has been explained as a protest movement against a difficult transition marked by painful economic reforms (Anastasakis 2002, 5). Second, radical political movements have been explained as expressions of dissatisfaction with a status quo perceived as 'traumatic, anarchic, corrupt, politically decadent and morally decrepit' (Tismaneanu 2007, 36). Third, the red-brown ideology of most radical parties in the Eastern Europe (Ataka in Bulgaria, Greater Romania Party and Serbian Radical Party) that combines anti-capitalism, nationalism and authoritarianism has been traced directly to the communist-nationalist ideology of the communist regimes in the region and their authoritarian practices (Ishiyama 2009; Mudde 2000, 13, 14; Shafir 2000). Fourth, the surge of the nationalist far right has been explained as a consequence of the delayed process of nation-building, which has meant that in Eastern

Table 1. Combined vote shares for radical right parties since the founding elections.

Country	Elections				
	First	Second	Third	Fourth	Fifth
Albania	4.97	2.30	2.40	0.60	0.34
Bulgaria	1.13	0.54	0.18	0.07	8.14
Croatia	50	47.51	31.85	6.37	3.50
Romania	8.82	19.48	15.12	5.42	13.98
Serbia–Montenegro-FRY	8.60	35.27	28.59	29.46	4.63
Slovenia	3.22	4.39	6.27	5.40	1.80
Macedonia	0.00	0.00	6.10	0.24	2.51

Source: Bustikova (2014, 1742).

Europe, nationalism has often overridden other issues, producing thus right-wing radicalism (Stein 2000). Finally, some have argued that the policy convergence of the major political actors in the context of EU integration limited political choice and created a 'vacuum effect' that encouraged the growth of the extreme right (Bustikova 2009, 237).

These five conditions have all been present in post-communist Albania. First, during its difficult transition towards a market economy, Albania weathered deep economic shocks, such as the 1997 financial crisis, that brought about a complete collapse of the state (Pettifer and Vickers 2007, 19). Second, most surveys show that perceptions of corruption in Albania are higher than in most other countries in the region (Transparency International 2014). Third, the Albanian communist regime was highly nationalistic and totalitarian. Thus, there is a communist–nationalist legacy and an authoritarian political culture in the country that should be quite conducive to political radicalism. Fourth, Albanian nation formation has been a far more recent phenomenon as compared to Romania, Bulgaria or Serbia, not to mention Greece. Indeed, the national issue is widely seen as unsolved, given various Albanian-inhabited territories outside of Albania. Finally, the policy distance between the two major parties, the Socialist and the Democratic Party, has almost vanished since 1997 (Fuga 2003). According to some measures, the policy distance regarding EU integration between the two main parties in Albania was smaller than in Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia and many other Eastern European countries (Bustikova 2009, 235). Yet, Albania has been one of the few Eastern European countries, along with the Czech Republic, Moldova, Ukraine and Montenegro, where right-wing radical parties have not been successful (Bustikova 2014, 1739). However, Moldova, Ukraine and the Czech Republic have enjoyed major radical communist parties, such as the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia that won 14.91% of the vote in the 2013 parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic (ElectionGuide 2015c). There have been no such successful radical left parties in Albania.

I am not arguing that there has been no political radicalization in Albanian society since the collapse of communism. There is, however, something exceptional about radicalism in Albanian social movements too. First, they are extremely fleeting. The 1997 popular protests that began as a spontaneous citizen movement, following the collapse of various pyramid schemes where the majority of the population lost their savings, were quickly brought under the control of the opposition Socialist Party (Mapo 2012). The 2013 November protests against the dismantling of the Syrian chemical arsenal in Albania, explored in detail in the last part of this paper, lasted less than a week. Second, social protests in Albania hardly challenge the status quo. Instead, they tend to focus on very specific demands. The 1997 protests demanded that the government return the savings that the population lost in the pyramid schemes. The 2013 November protests called upon the government to refuse the USA offer to host the destruction of the Syrian chemical arsenal in Albania. In this case, as I show in the third part of the paper, the protesters did not even call upon the government to resign. In this regard, Albania seems to differ from other countries in the region where one encounters radical social movements, such as the anti-austerity movement in Greece that began in 2010, the Ghezi park protests in Turkey in 2013 or the 2013–2014 protest in Bulgaria that produced lasting, identifiable and loosely structured social movements that challenged the status quo.

In this paper, I argue that there are two interrelated factors that explain the relative lack of political radicalism in Albania. First, the traumatic experience Albanians had with national–communism has undermined the emergence of any far left or far right nationalist political

discourses. Due to its deeply disappointing and traumatic experience with communism, the Albanian electorate became highly unreceptive to any far left anti-capitalist or far right nationalist discourses that could be/were connected to the anti-capitalist and nationalist ideology of Albanian communism. This was not the case in other post-communist countries, or other countries in the region, such as Turkey or Greece, where leftist or nationalist discourses have not been delegitimized to the same extent as in Albania. Second, the highly bipolarized Albanian political scene has deeply divided the Albanian society into two conflicting camps: the Socialist Party against the Democratic Party. The depth and intensity of such divide subsumed other potential cleavages.

In order to make the above argument, the paper has been divided into three main parts. In the first part, I show how the Albanian experience with communism was far more traumatic than that of any other countries in Eastern Europe. This in turn reduced the space for the emergence of far right or far left discourses that were reminders of the Albanian nationalist-communist ideology. In the second part, I show that the level of bipolarization in Albania during the last 20 years has been higher than in any other country in the region. This is another factor that sets Albania apart from other post-communist countries and explains the relative lack of radical political or social movements. In order to demonstrate how the communist experience and bipolarization combine to limit political radicalism in Albania, I explore the November 2013 protests, as an example of successful but limited social radicalization.

The traumatic communist experience

Albanian communism was the most oppressive, isolated and under-performing political system in Eastern Europe. In economic terms, communism left Albania with the lowest GDP per capita in the region in the early 1990s. In social terms, Albanian communism was more repressive than even the Romanian communist regime, widely regarded as one of the harshest communist regimes in Eastern Europe. As Woodcock (2007, 51) has noted in a comparison of Albanian communism with the Romanian one:

The absolute lack of political jokes about Albanian socialism in post-socialist conversations, memoirs, and academia, is striking in comparison to other post-socialist European contexts, such as Romania, where jokes from the period of socialism were thick and fast on the ground while Ceausescu was alive...

To the majority of Albanians, communism was not something one could laugh or joke about (Woodcock 2007, 53). Albania was the only country in Eastern Europe that remained bound to a politically oppressive and economically bankrupt Stalinist system until the collapse of the communist system in 1991. The small size of the country and its primarily rural population meant that the communist Party of Labour could exercise a tight grip on Albanian society. In a population of less than three million 'tens of thousands Albanians vanished in labour camps; another 700,000 were subjected to other forms of government repression' (Biberaj 1998, 71).

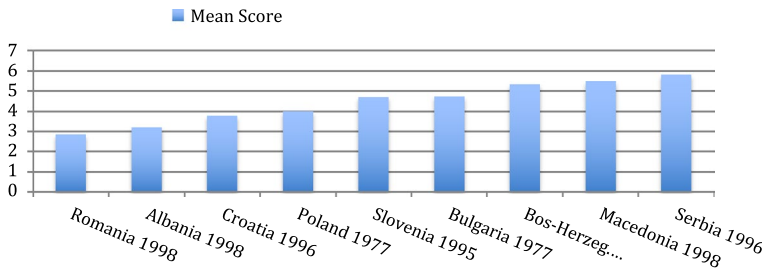
It should therefore come as no surprise that during the 90s communism was perceived more negatively in Albania as compared to most other countries in the region and beyond. See Graph 1. As the graph shows, Romania is the only other country that had a slightly more negative perception of communism than Albania in 1998. It is important to notice, however, that the survey in Albania took place right after the 1997 crisis where the majority of the

Albanians lost their life savings following the bankruptcy of various pyramid schemes that brought about the complete collapse of the Albanian state. Despite such disturbing events, the majority of Albanians still had a very negative perception of their communist past.

An important aspect that sets Albania apart from other post-communist countries is the fact that the negative evaluation of communism did not diminish over time, as it has been the case with many other countries in the region. Two decades after the fall of communism, there has been a growth in the phenomenon of communist nostalgia (or Yugo-nostalgia in the case of former Yugoslavia) throughout Eastern Europe (Todorova 2010). Growing numbers of citizens in the former Eastern Bloc have become increasingly critical of, and disillusioned with, their post-communist present. This in turn produced a more positive evaluation of the communist past. See Table 2.

The situation in Albania seems to be strikingly different. There is a general consensus amongst the population that the economic situation under communism was worse than during post-communism. See Table 3.

It is important to notice that the above responses should be interpreted as dissatisfaction with the communist past more than as a reflection of satisfaction with the post-communist present. In the same survey, when asked about the economic direction of the country since 1991, only 8.3% responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied. See Table 4.



Graph 1. Evaluation of communism (1 – very bad – 10 very good), 1995–1998. Source: WVS (1995–1999, V 151).

Table 2. Economic situation: communism vs. post-communism, 2009–2010.

Country	Hungary (2009)	Slovakia (2009)	Bulgaria (2009)	Romania (2010)
Better under communism than now (%)	72	48	62	63
Worse under communism than now (%)	8	29	13	23

Source: The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2009, 5) and Dragomir (2011).

Table 3. How would you describe the overall economic situation in Albania?

	Communism (before 1990)	Post-communism (1991–2010) (%)
Very bad (%)	30	75
Bad (%)	45	19
Good (%)	2	16
Very good (%)	0	31

Source: Rakipi and Huibregtse (2011, 62).

The results show that the respondents had a much more positive perception of the post-communist economic situation when asked to compare it with the communist past (35% bad vs. 32% good). When asked to evaluate the post-communist economic situation on its own, however, the perception becomes much more negative (61.4% dissatisfied vs. 8.2% satisfied). This means that more than accepting of their post-communist present, Albanians were deeply averse to their communist past.

The negative perception of the communist past combined with the disappointment with the Albanian post-communist political class produced high levels of legitimacy amongst the Albanian population for international organizations and institutions such as the European Union and NATO. While the communist ideology in Albania emphasized local development, all post-communist governments have emphasized development as something that comes from outside. In fact, the slogan of the Albanian communist regime until 1991, as far as economic development was concerned, was 'Through Our Own Effort!' The sharp break with the communist past was best reflected in the slogan of the first post-communist government in 1992 'We Govern and the World Helps Us!' The more Albanians lost faith in their local politicians and institutions, the more they seemed to confide in international actors and institutions. See Graph 2.

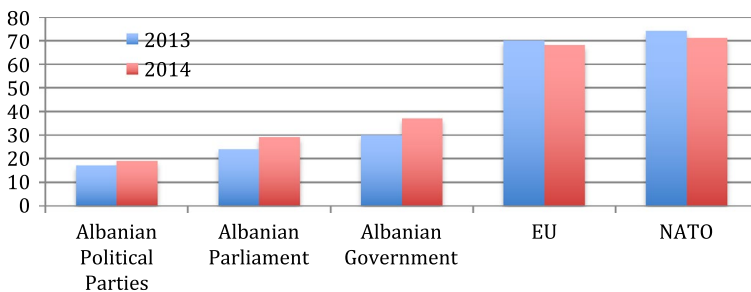
As the graph shows, high levels of mistrust of local institutions were associated with high levels of trust for international institutions. As far as distrust in local institutions is concerned, such as the Parliament or the political parties, Albania does not present a picture that is very different from other countries in the region. The high levels of trust in international institutions, however, set Albania apart from other post-communist and regional countries. See Graph 3.

What is interesting is the fact that the Albanian public has more net trust (those who trust minus those who do not trust) in the European Parliament than other EU members in the region that, unlike the Albanians, vote for such an institution. Furthermore, higher levels of trust in EU institutions in Albania cannot be explained through the membership effect: the fact that support for EU in many Eastern European countries has dropped after accession

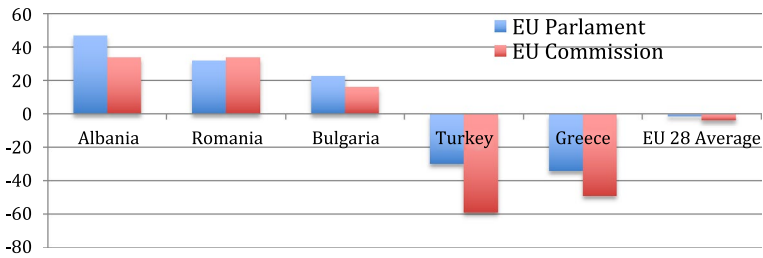
Table 4. How satisfied are you with the economic direction Albania has followed since 1991?

Answers	Percentages	
Not at all satisfied	27	61.4
Not satisfied	34.4	
Satisfied	8.2	8.3
Very satisfied	0.1	

Source: Rakipi and Huibregtse (2011, 63).



Graph 2. Percentage of those who trust domestic and foreign institutions, 2013–2014. Source: IDM (2014, 3).



Graph 3. Net Trust in the European Parliament and European Commission, 2014. Source: Standard Eurobarometer 82 (2014, T84, T85).

into the EU. The Central and Eastern European Barometer that surveyed 19 countries in the region during the 1992–1996 period, including Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia, found that the Albanian public retained a more positive image of EU than in any other country surveyed (European Commission 1996, 43).¹

The important, and perhaps growing, legitimacy of international institutions in the Albanian political scene during the last 20 years has been another factor that explains the lack of political radicalism in Albania. International institutions such as the European Union and the USA embassy in Tirana have been the guardians of political moderation. They have been quick to denounce any appearances of political extremism, whether from the right or the left. The most recent and telling example of this phenomenon was the successful pressure that the USA embassy in Tirana brought to bear on the discourse of the *Red and Black Alliance*, a radical nationalist movement, on January 2013. After meeting with the USA ambassador, the leader of the *Red and Black Alliance* declared that the movement would focus more on anti-corruption confirming that the USA remained a guiding light for his movement (Shqip 2013). Far from being radical, the anti-corruption discourse in Albania has served primarily to legitimize a neoliberal order, especially during the 1998–2005 period (Kajsiu 2015, 171).

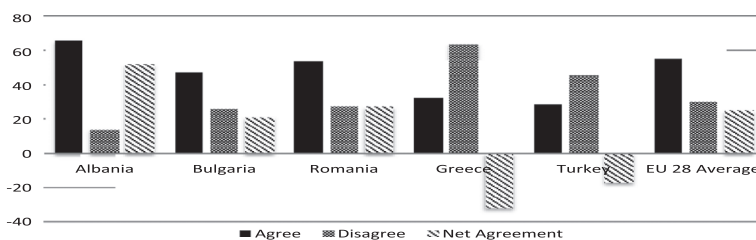
The negative perception of the communist political and economic system combined with the growing legitimacy of international institutions facilitated the consolidation of the neoliberal hegemony in the Albanian political scene and public opinion. First, international institutions that enjoyed high levels of legitimacy in the Albanian public sphere supported such hegemony. Second, the anti-communist discourse legitimized a neoliberal economic order that promoted political and economic liberalization, privatization and globalization as the overcoming of the communist past (Kajsiu 2015, 52). This combination explains in part why concepts such as liberalization and globalization are perceived more positively in Albania as compared to other countries in the region. Thus, in 2014, Albania had by far the highest percentage of respondents (45%) that viewed liberalization as something very positive, as compared to Bulgaria (16%), Romania (18%), Greece (13%) and Turkey (20%) (Standard Eurobarometer 82 2014, T52, T55).

Overwhelmingly, positive perceptions of liberalization can be explained by the fact that the majority of Albanians associated liberalization with free EU movement, something as much desired as it was forbidden during the communist regime. Of course, the articulation of free-movement, economic liberalization and opening as complementary processes served to buttress the existing neoliberal hegemony as the opposite of the traumatic and isolated Albanian communism. This in turn is reflected in the highly positive perception that Albanians

have with regard to globalization as compared to other nations in the region. As Graph 4 shows, Albanians have the highest percentage of net agreement (percentage of people who agree minus percentage of people who disagree) regarding the economic benefits of globalization.

The Albanian experience with communism combined with the legitimization of the neo-liberal developmental model that it produced undermined the emergence of anti-capitalist, anti-globalization or nationalist discourses. The Albanian national-communist ideology combined the national glorification of Albanian history with Marxism–Leninism (Lubonja 2012). It embraced both far left and far right political discourses insofar as its rejection of capitalism and globalization was combined with, and justified through, a strong nationalist discourse. As a consequence, alternative discourses that were critical of the open market and globalization or that had strong nationalist undertones could be easily attacked as remains of the past communist mentality or as ‘politically incorrect’, insofar as they upset Albania’s Western allies. This is not to say that there have been no nationalist discourses, parties or politicians in Albania. They have not, however, produced successful political movements. The Albanian equivalent of other nationalist parties in the region, called the Party of National Renovation, which has produced much of the nationalist discourse in Albanian media, has been electorally irrelevant since its foundation in 1995 (Sulstarova 2015, 88).

It is important to emphasize at this point that the lack of success of radical right-wing parties in Albania is attributable to two additional factors, besides the traumatic experience with communism. First, traditional political parties that existed before communism such as the National Front (Balli Kombetar) and the Legality Movement (the royalist movement), which utilized extremist right-wing nationalist discourses, lacked credibility with the Albanian electorate. Throughout the 45 years of communist rule, they had been the target of intense ridiculing and denigration by communist propaganda, historiography and cinematography. An entire generation of Albanians that grew under communism viewed these political forces either as collaborators of the Nazis (The National Front) or as traitors that abandoned and robbed the nation in its time of need, given that King Zog had fled the country with the treasury on the eve of the Italian occupation of Albania on 7 April 1939. It should therefore come as no surprise that the majority of Albanians saw Leka Zogu, the son of King Zog and leader of the Legality Movement, ‘as a comical figure with a rather dubious “business” reputation’ (Vickers 1999, 249). Second, these traditional nationalist right-wing political parties were not very appealing to the overwhelmingly rural Albanian electorate because they were representative of the major landowning families in Albania. This electorate was suspicious



Graph 4. Globalization as an opportunity for economic growth, 2014. Source: Standard Eurobarometer 82 (2014, T104).

that these parties supported land redistribution in favour of the big landowners and at the expense of the average peasant. The Albanian Labor Party and its successor Socialist Party would often accuse the opposition Democratic Party that it was reviving these extreme right-wing forces that aimed to take the land away from the peasants by revoking the agricultural reform that the communists had undertaken. Indeed, the defeat of the right-wing opposition Democratic Party in the first post-communist elections of 1991 has been attributed to the ‘widespread belief that it would privatize and redistribute the land, while the PLA [Party of Labor of Albania] had promised to protect the peasantry from privatization’ (Vickers 1999, 222). I believe that these two elements, lack of credibility and appeal with the rural electorate, combined to limit the success of these traditional right-wing nationalist parties.

Political bipolarization

Another factor that could explain the lack of radical political parties in Albania is the high degree of political bipolarization that has successfully divided the Albanian political discourse and electorate into two antagonistic camps: the Socialist Party (SP) on the ‘left’ and the Democratic Party (DP) on the ‘right’. As a well-known analyst has argued, ‘the two bands [Socialist and Democratic Party] have worked to divide in two public opinion, civil society, and the media, through the enverist [Enver Hoxha] philosophy of “he who is not with me is my enemy”’ (Lubonja 2013). A quick glance at the effective number of legislative parties in Albania during the last 22 years shows that the political scene has been dominated by an average of 2.33 parties for this period.² See Table 5.

The domination of the Albanian political system by the same two major political actors throughout the last 25 years is quite rare, not only in the post-communist world but also in the region and beyond. A comparison with four other countries in the region shows that Albania has had the smallest number of effective legislative parties during the last 20 years. This means that bipolarization in Albania has been stronger than in these countries. See Table 6.

Table 5. Effective number of parties in Albania 1991–2013.

Elections	1991	1992	1996	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	Average
Parties with more than 3% of the seats in Parliament	2	3	2	3	3	5	2	4	2.86
Effective legislative parties (Laakso and Taagepera 1979)	1.81	1.97	1.3	2.31	2.68	3.52	2.22	2.8	2.33

Source: Çeka (2013, 93); ElectionGuide (2015d) and author’s calculations.

Table 6. Effective number of legislative parties, 1990–2013.

Country	Effective number of legislative parties	Period
Bulgaria	3.34	1990–2009
Croatia	3.07	1990–2007
Romania	3.60	1990–2008
Slovenia	4.23	1990–2008
Albania	2.33	1990–2013

Source: Jurek (2010, 118) and author’s calculation.

The bipolarity of the Albanian political scene began in 1990, following the collapse of the communist regime. The gradual economic, social and political deterioration of the communist hegemony produced a growing split between the hard-liners and the reformers within the communist Party of Labour of Albania (PLA), which controlled almost every aspect of Albanian society. By 1991, the Albanian society was deeply divided into two antagonistic camps. On the one hand was the anti-communist bloc, primarily amidst the urban, youth and better-educated population that was highly critical of the communist regime and called for deep and rapid political and economic transformations. On the other hand, there were the supporters of the communist regime, primarily amidst the rural and lesser educated part of population that called for gradual transformations and held a less critical view of the communist past (Vickers 1999, 222). The latter were represented by the Albanian Party of Labour (APL), which on 10 June 1991 was transformed into the social-democratic Socialist Party (Vickers 1999, 228). The former were represented by the anti-communist Democratic Party that was founded on 12 December 1990. The Democratic Party initially 'took the trappings of a mass movement involving groups and individuals who would under more normal conditions not be in political alliance with each-other' (Biberaj 1998, 66). It included those persecuted by the communist regime as well as former members of the communist APL, such as Sali Berisha that soon became the key leader of the Democratic Party (*ibid.*, 69). Following the victory of APL in the first plural elections on 31 March 1991, there were clashes between the two camps in the urban areas where 'peasants coming into the town to sell their produce were beaten by town dwellers blaming them for ensuring the Communist victory' (Vickers 1999, 223).

During its rule, 1992–1997, the Democratic Party eagerly embraced and legitimized various political and economic neoliberal reforms of privatization and liberalization as anti-communist measures. By 1997, Albania was considered a model country for institutions such as IMF and the World Bank (Bezemer 2006, 17). Hence, during the 1992–1997 period, the ruling anti-communist Democratic Party and the opposition Socialist Party differed both in terms of identity and policy. While both parties condemned the Albanian communist past, the Democratic Party was far more critical than the Socialist Party. In terms of policy during the period 1992–1997, while the Democratic Party advocated and implemented deep and rapid privatization and liberalization reforms known as *shock therapy*, the opposition Socialist Party called for more gradual and limited transformations that would not destabilize the Albanian society (Fuga 2003, 104, 105). These differences divided the Albanian electorate into two antagonistic camps that deeply disagreed both on the interpretation of the immediate communist past as well as on how to transform the present.

Once the Socialist Party came to power (1997–2005), however, the policy and historical differences between the two camps began to quickly fade away. Under pressure from international organizations, such as the IMF, the new Socialist Government continued and deepened the very privatization and liberalization reforms that it had criticized while in opposition. In 2003, Albania had a private sector that was larger than the OECD average (Kajsiu 2015, 104). In 2002, the social base of the two parties was almost identical as far as levels of education were concerned (Kajsiu 2004, 35). By 2006, the communist vs. anti-communist distinction faded further away due to the changes in the leadership structure of the two parties. In 2006, the 'communist' Socialist Party, now in opposition, elected a new leader, Edi Rama, an anti-communist intellectual that had never been a member of the Albanian Communist

Party, while the 'anti-communist' Democratic Party was still led by Sali Berisha, a former communist and former candidate for the Central Committee of the APL (Vickers 1999, 238).

As ideological and policy differences faded away, the two major parties increasingly relied on institutional arrangements, clientelistic networks and polarizing political discourses in order to continue dominating the Albanian political scene. During the last 25 years, the two major parties have changed the electoral system before every general election in order to guarantee their political dominance (Çeka 2013, 70, 71). Both parties have also constructed extensive clientelistic networks through which they sustained the loyalty of their followers. Following Kitschelt (2000, 849), by clientelism I understand a type of linkage where businesses can provide politicians with money in exchange for government contracts or protection in the market, while party supporters offer their vote in exchange for public sector employment. Building on Kitschelt's definition, the two major political parties in Albania can be best described as organized clientelistic structures that provide particular benefits to their supporters. As an important scholar of the Albanian political scene has noted:

Finding a job in the hierarchy of the state administration, state enterprises, hospitals, schools and other public institutions has very much depended on the relations that a specific person has had with the ruling party at the local or national level. (Fuga 2003, 240)

This has meant that political competition in Albania has been an aggressive zero sum game where the winning party would distribute the spoils of victory amongst its followers. Indeed, the last confrontation between the opposition Socialist Party and the ruling Democratic Party on 21 January 2011 resulted in the killing of four Socialist Party protesters, shot dead in front of the Prime Minister's office by the Presidential Guard, an institution staffed at the time with supporters of the ruling Democratic Party (Likmeta 2014).

The more the two parties have converged, ideologically and policy wise, the more they have tended to polarize the political scene by portraying their political opponent as a threat to 'the people' (Kajsiu 2010). This is why hate speech has been one of the defining characteristics of Albanian political discourse. Political exchange between the main leaders has been dominated by personal attacks and insults (Halo et al. 2012, 9). In this respect, the Albanian political scene today resembles that of Greece during the 1990s and 2000s when the 'policy-empty polarization' between the two main political actors (PASOK and Nea Dimokratia) was not based on programmatic differences as much as on historical identities and a fierce competition for spoils (Chryssogelos 2015, 23). Unlike in the Greek political system, however, radical left- or right-wing discourses are not available in the Albanian political scene due to its traumatic communist past.

A case study: the November 2013 protests in Albania

In order to understand how the communist past combined with intense political bipolarization to limit the emergence of political radicalism in Albania, we shall explore one of the few successful citizen protest movements that took place in Albania during 7–15 November 2013. Throughout the second week of November 2013, a wave of massive protests broke out in the capital of Albania, Tirana, that quickly spread to the major cities of the country. The protesters demanded that the Albanian Government refuse the request of the USA, on behalf of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, to offer its territory for the destruction of chemical weapons from the arsenal of Assad's regime in Syria (Bengali 2013). The initial protests that began on 7 November had limited participation; however, by

12 November, the participation had grown to a few thousand people. In the following days, it continued to precipitate and during 13–15 November 2013, the participation grew rapidly not only in Tirana but in all the major Albanian cities. Such rapid radicalization and mobilization surprised not only the government but also many civil society organizers. By 15 November, the date when the Albanian Government had to make a final decision, thousands of citizens had been protesting in front of the Prime Minister's office for hours, while high school and university students began to boycott classes in order to join the protest. Faced with the growing numbers and increasing radicalization of the protesters, Prime Minister Edi Rama decided to reject the US offer, despite the fact that he had earlier said 'yes in principle' to the US proposal (Rama 2013a). Crowds responded positively and peacefully dispersed.

The November protests were greeted by a number of local observers as a milestone in Albanian democracy. Some viewed them as the key turning point in Albanian foreign policy that marked the end of the limitless servility of the Albanian Government towards its major ally, the USA (Baxhaku 2013; Çipa 2013). Some viewed the November protests as the harbinger of a new political area where the government will no longer ignore its citizens (Çavo 2013; Çoçoli 2013). Others viewed them as the beginning of an awakening on part of the Albanian citizens, who were able to look beyond the usual government–opposition polarization that has served to divide and control them (Erebara 2013; Gjoni 2013). Finally, some viewed these protests as a generational change in the Albanian political scene because most of the mobilization took place amongst the youth through new technologies, such as Facebook, rather than through traditional political parties (Erebara 2013; Salaj 2013). Despite the initial high hopes, however, the November protest did not produce any legacy or inspire other moments of radicalization. In fact, by 2015, there was no mention of them in the Albanian press.

Explaining the November protests

I believe that two key factors (amongst many others) combined to produce the November 2013 protests in Albania against the dismantling of Syria's chemical arsenal in Albania. First and foremost was the silence of both the government and opposition on this issue. Second, the fact that other more developed NATO countries had rejected the US offer to host Syria's chemical weapons in their territory. This fed the fears of the Albanian public that the country was bending under US pressure in order to undertake an operation Albania was ill prepared for, and which was so dangerous that no other country wanted to be involved. These two factors combined to produce high levels of fear and irritation in the Albanian public that were not channelled into the usual government–opposition divide. Instead, the citizens took to the streets, regardless of their political affiliation.

The issue of Syria's chemical weapons was probably the only case in Albanian post-communist history where a well-publicized issue of popular interest was not framed through the position–opposition divide. Unwilling to alienate the USA, the Albanian opposition Democratic Party ignored the issue of Syria's chemical weapons as long as it could. It continued with its political agenda, organizing a massive protest in Tirana, on 10 November 2013, on an unrelated local elections issue (Panorama 2013a). The leader of the opposition only referred to the issue of chemical weapons on 10 November in a Facebook posting, once this issue had already become a major concern for the Albanian population. Even so, he did

not take a clear stand against the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in Albania (Panorama 2013b).

The silence of the Albanian Government on the issue was even more striking. From the moment it first appeared in the Albania media, on 26 October 2013 until 15 November 2013, when Prime Minister Rama decided not to accept Syria's chemical weapons in Albanian territory, there were only two very brief pronouncements from the Albanian Government on this issue. On 7 November 2013, the Minister of Foreign Affairs declared in a hearing session in the Commission of Foreign Affairs in the Albanian Parliament that the Albanian Government was discussing with the US Government the possibility of destroying Syrian chemical weapons in Albania (Dita 2013). In his first pronouncement on this issue on 11 November, Prime Minister Rama declared that there was no information he could share with the public beyond what the Minister of Foreign Affairs had already [not] shared:

I would like to emphasize it very clearly. The fact that there is no more information than the information given by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Commission of Foreign Affairs in the Parliament is due to the fact that there is no more information. (Rama 2013b)

What is amazing about the above declaration is the fact that by 11 November, the issue of chemical weapons was being discussed intensely not only in the Albanian media but also in a number of international newspapers. In other words, the Albanian public was in the meantime being inundated with information not only from local actors but also from the international media.

The silence of both the opposition and government on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in Albania produced a rare instance in which a major public issue was not framed within the government–opposition debate. As a consequence, the issue mobilized large numbers of protesters from both sides of the political spectrum, and gained legitimacy as a concern that transcended the political divisions in the country. As Lubonja (2013) put it: 'One has rarely seen during the last 20 years so many well-known figures of our public life sharing the same opinion [against the reception of chemical weapons].'

Bipolarization and moderation

As the protests began to attract an increasing number of participants during the second week of November 2013, the opposition Democratic Party was forced to openly support them. At once, many political analysts close to the ruling Socialist Party began to criticize and delegitimize the protests as an instrument of the opposition Democratic Party to return to power (Baze 2013b; Stefani 2013). These accusations were far-fetched, given that some of the key organizers of the protests, such as the Alliance Against the Import of Waste (AKIP in Albanian), had collaborated closely with the Socialist Party in 2012, opposing the approval of a law that allowed waste import in Albania by the then ruling Democratic Party. In 2012, the Democratic Party, then in power, had openly accused this organization (AKIP) as an instrument of the opposition Socialist Party. However, despite such unfounded and far-fetched accusations, the organizers of the protests took special care to emphasize the reasons why Syria's chemical arsenal should not be destroyed in Albania, without ever mentioning the resignation of the Prime Minister for saying 'yes in principle' to the US proposal (Panorama 2013c). In other words, to avoid being drawn into the bipolarized government–opposition debate, the protesters had to moderate and limit their demands to specific measures, such as the refusal of the US proposal by the Albanian Government.

In order to show how the lack of a government–opposition divide on the issue of chemical weapons affected the public opinion, I have monitored the editorial and opinion pieces of four major daily newspapers in Albania, one moderately critical of the socialist government (*Panorama*) and the other three close to the ruling Socialist Party, before and after the government made a decision on this issue. During the period, 5–15 November, when the issue of chemical weapons was widely debated in the Albanian media, but there was silence from the government and the main opposition, the vast majority of the articles were against the destruction of these weapons in Albanian territory and supportive of the popular protests. See Table 7.

The complete absence of the government in the public debate on the issue produced great confusion in the pro-government media. A well-known political analyst and government supporter expressed the frustration of many pro-government media with the Prime Minister when complaining in an editorial that: ‘To defend Edi Rama as a leader is perhaps the most difficult thing in Albania, even if you have decided to be his supporter. To defend a leader when you do not know what he is thinking is almost impossible’ (Baze 2013a). The Albanian media and political analysts, who in their majority function as an extension of the two major political camps, were at a loss in a public debate where the government did not take a stand.

Once Prime Minister Rama held a speech on 15 November 2013, where he declared that Albania was not able to accept the Syrian chemical weapons in its territory and where he explained the reasons why he had earlier said ‘yes in principle’ to the US offer, the coverage of the issue changed dramatically. See Table 8.

One single intervention by the Prime Minister Rama in a 30-minute speech was sufficient to almost overturn the debate in the written media. Although the Prime Minister acceded to the demand of the protester, his criticism of their cause as being instrumentalized by the opposition Democratic Party radically changed the discussion that was taking place in the written media (Rama 2013a). Growing numbers of articles criticized the protests as inspired by the opposition, reframing the debate into the government–opposition divide.

Table 7. Editorials and opinions on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in Albania, 5–15 November 2013.

Newspaper	For the destruction (against protests)	Against destruction (for protests)	Neither
<i>Panorama</i>	1	14	1
<i>Tema</i>	0	3	1
<i>Shqip</i>	1	13	1
<i>Dita</i>	2	3	0
Total	4	33	5

Table 8. Articles on the November protests in Albania, 15–25 November.

Newspaper	<i>Pro</i> – supporting the protests	<i>Against</i> – the protests	<i>Neither</i> for nor against
<i>Panorama</i>	6	0	4
<i>Tema</i>	0	1	2
<i>Shqip</i>	8	4	1
<i>Dita</i>	1	9	0
Total	15	14	7

The anticommunist discourse and moderation

The November protests showed that political mobilization and debate in Albania resort to anti-communist discourses even when it is not framed through the government–opposition divide. Of the 42 articles monitored during the 5–15 November period (see Table 8), more than 25% (11 articles) directly referred to Albania's communist past. Those supporting the US proposal condemned the protests as a revival of irrational Albanian communist fears of 'American imperialism'. A well-known political analyst under an article entitled 'USA is not the "American imperialism" of Enver Hoxha' expressed its concern about the rising anti-Americanism in Albania arguing that the USA was 'being exposed in the position of "American imperialism" and the project for the destruction of Assad's poisons as another American danger for Albania, after that which was once formulated by the communist dictator Enver Hoxha' (Stefani 2013). Along the same lines, another political analyst, in an article entitled 'A dirty battle with paranoia and USA', argued that the opposition was feeding the anti-American feelings of uninformed Albanian protesters (Baze 2013b).

Those political analysts that supported the protests against the US proposal countered charges of anti-Americanism by arguing that such accusations were built on the very communist ideology they criticized. 'The truth is that this kind of America to which we should always say "yes" for everything has been created by our politicians in order to brainwash us, in the same way as Enver Hoxha once created USSR and China' (Lubonja 2013). Other analysts used the anti-communist discourse to ridicule the decision of the Prime Minister to even consider the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons in Albania. One analyst referred sarcastically to the news that saarin gas would come to Albania using a famous communist song: 'Albania has a great celebration/The gas is coming from Syria' (Tupja 2013). Another analyst referred to Prime Minister Edi Rama as 'comrade E', hinting at Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha, given his silence and refusal to discuss the issue of chemical weapons in public (Lepaja 2013).

Despite their differences, both sides made their argument by rejecting the Albanian communist past against which they reasserted their pro-American and pro-democratic credentials. It was quite remarkable, for example, how hundreds of citizens protesting in front of the US embassy in Tirana against the US proposal were very careful not to commit any acts that could be interpreted as manifestations of anti-Americanism. The organizers of the protest took special care that no anti-American slogans or acts would appear during the protest. The majority of the protesters were chanting slogans that did not attack the USA, such as 'Albania is ours', 'We love life' and 'No to the chemical weapons'. Furthermore, the protesters themselves utilized American discourses and symbols to protest against the US proposal. Thus, one slogan read 'Yes we can, say No' building on Obama's famous presidential campaign slogan, while another poster showed a finger-pointing Uncle Sam urging people to protest (Aljazeera 2013).

Although a clear moment of social radicalization, the November 2013 protests in Albania were far more fleeting and moderate than other radical social movements in the region. In the case of Bulgaria, the protesters made ample use of humour and the carnival for months drawing from a 'long-standing tradition, rooted in the socialist past' in order to ridicule and protest against their existing political class and the growing gap between what they promised and what they delivered (Koycheva 2016, this issue). In the Albanian case, the protests lasted only one week and they did not call for the resignation of the government. Unlike in

the case of Bulgaria, the protests in Albania could survive only by shunning, instead of drawing on, the communist tradition. There were no anti-globalization or anti-capitalist groups within the Albanian November protests, either, as was the case with the Sunni-Islamic-oriented group called Anti-Capitalist Muslims that organized the Earth Tables during the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul (Damar 2016, this issue). Finally, the November 2013 protests in Albania did not leave a lasting impact in the Albanian political scene. Once the Prime Minister conceded to their demand, the crowds dispersed peacefully. By comparison, the Gezi Park protests opened the way to new and surprising political alliances in Turkey, (between Turkish secularists and Kurdish activists), while the December 2008 protests in Greece planted the seeds of the anti-austerity movement and the consequent political success of Syriza (Karakatsanis 2016, this issue).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the relative lack of political and social radicalism in Albania, as compared to other countries in the region, can be understood as the outcome of two interrelated factors. First, the traumatic experience of Albanian society with communism reduced the space for far left or far right discourses, which could serve as reminders of the traumatic communist past. This in turn strengthened the neoliberal hegemony that was implemented after the fall of communism and the legitimacy of the international institutions that served as guardians of moderation in the Albanian public scene. Second, the deeply bipolarized and clientelistic political system in Albania divided the public sphere into two antagonistic camps (socialists and democrats), further undermining the emergence of alternative radical political or social movements.

Of course, there have been various moments of social radicalization in post-communist Albania: from the 1997 and November 2013 protests to nationalist euphoria during international soccer matches. One thing these moments of radicalization share, however, is their fleeting nature and limited contestation of the political and economic status quo. This happens because, on the one hand, the social protests are promptly subsumed within the deep political bipolarization, while, on the other hand, they cannot draw on alternative, far right or far left discourses that would enable them to overcome the existing political bipolarization.

One could speculate that in the future as the communist legacy slowly fades away and the bipolar clientelistic system becomes increasingly unsustainable, we could witness more frequent and intense moments of political and social radicalization in Albania. A deep economic crisis that would undermine the operation of the current clientelistic system combined with the emergence of new generations that are far removed from the communist experience could open up new spaces of political and social radicalization. It remains to be seen, however, whether such radicalization will be productive and progressive, emphasizing solidarity, inclusion and social justice, or aggressive and regressive emphasizing exclusion, hatred and resentment.

Although this paper focused exclusively on Albania, the thesis it proposes can be tested against other cases in the region and beyond. Building on the Albanian case, one could construe the hypothesis that political and social radicalization should be relatively limited in those countries where the majority prefers the post-communist present to the communist past and where there is a high level of political bipolarization. The problem is of course that

few countries in the post-communist world satisfy both these conditions. It is, however, possible to reformulate the same hypothesis in such a way that it can be tested against a larger number of cases. Again, drawing from the Albanian experience, one would expect that political and social radicalism would be relatively successful in countries where the majority prefers the communist past to the post-communist present and where there is a low level of political bipolarization. While this paper argues that the Albanian case seems to corroborate this hypothesis, future research can test its validity over a larger number of cases.

Notes

1. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
2. This average would be even closer to 2 if we take into account the fact that the relatively high effective number of parties in 2005 (3.52) was due to strategic voting, as the two main political parties, Socialist Party and Democratic Party, called upon their respective supporters to vote for their coalition partners in order to maximize the coalition vote.

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