“In the People's Service” - Border policy in communist Albania

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ABSTRACT

During 45 years of dictatorship Albania closed its borders, becoming one of the most isolated countries in the world. The border was overseen by specific security systems that made it impossible to cross. The ideological propaganda of the Labor Party through the media of the time elevated the need for borders into a cult, feeding the illusion that beyond their own line lay the great, dangerous world.

For decades the border along the country became unmanageable for domestic and foreign enemies. Border crossing was punished by imprisonment and even death by shooting. Even in 1990, despite the fact that measures against escape were eased, 54 people were killed at the Albanian border, and their perpetrators' identities have not yet been made public.

This paper will analyze border-protection policies against imaginary enemies based on the periodicals of the Sigurimi magazine “Në Shërbin të Popullit” [In the People's Service], archive documents and interviews with people who lived at the border. A particular focus will be placed on the role of the media in providing important support to the system for spreading the cult of "strong borders to protect the country."

Keywords: Border, Communist Dictatorship, Albania, Propaganda, State Security, Isolation

Introduction

The history of Albanian communism is the history of the country’s total isolation from the world. Under the motto “We build socialism by our own strength!” from 1945 onward, communist Albania closed all of its borders with neighboring countries. No one was allowed to enter or leave. Under the totalitarian rule of Enver Hoxha (1944-1985), Albania will be “one of the most repressive communist countries in the world” (Biberaj 1999, 5). The totally isolation from the outside world, made it easier to install an oppressive apparatus that was without comparison in other Eastern European countries—so oppressive that at the end of the communist regime, more than one out of three Albanian families were affected by political persecution.
In no other communist country in Europe did people so easily become victims of political persecution, imprisoned for decades on the basis of a simple administrative act. The practice of persecution targeted not only individuals suspected of being “enemies of the people,” but also their relatives. Approximately 59,009 families were expelled to internment and labor camps, 34,135 victims of political persecution filled the jails and after public (bogus) trials 5,487 people were sentenced to death (Abrahams 2015, 12). The clergy in general, and the Catholic clergy in particular, were killed, persecuted, or imprisoned until religion was finally outlawed in 1967.¹ As a result of isolation and the rupture in relations with the rest of the world for almost half a century, this painful history of systematic terror of the Albanian population, was not even known, let alone understood, beyond Albania’s borders.

The aim of this paper is to shed light on one of the powerful pillars on which the dictatorship rested: the defense of the territory’s borders from foreign and domestic enemies. To achieve this aim, border forces, the State Security (SIGURIMI), and propaganda spread by the press of the time were mobilized. The paper’s focus will be the policy of border protection, based on official documents, as well as propaganda, specifically through the SIGURIMI’s magazine, “Në Shërbim të Popullit” [In the People’s Service] (IPS) during the period 1969-1974. This period of time has been selected due to the increased severity of the legal framework for punishing unlawful border crossing (escape) during the period of Albania’s complete isolation after its break with the Soviet Union and later with China. The country fully closed its borders, toughening security measures and engaging all mechanisms of the state, in which the SIGURIMI and its network of informants, extending to all border points, would play an important role, under the motto: “The entire people a border guard!” The SIGURIMI’s inclusion in this mission demonstrates the regime’s uncertainty about the mere physical guarding of the border by the military corps.

The study below is organized into three parts. In the first part the legal framework that provided the basis for guarding the border is presented. The main part of the paper deals with propaganda in the press that had the aim of elevating the figure of the border guard and of anyone who defended the country. In the final part, the communist legacy and the border policy’s consequences after the fall of the communist regime are discussed.

By means of interviews with witnesses, people who attempted to cross the border before 1990, we aim to provide a complete panorama of communist terror and persecution, but also to shed light on the way in which Albanian society and politics have been confronted with the painful history of these decades.
1. The Legal Framework for Border Policy during the Dictatorship

Upon the Communist Party’s (CP) ascent to power after World War II, a series of measures were adopted for guarding the border, making its crossing, year after year, almost impossible.\(^2\) According to the Albanian Constitution of 1976\(^3\), the border would be guarded by border forces, in which the “Border Directorate” was one of the pillars of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA) together with state security service (SIGURIMI) and the police. Referring to the regulation on borders of 1989, the domestic border territory was surrounded by the “border clone,” a wall with barbed wires with an electrical current and an alarm. Along the border with Yugoslavia, 176 primary border markers and 1,254 intermediate ones were placed, and along the border with Greece, 177 primary border markers were placed. In lakes, the border was illuminated by lighted marks. In rivers and streams, the border was in the middle of the primary water stream. In the sea, the border began 15 miles into the water (Dervishi 2016, 10).

The guarding of the border in Albania was provided for in the MIA’s regulation and in the Criminal Code, which authorized punishments for border offenders. In the Criminal Code of the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania (PSRA), year 1977, Article 47, point “gj,” escape was considered “treason against the nation” and was punishable by 10–25 years in prison, and in some cases even by death. Specifically, shooting was provided for in the regulation “against PSRA civilians and soldiers who attempt to escape,” and the steps for shooting were set out in their own chapter. The unit would call out “Hands up!”, and when the “border offender” did not comply, a warning shot would be fired (in the air); in the event that the offender did not stop or failed to return, the unit would open fire.\(^4\)

Aside from the punishment upon people who attempted to escape, penal measures would also be imposed against their families in various forms such as imprisonment, internment, or termination of employment. As the years passed, the monitoring mechanism was perfected, and ways of reducing the risk of escape were experimented with. The relatives of those punished for political reasons or of escapees from the north were sent to internment camps in the south, and families from the south were interned in the north, so that they would have neither family relations nor similar customs or religious beliefs. The scholar Shannon Woodcock, who, during the 2000s, interviewed dozens of witnesses from the time, provides an interesting perspective on the above when she writes: “\textit{In order to thwart the potential escapes, people from seaside were sent to the mountains, and highlanders who couldn’t swim were posted by sea or by Pogradeci lake}” (Woodcock 2016, 94).
Coercive measures against a person who attempted escape, and the consequences for his family, had a long-term effect in reducing the number of border-crossing attempts. Zenel Drangu (68), who attempted to escape in 1968 by swimming across the Buna River in the highlands of Shkodra, says that the fear that his family would be deported was one of the things that made his decision to escape difficult.

“In the discussions among friends for escaping there was always that fear that you would be seeking a better life if you left the country, but your family, whom you leave behind, would suffer your consequences.”

The local journalist Artur Kurtallari, recounting the history of his uncle’s successful escape to the United States of America (USA) in 1988, tells of how his relatives were tagged as “enemies of the people” immediately after the escape:

“I was seven years old at the time, and the situation inside the family was difficult. They considered us all to be enemies of the people, we were lucky that it was the end of the regime, because we could have suffered much worse! In fact, the village’s State Security officer demanded that my father divorce my mother because she now had an escapee brother.”

Trials for “border offenders” were organized in every city to set an example for others. In most cases the courts were complete formalities, given that the punishment was preordained, as recounted by Zhivko Petrovic (65), who was punished after attempting to escape from Kukës, on the border with Yugoslavia, in 1976:

“The trial was just a formality, they asked a few questions in order to fill out a form, as though court was held... they took you to another room and communicated the decision to you. The decision was final, whether you asked for forgiveness, asked for mercy, or whatever... but it was better not to ask such people for mercy, I didn’t ask for mercy and I knew they had no mercy! They sentenced me to ten years...”

The pressure on the border guards themselves was enormous, because the Criminal Code of 1977 (Article 146) likewise authorized in case of violations of the border, committed during service hours, risked being sentenced up to 15 years in prison. The closing of the border was dramatic, especially for inhabitants who lived in border zones, who had to cut off ties with their relatives, at the northern border between Albania and Kosovo (former Yugoslavia), in the south at the border with Greece, and in the southeast at the border with Macedonia (Dervishi 2016, 9). Relations were cut off even for relatives located outside the borders at the moment they were closed on 25 April 1945. Whoever was left outside could no longer enter. The dramatic consequences of this policy are clearly outlined in the example of Valbona Çoku (74), who
would be left alone as an infant, since her parents were in Italy, where her mother had gone to seek treatment. She would be raised by her uncle, only to be interned all alone in Savër, Lushnja as soon as she turned 16.

“The closing of the borders brought the final break from my family when I was only an infant several months old! I never met my mother! I met my father in Italy only after 1990, when he was very old, and myself was over 40 years old! When I sent photos to my parents in Italy I had to make a mark next to my face because my parents couldn’t distinguish me from the others.”9

In any case, Albania's borders did not remain uncrossable. In 1986, the New York Times wrote that the number of escapees had noticeably increased in recent years:

“In recent months, the number of Albanians escaping to Yugoslavia and Greece has greatly increased. According to a Belgrade official, the number coming to Yugoslavia since the beginning of the year is 'in the hundreds.' Considering how tightly Albania's Sigurimi - the secret police - guards the frontiers and controls the interior, this is almost a phenomenal number. Greece, too, has reported a rising number of escapees from Albania - most recently when two sisters swam six miles to the island of Corfu on July 29. Some of these escapes are ethnic Greeks. Many of the escapees tell of having served terms in Albania's prisons on political charges.”10

Artur Kurtallari, whose uncle had escaped in 1988, says that in his family, it was often said that after the death of Enver Hoxha, the regime was coming to an end:

“My uncle told us that he had information that many people were leaving, that the ruling class was fading, that communism in a number of Central and Eastern European countries was collapsing due to the domino effect, and he had thought to escape for a better life, which he later attained!”11

According to an MIA document marked “Top Secret,” signed by the Minister at the time, Hekuran Isai, in November 1990, it is claimed that “from 1944–1989, the number of people escaping from Albania were 13,692 people, of whom 988 died.”12 In his capacity as member of the Politburo, Simon Stefani said in 1990 that, “since liberation [of the country], 11,800 people of adult age have escaped from Albania.”13 Former persecuted people pretend a higher number of escapees during 1944-1989 mainly on the basis of contacts with the families of former victims of political prisoners, but official documents are lacking.14
2. Communist Propaganda of Unconquerable Borders

Propaganda about the achievements of the party and the people’s rule on the road to building socialism in Albania went hand in hand with measures taken by the communist state for the destruction of private property and the creation of collective ownership of the means of production. But the main role of propaganda was the creation of the “New Man” with communist morality and a homogenized society, in which the class struggle was used as a means of inculcating party ideals and eliminating political opponents. By propagandizing the country’s economic and social achievements during the communist period, all of the system’s failures and negative effects were left in the shadows. The propaganda consisted not only in emphasizing the achievements of the time, but also in denying every achievement of the past, in denying the prosperity of liberal democratic, so-called “imperialist” countries. Directives and the policy line that would follow the press had to be determined every week by the central committee. The “Sovietization of Albania” (Mëhilli 2017, 54) was dominant in the press too, and this model will be applied by the first generation of journalists (Godole 2014, 53).

2.1 “In the People’s Service”

SIGURIMI was established with the support of the Yugoslav secret service (UDB) in December 1945 (Dervishi 2012, 22). In order to increase its public impact, he would publish his magazine in August 1968, “In the People’s Service” (IPS), that would be published regularly until the end of 1990. The magazine was characterized as a political-literary publication of the MIA that reported on, among other things, the vigilance of citizens, the role and profile of the border guard through writings of various genres: reporting, short stories, interviews with former border guards, columns focusing on foreign and domestic enemies, etc. It is observed that most of the articles do not identify an author, especially in the first years of publication. After the 1970s, this changed, when wellknown intellectuals of the time would write for the magazine in the areas of culture and science. The aim of their contribution was:

- The legitimation of the idea of the country’s isolation in the face of “foreign enemies”
- The embrace of the Labor Party’s ideological line
- The conviction that Albania’s borders were untouchable and the mythologizing of the border guard
- The mobilization and encouragement of citizens to become involved in defending the nation and in the war against the class enemy, etc.
In order to achieve this, a number of tools were used, in addition to texts: photographs, mainly reenactments from training sessions, group readings of Party materials, patrols of defense points, engagement in volunteer work for building public works and infrastructure, or leisure time with youth and children in border zones.

In this study 180 articles of the ISP magazine were analyzed on followings categories: Borders, border guards, isolation, “foreign enemies”, escape, “people’s enemy”. Respectively these magazines were selected according to the year: 1969 (14 articles), 1970 (22), 1971 (25), 1972 (36), 1973 (38), and 1974 (45). The number of articles as we see was increasing year-by-year.

2.2 The profile of the border guard

In many articles the border guard is depicted as an individual whose existence finds its origin and is justified in function of the Party’s agenda. He does not have a personal life, he lives and works 24 hours a day according to the magazine’s propaganda, and is an example of sacrifice for the sake of society. The border guard, then, is presented almost as a mythical, superhuman figure who transcends physical needs and limits: “Nothing phases the border, he performs his duties even when his feet are frozen, even when the snow has blanketed everything and the mountains appear dead.”

By mythologizing border guards, the magazine propagandizes the idea that it is impossible to cross the border, as well as the great prestige of people who serve the Party and the regime in power. Distinguished border guards are especially named as symbols of “patriotism,” “courage,” “bravery” that inspire and therefore deserve “the deep respect and appreciation of the people.”

The border guards themselves were interested in increasing vigilance for pragmatic purposes as well, because according to the regulation at the time, every border soldier who managed to capture or shoot a person who was trying to escape was rewarded with 14 days of leave.

One of the magazine’s aims was to make the border guard “tangible” for the society and community where he completed his military service. In every issue that was analyzed, the IPS Magazine depicts events in which border guards contribute to planting trees, to agricultural work, to building public infrastructure works—in short, they are in the service of the society and community. We find him engaged everywhere:
In the agriculture: “Border guards of this unit, guided by the lessons of the Party and Comrade Enver, hold pickaxes alongside their weapons and plant trees.”  

In the construction of Socialism: “Border guards who served for ten days as volunteers for the Elbasan – Prrenjas railroad.”

In meetings with children: “in a meeting with the pioneers of Korça”.

In service to the community. “Border guards of post N. were repairing a sports field. They are all healthy with smiling faces. Some carried rocks with carts and wheel barrows.”

Positive articles about border guards aimed over the long term to bring them closer to the residents of zones where they completed their military service. The border guards must be treated like “part of the family,” whom you can trust, and with whom you can share information in confidence, just as with friends or family members.

2.3 The influence of foreign media as a motive for escaping

According to interviewees, illegally following foreign radio and television, and the information they received there, were the primary motive for attempting to escape. The information that foreign media transmitted clearly showed the difference between the real situation and that which was propagandized in Albania (Vickers 2006; Godole 2014; Abrahams 2016). According to Zhivko Petrovic, Yugoslav television provided his first motivation to escape:

“I was in school and in Shkodra people would often flip the television to foreign channels. A lot of people from Shkodra left, and I got the idea to leave too.”

Zenel Drangu says that he listened to “Radio Vatikani” [Vatican Radio] and “Zëri i Amerikës” [Voice of America], which served as a window for hearing about what was happening in the world. This motivated him to escape as well:

“Ever since my military service when I was 20 years old, I thought about escaping. Being the young men that we were, we thought about a better life. We listened to the Radio, Vatican Radio and Voice of America, it was different from what the propaganda told you here in Albania, in Shkodra, that ‘we are the happiest people in the world,’ but it turned out that we were the most deprived people in the world...”

Signals from Italian television stations that were caught incidentally, and the reality that was depicted there, were also inspiring for Hysen Kica (69), who lived and worked in a village in Bulqiza, a remote, mountainous area.
“As soon as I learned foreign languages I also started to follow foreign programs, mainly Italian channels, the Sanremo festival. But the more you see and hear, the more you can understand and evaluate the country where you are located, and of course I felt what was missing, I felt the great shortfalls in my life...”

The SIGURIMI itself was aware that foreign television and radio stations were listened to illegally. Through its magazine, IPS, clear guidelines were given regarding the radio, as “a diversionary tool in the hands of imperialists and revisionists” and as “propagandistic tools”:

“The radio station ‘Voice of America’ transmits programs in Albanian for three and a half hours per week, whereas ‘Moscow Radio’ transmits to Albania eight programs of half an hour each, through which it spews revisionist venom, attempting to present it in a sugar-coated form. Every day they are transmitted for 20 hours, in the programs of Moscow, Washington and Rome, of the Vatican, Athens, and Belgrade.”

It is worth emphasizing that developments in Albania were followed with interest by the foreign media as well. For some foreign journalists who did not know the bitter reality and the violation of human rights from the inside, the dictator Hoxha was treated almost with reverence, for stoically defended the communist line that other members of the former communist bloc had betrayed. Here is what the New York Times (NYT) wrote in 1984:

“Two years ago, Mr. Hoxha wrote: ‘There are some, the imperialists and their lackeys, who say that we have isolated ourselves from the ‘civilized world.’ These gentlemen are mistaken. Both the bitter history of our country in the past and the reality of the ‘world’ which they advertise have convinced us that it is by no means a ‘civilized world,’ but a world in which the bigger and stronger oppresses and flays the smaller and the weaker, in which money and corruption make the law, and injustice, perfidy and backstabbing triumph.”

Even after Hoxha’s death, interest of the foreign media remained high, especially after Alias' statement in November 1986 about the diplomatic opening of Albania to the Western Europe, France, Austria, Switzerland or Nordic countries for future co-operation (Vickers 2006, 202). In another NYT article, the “opening” of Albania to foreign tourists is referenced when details such as this are provided:

“But now, President Ramiz Alia, who has ruled since Mr. Hoxha's death in 1985, has begun to open the doors to a limited number of foreign tourists. An estimated 10,000 tourists visited Albania this year, just a handful of them Americans.”
2.4 The prohibition of religious practice as a motive for escaping

The struggle against the clergy had begun since the Communist came to power. Between the years 1945-1949, 63 Catholic clerics were shot. The persecution continued until 1967 when the religion was completely banned. The prohibition of religious practice was an important motive for escaping for a lot of catholics in nord Albania. Anti-religious propaganda considered religious adherents to be “enemies of the people.”

The newspapers “Bashkimi” [Union] and “Zëri i Popullit” [Voice of the People] were filled during that entire period with material accusing Jesuits and Catholics of planning and rebelling for the overthrow of the regime, for conspiring with Anglo-Americans, etc. The anti-religious attitude was even sanctioned by Article 37 of the Constitution of 1977: “the state recognizes no religion whatsoever and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating in people the scientific materialist worldview.”

The harshest attack was directed to the Catholic clergy. Thus, there were attempts on the part of Catholic priests to escape. One of them, Father Zef Pllumi, an important figure in the dissidence and resistance of the Catholic clergy was sentenced 25 years after he tried to escape via the land border in Shkodra. He was arrested, not by border guards, but by inhabitants of the border zone who spied for border authorities. In the report on Pllumi’s arrest, the following is attested:

“He left on his own toward the border. He went in the direction of the Peja Pass. He managed to escape the eye of the border guards posted in Theth, but not the eye of the ‘New Man.’ In the Nikçi Mountains the ‘New Man’ was watching. Eight forest-development workers spotted him and asked him for the document that was necessary for traveling in those zones. They were suspicious and escorted him.”

2.5 “The New Man” as a border guard

Mobilizing the people to follow the communist ideology blindly was a key mission of the PLA. Even on the issue of guarding the border, citizens (mainly residents who lived close to the border zones) were encouraged to “catch” border offenders and to report them to the nearest border station. In the vicinity of every border post, local volunteer forces were at the ready (Dervishi 2016, 11). Also, another element that spurred their involvement was public honor for “vigilance and bravery,” as qualities that the “New [Socialist] Man” had to possess. Even the
IPS Magazine broadly served to mobilize the people, reporting regularly in the column “The people are watching” in 1974. There, the idea that it was an “honor” to serve in guarding the borders was legitimized.40

By erecting the myth “The entire people as a soldier” (and a border guard!), the regime aimed to frighten people who aspired to escape. Zenel Drangu recounts how the villagers of the border zones were even armed:

“The border was guarded by the army as well, but it was also guarded by the people, they were called ‘Bushatis’ at the time, they were linked to the State Security, they were also armed by the state and they guarded that part of the border, because there was a cluster of 30 soldiers that wasn’t in a condition to guard it over there, the people itself guarded it…”41

The IPS would write that there is no army stronger than the armed and militarily trained people,42 and that the people, in the interest of guarding the border, spared neither its blood nor the lives of its children! 43

The vigilance of the people made the efforts of the regime’s opponents to escape more difficult, as is evident in Artur Kurtallari’s account of his uncle’s escape into the mountainous zones of Kukës:

“My uncle pretended that he was visiting his cousins in the village of Topojan, but his aim was to cross the border. Later, the conditions for leaving were very difficult because he hid himself from everybody who was connected with the government, the police, the military, but also from the eye of the border’s inhabitants, who raised suspicions about everyone whom they did not recognize.”44

Spase Mazenkovski (70), from Macedonian minority in Pustec (Prespa/Albania), recounts how the inhabitants of the border zone were treated differently than others:

“The people of the border were never treated like the rest of the Albanian population, perhaps to keep them close and not to give them reasons to escape by the mountains or the lake, but also to spy in cases in which a desire to escape was expressed!”45

2.6 Paranoia about the foreign enemy

The Army of National Liberation founded during World War II relied on a great deal of help, initially from the Soviet Union (USSR), but after leaving the Warsaw Pact (1961) and after breaking ties with the USSR, the situation changed. Political commissaries were put in charge
of the army, in most cases without experience, because Enver Hoxha wanted to avoid the creation of a military caste, which could become a threat to his power, and he eliminated a large portion of the generals that he himself had appointed. The propaganda of the time spoke of the foreign enemy that could attack and conquer the country. Under the conditions of the Cold War, imperialist countries that threatened the country were spoken of; and later on, revisionist countries such as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, which, newly transformed into enemies, could attack Albania, were spoken of as well. Military education was included in curricular programs, and the civilian population was regularly engaged in military training. The Ministry of Defense launched a major bunkerisation project. 700,000 bunkers were planned, but at the end only 17,000 were built for lack of materials. The Albanian government even boasted that bunkers could endure not just Russian projectiles, but “up to four nuclear explosions” (Abrahams 2015, 41). These bunkers continue to dot the Albanian landscape, are a visual heritage of the paranoia about a foreign enemy, as evidence of this past (Biberaj 1999, 74).

This paranoia of the imaginary foreign enemy was also reflected in the press. During these years the IPS gave a larger space to articles related to foreign enemy and the heroism of border guards against them. The propaganda would deepen the paranoia of fear, intensifying the class struggle and inventing agents and collaborators with the foreign enemy.

“Antagonistic propaganda against the rule of the people, incitement to escape, tendencies to terrorize and distract, and boasts about the allegedly good life in the West are a reflection of the class struggle in the political arena and are deliberately undertaken by the enemies of socialism in order to warp the conscience of unbalanced people or of politically and ideologically uninformed youth.”

In discussions of the IPS’s readers, accusations of connections between the domestic and the foreign enemy against national interests become even more direct: “Liberal attitudes that lead to bad consequences. Class enemies, foreign and domestic, work actively from their position to keep alive and spread their contaminated morality.”

In a series of comments, the IPS goes even further, pointing the finger at the “American enemy,” who falls before the Albanian military force.

“The American government has done its utmost to deny this aggressive, criminal activity against the PRA before international public opinion, but it could never achieve its goal, because its agents have constantly been caught red-handed.”

This propaganda was used to legitimize the further isolation of Albania and the demolishing of enemies as “losers”.
3. Killings at the border and (non-)confrontation with the past

The communist regime in Albania did not pull back from the politics of terror even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, while communist regimes fell in the countries of the then-Eastern Bloc. The border continued to be guarded as before, they even “took measures to tighten border control as many Albanians attempted to flee the country” (Biberaj 1999, 49). Killings at the border were even used politically to terrorize the masses, however much this would have the opposite effect. The most flagrant instance was the killing of two youths who tried to cross the border at Rrushkull, in Dajç, Shkodra, on 26 August 1989. Their bodies were wrapped in barbed wire in a truck and were displayed in that form—killed—through the streets of the zone’s villages, all the way to the city of Shkodra.

While other former communist countries were holding their first pluralist elections, in Albania, 54 people are thought to have been killed at the border in 1990 alone, including women among them (Dervishi 2016, 134). This is a unique case compared to all of the former communist countries, especially considering that the killings continued even after May 1990, when, after changes in the law, escape was no longer considered “treason against the Nation,” but only “illegal border crossing” and was punishable as a crime by up to five years in prison.

While the party took measures to keep the borders closed, in early July 1990 thousands of Albanians stormed foreign embassies in Tirana in attempt to flee the country. During July over 4,790 Albanian left the country (Biberaj 1999, 51) mostly going to Germany or Italy. By October 1990 the Minister of the Interior Hekuran Isai, reported that there had been initiated

“421 criminal cases for the crime of illegally crossing state borders, committed by 757 people (509 were caught at the border, 21 were killed by border forces, and 227 crossed the border), whereas in the corresponding period in 1989, 62 cases were initiated, committed by 93 people” (Dervishi 2016, 131).

Thus, by October 1990, attempts to “escape” had increased seven-fold and the pressure on border soldiers not to allow “any foot of enemy” to leave the country was enorm. It was even proposed that “exemplary border guards” be given “moral and material incentives,” and that measures up to and including imprisonment be taken against those who were “not vigilant” (Dervishi 2016, 115).

After the fall of the communist regime, no trials have been held in Albania against those who ordered the killings at the border in 1990 and before. A court decision exists only in one case, for the life imprisonment of the former commander of the border post in Velipoja, where,
on 19 May 1990, a young boy had been killed and his brother had been wounded, one week after the law on border crossing had been amended. Even though more than 20 years have passed since this decision, the person in question still has not suffered his punishment. According to an investigation of the matter, state institutions will not answer precisely whether the accused is completing his prison sentence or not, whereas the State Police claim that the person is wanted, even though in 2012 there were reports in the media that he was detained in Italy and was being processed for extradition to Albania.

Conclusion

The total closure of the borders during the dictatorship was one of the communist party's weapons to hold power for almost half a century. Paranoia of the foreign and internal enemy was supported by the army, the Security, and above all by propaganda for the indoctrination of the population. The damages of this isolationist, white-and-black politics (with us or against us!) still continue to be present in the way how regional and international relations are built. The consequences of the long-standing isolation of Albania have never been the subject of society-wide discussion. Also, the issue of killings at the border from 1944 to the end of 1990 was lacking in public discourse, either to punish the perpetrators of the crimes or at least to identify them. This is accompanied by a lack of political will to confront the communist past, legally and morally. Therefore, this chapter of Albanian history has such great influence on the present, because still tens of thousands of victims of this persecution live in the vicinity of their persecutors and no one condemned the injustices that were caused to them.

Notes

1 For more information regarding the persecution of the clergy, see: Pjetër Pepa (2017). Dosja e Diktaturës [Dossier of Dictatorship], ISKK, Tirana, pp. 39-68.
2 The border of the Albanian state territory is approximately 1094 kilometers long, comprising 627 km of land borders, 316 km of sea borders (seaside line 472), 73 km of lake borders, 48 km of river borders, and 30 km of streams. With the Yugoslav state, before its dissolution, the border was 529 km long (380 km land, 39 km rivers, 7 km lakes, 22 km streams, and 22 km sea). With the Greek state, it was 349 km long (247 km land, 78 km sea, 9 km rivers, 7 km lakes, and 8 km streams). Quoted in: Kastriot Dervishi (2016). p. 9.
"The border soldier warns you once, twice, and the third time he kills you. With the border soldier there is no exchange of words. The soldier will kill you!" Ramiz Alia’s speech, 26 July 1990, at the Plenum of the Central Committee, on the killings at the border during that year, quoted in Qemal Lame (2014) Kur shembeshin themellet [When the foundations collapsed]. Tirana: Onufri.

5 Interview with Zenel Drangu, Shkodra, September 2018.

6 Interview with Artur Kurtallari, Kukës, August 2018.

7 Interview with Zhivko Petrovic, Spaç, Rreshen, March 2017.

8 IPS, Column “Albumi ynë historik: Retrospektivë” [Our historical album: A retrospective], p. 4, 4 April 1974.


11 Interview with Artur Kurtallari, Kukës, August 2018.


15 Information quoted from the exhibition “Propaganda during the Communist Regime” by Brisejda Lala and IDMC in National Museum, Tirana 2017.


17 For more information related to propaganda and the role of journalists see also Münch, J. W., & Gaqo Simaku (1994); Godole (2014)..

18 IPS, May 1970, p. 6

19 IPS, 4 April 1972, p. 13

20 IPS, no. 2. 1969, p. 18

21 IPS, 11 November 1971, p. 21

22 IPS, cover, 8 August 1972

23 Information quoted from the online website of the Museum of Memory: www.muzeukujteses.al

25 IPS, no. 2., 1969, p. 20

26 IPS, 1 January 1974 p. 9

27 IPS, 10 October 1973, p. 29

29 IPS, cover, August 1972

30 Interview with Hysen Kica, Durrës, September 2018


32 IPS, no. 5506, dated 28.12.1976

33 Father Zef Pllumi was imprisoned twice by the communist regime in the periods: 15.10.1946-15.10.1949 and 27.9.1967-11.4.1989. For further information about Pllumi’s period in the prison read also: At Zef Pllumi (2006). Rrno përmjet at kleriku dhe si-e pesoi nga diktatura/IPS, 2 February 1974, p. 20

34 Interview with Zenel Drangu, Shkodra, September 2018


37 IPS, No. 5506, dated 28.12.1976

38 Father Zef Pllumi was imprisoned twice by the communist regime in the periods: 15.10.1946-15.10.1949 and 27.9.1967-11.4.1989. For further information about Pllumi’s period in the prison read also: At Zef Pllumi (2006). Rrno përmjet at kleriku dhe si-e pesoi nga diktatura/IPS, 2 February 1974, p. 20

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28 vjet nga vrasja nё kufi, asnjё dite burg per ish-komandantin e postёs sё Velipojёs [28 years after the killing at the border, not a day in prison for the former commander of the Velipoja post], quoted from Erblin Vukaj, published in Observatori i Kujtesёs [Albanian Observatory of Memory], 2 July 2018

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