THE POLITICS OF CONTESTED HERITAGE:

Memory, Place, and Power in Post-Communist Albania

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that contested heritage is a locus of governmental intervention in post-communist Albania and a key site where narratives about the country's past and its transition away from communism are inscribed. I demonstrate how the Rama Socialist Government in Albania strategically deploys heritage to constitute itself as both a reconciliatory mnemonic unifier of the nation and a radical modernizer of the country, as the city becomes an aesthetic political project. Each of the dissertation's chapters chronicles the story of an exemplary heritage site: the celebration of a communist-era soundscape, the restoration of the Mosaic "Albania," the radical makeover of the Piramida, and the demolition of the National Theater. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in Albania over a period of three years (2021-2023) conducting participant-observation, archival research, interviews, and media discourse and thematic analysis, I show how the Albanian government worked together with representatives of the European Union and the United Nations Office for Project Services, as well as with non-traditional political actors including prominent Western architects, urban planners, and curators, in authoritatively restoring, transforming, demolishing, and reconceptualizing contested heritage. I also demonstrate how these actions were received and contested by different sections of the Albanian population. Finally, I highlight the political implications and effects of the discursive struggles between local and supra-national actors and institutions on heritage sites and on the meaning ordaining, and constitution of heritage itself.

On a conceptual level, this dissertation argues that authoritative decisions on contested heritage are navigated through a two-step process of inter-elite competition and symbolic re-processing of heritage for current political needs. Ultimately, I propose to approach contested heritage as a site of plurality and power contestation. Approaching contested heritage as a site of plurality, I argue, foregrounds its power and monumental seductiveness for authoritarian instrumentalization and is conducive to a more systematic analysis of politics of heritage as a space of discursive, symbolic, and material public contestation.

Résumé

Cette thèse démontre que le patrimoine contesté est un site de prise de position gouvernementale et un lieu d'inscription des récits du passé et de la transition post-communiste en Albanie. J'y prouve que le gouvernement socialiste de Rama déploie stratégiquement la question du patrimoine pour se construire à la fois en tant que réconciliateur et unificateur mnémonique de la nation et en tant que modernisateur radical du pays, alors que la ville devient un projet esthético-politique. Chacun des chapitres de la thèse raconte l'histoire d'un cas emblématique : la célébration de l'environnement sonore communiste, la restauration de la mosaïque « Albania », la métamorphose radicale de la Piramida, et la démolition du Théâtre National. En m'appuyant sur un travail de terrain approfondi mené en Albanie pendant 3 ans (2021-2023) comprenant de l'observation participante, des recherches d'archives, de l'analyse discursive et thématique de contenus médiatiques, et des entretiens, je montre ainsi comment le gouvernement albanais a travaillé main dans la main avec des représentants de l'Union européenne et du Bureau des Nations unies pour les services d'appui aux projets ainsi qu'avec des acteurs politiques non traditionnels tels que des architectes occidentaux reconnus, des urbanistes, et des conservateurs patrimoniaux pour se prévaloir de l'autorité nécessaire afin de restaurer, transformer, démolir, et reconceptualiser le patrimoine contesté. J'évoque également la façon dont ces initiatives ont été perçues et contestées par différentes sections de la population Albanaise. Enfin, je souligne les implications et conséquences politiques de l'affrontement discursif entre acteurs et institutions locaux et supranationaux pour les sites patrimoniaux ainsi que sur la signification et la constitution de l'héritage lui-même.

A l'échelle conceptuelle, cette thèse démontre que les décisions concernant le patrimoine contesté sont gérées via un processus en deux étapes incluant à la fois une compétition intra-élite et une réappropriation symbolique du patrimoine en fonction des besoins politiques actuels. Je propose donc d'envisager la catégorie de « patrimoine contesté » comme un site de pluralité et d'affrontement de pouvoir. J'y affirme qu'étudier le patrimoine contesté comme un site de pluralité met en avant son potentiel et son immense attractivité en tant que levier d'instrumentalisation autoritaire et permet d'analyser plus systématiquement la politique patrimoniale comme un espace de contestation publique discursive, symbolique, et matérielle.

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I have dreamed of writing this acknowledgment section from the first day of my PhD, and maybe from before that, when I started building a certain mythology of academia earlier in life. Like all myths, this journey was bound to go through various iterations of euphoria and disappointment. Overall, it was a humbling journey, made of tectonic moments of crisis and achievement, disempowerment and empowerment, breakdowns and breakthroughs. It was mostly a journey of perseverance, willpower, and the invisible care and support labour of the people around me. This labour won't be intelligible in the pristine pages of this dissertation, and neither will the collective and inter-personal nature of the birth of ideas. This section is dedicated to this invisible labor, the other forms of intelligence that made finishing this PhD possible, and the invisible intellectual contribution of the community around me that permeates what now comes to be somehow constituted as my intellectual labour.

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Juliet and Maria as a member of my dissertation committee, as I couldn't have hoped for a better trio. Her intellectual generosity has enriched my dissertation and informed my research interests, and I continue to learn from her work and teaching.

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I was also lucky to work for the EU-sponsored BEAR Project at McGill, where I was exposed to Juliet's leadership and learned that academics have an incredible toolkit of skills and talents. This project took the team on various trips, my highlights being Estonia, Russia, and Hungary. I cherish the moments I spent with Juliet, Maria, and Prof. Magdalena Dembinska, along with the incredible academics, from both sides of the Atlantic, gathered around the BEAR Project.

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and along them as most of us made this place home later in life. Also, the people of *Thèsez-vous*, where I wrote almost every day for the past 2 years, were the best and most gentle companions. My French improved immensely in their company.

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Abbreviations

AHD	Authorized Heritage Discourse
AQSH	Albanian Central State Archive
ASAI	Albanian Supreme Audit Institution
CoE	Council of Europe
DCM	Decision of the Council of Ministers of Albania
DMC	Decision of the Municipal Council [of Tirana]
DP	Democratic Party of Albania
ICC	International Center of Culture (Albania)
ICOMOS	The International Council on Monuments and Sites
IDMC	Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture
IMC	Institute of Monuments of Culture of Albania
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
MP	Member of Parliament
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCR	National Council of Restorations of Albania
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PM	Prime Minister
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement (EU Enlargement)
SP	Socialist Party of Albania
UN	The United Nations
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNOPS	The United Nations Office for Project Services
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development

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Introduction

In 2013 Prime Minister-elect Edi Rama claimed that the change ahead of Albanians "is comparable only to 1992" (Ora News 2013a). He was speaking to a room full of architects, artists, urban planners, and other international and local experts who he called "protagonists" of the "radical change" of Albania. His Socialist Party (SP) assembled these local and international experts in the summer of 2013, right after winning elections and before taking office, for the Next Generation's Albania (*Shqipëria e Gjeneratës Tjetër*) conference. Rama had built and cultivated relationships with these renowned professionals and experts, from Western Europe in particular, during his decade long mayorship of Tirana. They would become the Socialist government's advisors, partners, clients, and contracting firms for major urban revival projects in the decade-long governance that followed.[1] After proclaiming the chaotic urban development to date "a national emergency", the new Rama Government called the conference as a forum to craft its new sustainable development programs. Deputy PM Peleshi reiterated the political vision, claiming that Albania was not only on the verge of a new developmental paradigm, but "a historical restart from the beginning, which coincides with *the end of the Albanian transition*" (emphasis mine) (Ora News 2013b).

This invoking of 1992 while proclaiming "the end of the Albanian transition" was a powerful political metaphor that in retrospect accomplished important symbolic work. 1992 was the year of regime change in Albania, when the nominal anti-communist Democratic Party (DP) won general elections[2] and governed the foundations of transition until state collapse and civil unrest in 1997. This symbolic invocation of 1992 was meant to accomplish three discursive manoeuvres for the government's upcoming mandates: 1) to indicate the *nature of change*: the Rama Government was practicing a paradigmatic shift in governance, from the previous chaotic

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[1] Architects such as Winy Maas (founding partner from MVRDV architectural firm) that would be commissioned for the Piramida project and Bjarke Ingels (founding partner from Bjarke Ingels Group – BIG) that would be commissioned for the new National Theater project were both present.

[2] In mid-1991, the Party of Labor of Albania had transformed itself into the Socialist Party of Albania and governed in both the Stability Government in 1991—mixed, but Socialist led—and the subsequent Ahmeti Government before the DP won the March 1992 elections. Rama is not replaying 1991 (the time of the Socialist rebirth), but 1992, the time of full commitment to democracy and market economy.

and unsustainable development practices that brought the country to the verge of what he defines as a "national emergency" to modern practices, vested with and in professional knowledge and expert-driven policies; 2) to indicate the *magnitude of change*: 'the end of transition' resembles 'the end of communism', thus radical changes were ahead; and 3) to invoke and engender a *sentiment of change*: 1992 denoted euphoria, a reforming and transformation ethics, that delivered some dreams and shattered others, with state collapse following in 1997. The Rama Government instigated a *critical juncture* that built their legitimacy to radically will urban politics anew.

Critical junctures emerge in political analysis as watershed, short, distinct, and crucial moments of change, marked by fluidity, openness, and contingency, which give way to longer path-dependent periods with less possibility for manoeuvre (Berins Collier and Collier 1991; Capoccia 2015). It is this allure of tectonic shifts and contingency, along with the possibility to mark a period and foreclose the political possibilities of what comes after that make the invocation and proclamation of critical junctures attractive to new governments aiming for radical change. As Forest and Johnson (2002, 524-5) argue, they also bring the politics of memory to the fore, as politicians compete to leave their signature for the present and the future of collective identities.

Edi Rama, a painter, son of communist-era elite sculptor Kristaq Rama, and former flamboyant Minister of Culture, Mayor of Tirana, and leader of the Socialist Party, won the 2013 elections under the slogan of Renaissance (*Rilindja)*, a term translated in Albanian as rebirth, and used to indicate both the European Renaissance and the romantic era of National Revival. From an ingenious and immodest electoral slogan, *Rilindja* became a governance banner, discursively and materially defining political revival, urban revival, and cultural revival. Rama himself had led the second rebirth of the Socialist Party since 2005—its first being the founding moment as a successor party of the Party of Labour of Albania in 1991. For an entire decade prior as Mayor of Tirana (2000–11), he became known for the makeover of the capital city, with his most symbolic interventions being the cleanup of the Lana riverbank central to Tirana and the colorful painting of the façade of communist-era residential buildings (see Musaraj 2021).[3] This mayorship 'training' in urban politics, coupled with an aestheticization of politics into the built environment of the city, would be upgraded and upscaled for his national governance mandates. Tirana and

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[3] In 2004, Rama won the World Mayor Award following these visual transformations of Tirana.

Albania become his canvas (Creative Time 2014) and Urban Renaissance the epitome of his local and national governance mandates.

An exoticized image of Rama emerged in the Western press as an artist–modernizer, now Prime Minister, transforming his country guided by a contemporary artistic sensitivity. In 2005, Jane Kramer wrote an article for the New Yorker, *Painting the Town: How Edi Rama reinvented Albanian politics*, describing Rama as an artist turned politician who "took Tirana as his canvas." In 2014, Artforum published Hans Ulrich Obrist's interview with Rama, with an opening statement that "few artists have become world leaders and few world leaders artists (George W. Bush's watercolors notwithstanding). But Prime Minister Edi Rama of Albania is that extraordinary hybrid," further promising to "unravel the complexities surrounding his ambitious aesthetic and social reforms" (2014, 87). In 2014, PM Rama was a keynote speaker at the Creative Time Summit in Stockholm, where he claimed that "in politics too I try to paint a canvas. I visualize how I want our country to be, to feel, how I want [it] to change as a world changes around us" (Creative Time 2014, sec. 0:46). In 2017, Obrist used Rama as an example in his Artsy Editorial on *Why We Need Artists in Politics*. In 2023, The Economist published *Albania is no longer a bad Balkan joke*, sharing on social media that "the Balkans may have a new leading light: Edi Rama, the former basketballer-cum-modern artist who leads Albania" (@TheEconomist, June 11, 2023). Despite a mixed reaction to this emerging artist-Prime Minister hybrid persona within Albania (Isto 2020; Lulaj and Mazzi 2022; van Gerven Oei 2023), the emerging exotic international persona of PM Rama facilitated his assumed mandate to transform Tirana and Albania, waving his paint brush freely over the built environment of a country and peoples, as this aesthetic political experiment unfolded to modernize them.

The Socialist Government would deliver on its promise of "radical change", starting urban upgrade projects throughout the country that would transform the built environment of urban centers, especially of the capital city, Tirana.[4] Urban Renaissance, originally a government program, would soon become a *governing metaphor*, a discursive trope of "rebirth" ascribed to all

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[4] An administrative-territorial reform also changed the central-local government prerogatives at the start of Rama's first mandate. With Socialist Veliaj becoming the new decade-long Mayor of Tirana after 2015 and the Socialists being particularly successful with mayorships in the rest of the country during Rama's second mandate, the Rama Government practically had a free hand to transform urban centers throughout the country. See Reporter.al's project page, with a database covering projects until 2020 (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Albania 2020)

urban projects as a qualifier of "done", "complete", "upgraded": "the rebirthed old bazar", "the rebirthed central square", "the rebirthed Piramida", "the rebirthed mosaic". Even demolition projects and new buildings replacing the old would be baptized as rebirths: "the rebirthed theater", "the rebirthed stadium". The meaning of rebirth ranged widely, from revitalization, to transformation, to reincarnation after death. Rebirth invoked universal redemption or salvation, independent of the mode of passage (preservation or demolition) and indiscriminately defining every urban project the Socialist Government completed.

This material and symbolic rebirth of Albania at "the end of transition" deeply affected spaces, places, sites, and buildings that were *contested* during the transition from communism. *Contested heritage* is a category of heritage affected by discursive, symbolic, or material public contestation (Olsen and Timothy 2002; Timothy and Nyaupane 2009; Silverman 2011). The wider inter-disciplinary heritage studies prefers the term "dissonant heritage" (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Ashworth 2002; Bruce and Creighton 2006; Banaszkiewicz 2017; Battilani, Bernini, and Mariotti 2018; Smith 2011)[5] to capture diverse and often competing cognitive, affective, symbolic, and value-ascribing attitudes and predispositions towards heritage, while the term contestation is less frequent. *Dissonance* (and resonance) in my view is best suited to capture conditions/states of meaning-making that do not necessarily motivate political action, while *contestation* best captures political actions and power relations, either by governments, elites, organized religion, the public, or a diverse set of stakeholders (Forest and Johnson 2002; Olsen and Timothy 2002; Timothy and Nyaupane 2009; Silverman 2011). Even a government's refusal to maintain a heritage-designated site is an act of contestation, which may arise from dissonance, assume it, or engender it. While dissonance is situated at the symbolic level, contestation is concerned with both symbolic and political dimensions, both necessary, I argue, to understand the politics of heritage contestation.

As Rama's urban Renaissance project scanned the built environment of Albania it zeroed in on contested heritage sites left in limbo from previous political battles, including the Piramida, the mosaic "Albania," and the National Theater. The Piramida, a pyramid-shaped building in

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[5] Other less frequent terms include *ambivalent heritage* (Chadha 2006), *negative heritage* (Rico 2008), or *difficult heritage* (Macdonald 2009; 2015).

central Tirana,[6] was built in the late 1980s as the Museums of the late Dictator Enver Hoxha to immortalize his memory and pledge allegiance to his political line from the new communist elite. While the museum was dismantled after 1992, the building was preserved and renamed, and its spaces played multiple economic, cultural, and administrative functions, resembling the fate of VDNKh in Moscow (see Forest and Johnson 2002). On a quest for identity, wanting to capitalize on an anti-communist political cleavage and de-Hoxhaisation impetus, the Democratic Berisha Government threatened demolition during the late 2000s, associating the Piramida with the cult of Dictator Hoxha. After resistance from civil society, the Socialist Party, and Tirana Mayor Rama, and failure to secure financial resources for the new parliament building meant to replace the Piramida, the government plans fell through.

The Mosaic "Albania" and the National Theater building faced their rounds of contestation throughout transition, but their fate right before the Socialist government took power in 2013 was marked by willful neglect and abandonment rather than a threat of demolition. The Mosaic "Albania" was built in the early 1980s and stood on the façade of the National Historical Museum facing Tirana's central Skanderbeg Square. As a visual representation of the national history of Albania in a socialist-realist aesthetic, it depicted an ideological communist historiography of Albania from antiquity towards the communist utopia. A dissonant heritage because of this symbolic repertoire, the mosaic was initially shielded from active public contestation by the removal of its overtly communist symbols when the Democratic Government first took power after 1992. However, it remained an occasional target of public contestatory impulses due to its prominent public display and its place within the overall symbolic repertoire of the previous regime. Calls for its removal and potential exhibition in a museum resurfaced from time to time in public debates. The last Democratic Government deemed some of the damage to the Mosaic irreversible, refusing to act on its conservation.

The National Theater was a building completed during the Fascist Protectorate of Albania. It served for most of its life as the People's Theater of Albania and then the National Theater after the fall of the communist regime. The National Theater as a central art institution was affected by

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[6] The museum was dubbed *Piramida* during the student movement aiming to topple the communist regime in the 1990s. The term "Pyramid of the Pharaoh" (Tarifa 1995, 149) was initially meant to be derogatory, but the name stuck in Albanian as "Piramida".

the reformatory ethics of the early transition, but its space, artistic production, and artistic labor engendered during the communist period, were generally shielded from the rapid changes in the arts and cultural sector after 1992. The early 2000s saw this initial shielding challenged by then-Minister of Culture Rama, under the banner of reform of the arts and cultural sector, while the building became designated as damaged. While the National Theater survived along with its artists and art production, by 2013 the theater building, like the mosaic, was in disrepair and in need of attention.

The Rama Government's Renaissance mandate zoomed in on these spaces that it designated as 'left in limbo'. As in 1992, when the fall of communism gave the democratic government a legitimate monopoly on the means of symbolic production, reformulation, and symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989), the Socialist Government in 2013 proclaimed 'the end of transition' and mandated itself with re-ordering the symbolic space of post-transition Albania. The Mosaic "Albania" was retained and restored, the Piramida was retained and transformed into a technological center, and the National Theater was demolished and reconceptualized anew. Other spaces were uncovered, redesignated, and curated for a government-mandated memory landscape. Why did the Rama Government embark on an active campaign to intervene in Albanian heritage sites, at a scale unseen since the fall of the communist regime? How did the government navigate its choices to restore, demote, and transform contested heritage sites?

The politics of contested heritage

Authoritative voices use contested heritage sites to legitimize and make material their governance visions along with their imaginaries of political orders. If *heritage* is the "production of the past in the present" (Harrison 2013, 32), *contestation* is the politically articulated competition of plural pasts, pasts that cannot easily be coherently and hegemonically articulated in order to turn "the past into The Past" (Macdonald 2013, 18). The Past with a capital P denotes a politically unitary, common, and hegemonic idea of the past. As every Past with a capital P is inherently productive of subaltern plural pasts, contested heritage stands as a testimony to such plurality, to the inability of the polity to constitute a hegemonic order to remember and commemorate the past. Contested sites, in that sense, stand as material manifestations of a would-be hegemonic Past or Future that failed to be authoritatively imposed as a world view or to emerge as a hegemonic discourse (*cf* Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

I look at contested heritage as a seductive fertile ground for ideological investment (and as the manifestation of would-be authoritative visions of the Past and Future. The very impulse to intervene and provide a "resolution" to these contested sites is an articulation of political power and a reaction against the plurality of pasts inscribed in them. I problematize this temptation to intervene politically, following the concept of *monumental seduction* (Huyssen 2003), and propose it as a locus of authoritative power, which may manifest in authoritarian ways. I then suggest categories of dissonance and resonance as marks of plurality in society, of an agonistic politics of contestation (Mouffe 2013) that has not yet dissipated and that mobilizes against authoritatively imposed discursive orders and hegemonic visions of the Past and Future manifested in top-down political interventions targeting contested heritage.

As this self-proclaimed critical juncture expanded the space of permissibility and contingency to deal with contested heritage in Albania, the choices made were neither intuitive nor inevitable, but rather political. In my analysis, governmental choices to preserve/restore, transform, or demolish contested heritage represent inter-elite public competitions for symbolic capital (Forest and Johnson 2002) that promote specific visions of collective memory and modernization. The Rama Government engaged with contested heritage in order to derive symbolic capital from it as a *reconciliatory unifier of the mnemonic community* and *a radical modernizer of the country*. The Urban Renaissance program approached contested heritage at the intersection of two government-mandated visions deployed as dominant discourse: a *memory discourse* and a *modernization discourse*. These discourses are both political visions about how the Past and the Future interact in the symbolic space of built heritage and political imaginaries about how the Rama Government perceived itself at the end of transition. As a reconciliatory unifier of the mnemonic community, the Rama government invested through speech, law, and new museums and exhibition spaces in a memory contract that disavowed claims of justice as divisive and unintelligible given the ubiquity of violence in the totalitarian regime, attributing the "faults" of the communist dictatorship to systemic forces like the *Sigurimi* and the political mastermind, Dictator Hoxha. It aimed to unify the mnemonic community around truth, the opening of the security files, and exhibitionary spaces of memory that invited future generations to reflect on the past. As a radical modernizer of the country, the Rama Government was committed to urban development and revival, radical reform of the arts and culture, democratization, EU integration, and an orientation towards Western expertise and projects on urban revival.

These visions and imaginaries of its role materialized in choices about contested heritage, because such heritage provides a fertile space to accumulate symbolic capital, which for Forest and Johnson (2002, 524) is the medium of "prestige, legitimacy, and influence" in society. The symbolic capital accumulated in these contested sites provides opportunities for the government to be either a *savior* and preserver of what is constituted as valuable and endangered, or an *efficient modernizer* of what is deemed irreparable, backward, and in the way of development and progress. While Forest and Johnson traced the simultaneous symbolic dialogue among elites as they competed for different visions of the nation manifested in choices about monuments, the Rama Government engaged in an inter-elite and public symbolic dialogue in time as much as in space: engaging with the transition as much as the communist period, while trying to pre-empt resistance in the present as it selectively ordered unified visions of the Past and Future. As a reconciliatory unifier of the mnemonic community and a radical modernizer of the country, the Rama Government aimed at transcending both periods as it proclaimed the end of transition. Rather than seeing the 1990s as a tumultuous and discordant era for subsequent political orders to "fix", as in the case of Putin's Russia (Sharafutdinova 2020), the 1990s in Albania served as a site of symbolic reprocessing, with the young Socialists claiming their own brand of a reformatory vision of radical modernization, westernization, and condemnation of the dictatorship combined with a reconciliatory impetus to unify Albania as a mnemonic community. The early transition in Albania (1992-1996) emerged as a space of selective appropriation and disavowal, while the late transition (1997-2012) emerged as a site of symbolic and political contestation, primarily disavowed.

Dealing with contested heritage presented the government with the need and opportunity to approach two types of symbolic capital inscribed in heritage sites: the *contestatory repertoire* accumulated throughout transition, and the *symbolic repertoire* from which the contestation originated. The contestatory repertoire captures the political battles around heritage and facing it means facing previous elites. The symbolic repertoire captures political symbolism accumulated from both the origins of such sites and their uses during transition. I argue that the government makes choices to retain or demolish contested heritage by primarily facing previous elites (the contestatory repertoire), while choices to restore, transform, or rebuild heritage after it has been retained or demolished is made by facing their symbolic repertoires.

Facing the contestatory repertoire accumulated throughout transition emerged as a particular site of political theater, disguised as expert-originating, facilitated by the expert base and international partners that the Rama government gathered around urban revival. While choices to preserve or destroy heritage were government decisions, the government mobilized the expert base of foreign architects, designers, and international partners like the EU and UN to restore, transform, and rebuild what the government designated as heritage to be preserved (i.e. the symbolic repertoire). As this involved collaborating with authoritative and authorized voices (Smith 2006), the government discursively used these "modes of rebirth" (restoration, transformation, rebuilding) to disguise its own political decision as technocratic and expert-based. Mobilizing this expert base around the Renaissance of contested heritage allowed the government to tap into authorized heritage discourses (AHD) (Smith 2006), which are particularly powerful as regimes of selective preservation of heritage (Bell 2013). The government engaged experts to help reprocess Albania's symbolic repertoire through restoration, transformation, or reconceptualization, as it constituted the "rebirth" of the Mosaic as iconic, the Piramida as transcendent, and the National Theater as modern.

Contested heritage emerges in this dissertation as a testimony to dissonant symbolic readings of the past inscribed in heritage, and their contested status stands as testimony to the articulation of symbolic dissonance through public and political action and inaction towards the commemorative maintenance of this heritage. Following Forest and Johnson (2002) on the one hand and Jenkins (2011) and Wood (2016) on the other, depoliticization emerges in my analysis as both a *strategy of symbolic reprocessing* and a strategy of *pre-empting collective action*. As a strategy of symbolic reprocessing, depoliticization is situated in the rebirth projects through decisions to restore, transform, or reconceptualize and that were meant to reprocess sites from politically symbolic spaces into those reflecting the Rama Government's visions of memory and modernity. As a strategy of pre-empting collective action, depoliticization was meant to disguise contingent political decisions as rational, expert-based, and inevitable decisions.

Competing for symbolic capital through contested heritage oriented the Rama government to view transition as the space of inter-elite symbolic struggle as well as to reprocess the symbolic capital inscribed in these sites. Questions of demolition or retention (*disavow* vs *retain*) precede the modes of rebirth (*restore* vs *transform* vs *reconceptualize*), despite their simultaneous public

processing. The Rama government confronted the previous elite through disavowing their contestation of the Piramida and the mosaic (retained), while embracing Rama's own transitional contestation over the National Theater (disavowed). The Rama Government subsequently processed symbolic space as the source of contestation at the intersection of the memory discourse and the modernization discourse, with the former scanning the built environment for what was safe, memorable, and worth preserving, while the latter pushed towards reform and radical change, stopping only at the useful, extraordinary, or iconic. The Mosaic, already freed from overt regime symbolism, was restored as iconic. The symbolics of Hoxha inscribed in the Piramida was a productive metaphor, prompting the government to preserve the structure but transform its appearance and turn it into a technological center for youth. The National Theater was deemed cheap, damaged, and past its prime and its time, an artistic place that had lost the glory of the past and embodied all the pathologies of an institution that refused to reform into contemporaneity. Instead, the Rama Government decided that a reconceptualized theater building designed by a famous Western architect would help the theater meet the contemporary modern needs of art production.

Approach and methodology

This dissertation approaches the places I study as *sites*, as opposed to cases. Sites may be both interconnected and simultaneously reiterations or instances of a wider process. A site may be both a place of manifestation and a place of constitution, where one "can observe a broader process unfolding" (Riofrancos 2021, 115). Sites can be self-sufficient, inter-dependent, or manifest political processes in tandem with other sites. I analyze sites through a genealogical approach ("a genealogy of place"), studying their chronology of origins and existence, but primarily their stories of contestation, struggle, symbolic ordering and reordering, to identify political contingencies rather than historical inevitabilities.[7] While this dissertation tells primarily a story of elites willing the city into being and of elite-mandated discursive orders inscribed in materiality, I trace contestation as a space of plural symbolic accounts competing for recognition and intelligibility. Elite-mandated symbolic spaces deflect the intelligibility of 'competing narratives' in an attempt to subvert the articulation of plural accounts about pasts and futures.

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[7] I take Foucault's ([1975] 2012) genealogical method in *Discipline and Punish* to aim at capturing these contingencies rather than just analyzing historical inevitability.

The data I have gathered and the methods I have used to analyze it are diverse and iterative. I explain in detail the subset of data and methods I use in each of the chapters. For a general overview, I conducted fieldwork in Albania in 2021-22 and in 2023, and approached sites, events, speech, and situations with an ethnographic sensibility (Pader 2014; Simmons and Smith 2017). The main categories of data include: observational data of sites (museums, commemoration spaces, permanent installations) and events (art shows, book launches, film projections, IDMC's Memory Days, exhibitions, the Gjirokastra Festival 2023), archival data from the Albanian Central State Archive (covering primarily 1981-1995), 22 semi-structured interviews with members of the cultural elite, cultural administrators, civil society, and members of the Authority for the Opening of the Communist Files,[8] a comprehensive dataset of e-print newspaper articles from PressReader of *Panorama* and *Gazeta Shqiptare* newspapers (2009-2023), and a dataset of speeches, TV reports, online news and op-eds, along with videos of inaugurations, commemorations, speeches, and anonymized social media posts and comments following a public debate on the restored Mosaic.

I approached the field and my data through a critical discourse analysis and a critical symbolic analysis of sites. I try to make sense of symbolic interpretation and re-interpretation that was processes, formulated and reformulated, narrated and constituted aesthetically, symbolically, and materially, in speech acts and decisions. I visited sites more than once to have multiple coding of my observations. I interpreted language, discursive practices, affective behavior, and soundscapes, and also captured clues from 'the spectacular' moments of the grand inaugurations of rebirthed sites. I approached my interviews through an ordinary language lens (Schaffer 2014) and also used reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) for speeches, social media narratives, and commentaries, in order to explore both narrative themes and within-theme hierarchies (Byrne 2022). I find RTA particularly valuable and epistemologically congruent with analyzing data not generated from interviews, where themes may be conditioned through questioning. In official speeches, I applied an ordinary language lens (Schaffer 2014) and also looked for discursive practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983).

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[8] Fifteen interviews with communist and post-communist cultural elites and cultural administrators, two interviews with Albanian Members of Parliament, three interviews with members of civil society working on issues of memory and two interviews at the Authority for the Opening of the Communist files. A detailed list of this interviews is provided in the Reference section.

In interrogating government actions and 'coding' strategies, I followed Jenkins's (2011) and Wood's (2016) propositions about interrogating practices, actions, and discourse. Jenkins outlines strategies of politicization and depoliticization as guiding types of tactics: "a strategy of politicisation, in its broadest sense, entails exposing and questioning what is taken for granted, or perceived to be necessary, permanent, invariable, morally or politically obligatory and essential" (159), while "a strategy of depoliticization entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or *removing* contingency" (160). Wood (2016, 529) provides an overall definition of depoliticization as "a set of tactics, tools and processes that place at one remove the political character of decision making and reduce the capacity for collective agency." These strategies, techniques, tactics and practices served as guiding instruments in my analysis of the various facets of depoliticization deployed by the Rama Government.

Outline of chapters

In Chapter 1 I demonstrate why and how contested heritage was a productive political space for the Rama Government to constitute itself as a reconciliatory unifier of the mnemonic community and a radical modernizer of the country. In Chapter 2 I dive deeper into the government's investment in a reconciliatory memory contract situated in speech, law, and space (new memory museums and permanent installations) as I outline its discursive cooptation of the totalitarian paradigm to represent the dictatorship as ubiquitously violent, maintain what I describe as the "underspecified" nature of the regime governing guilt and responsibility for the communist dictatorship, and unify the nation as a suffering unit. In Chapter 3 I trace the public contestation from a former political prisoner of a celebrated soundscape heritage from the communist period, demonstrating how the underspecification of guilt and responsibility conditions the access to the collective remembrance space of subaltern and competing accounts about the past. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 investigate the Mosaic, the Piramida, and the Theater. In chapter 4, I trace how the Mosaic was constituted as iconic as its restoration was channeled through the EU and UNOPS restoration project. In chapter 5, I trace the transformation of the Piramida into a site that transcended the symbolic space of the dictatorship and the contestation space of late transition. In chapter 6, I trace the demolition of the National Theater, with the building constituted as the epitome of a space and place stuck in time that refused to be reformed and modernized.

CHAPTER 1 – The Renaissance of Contested Heritage: Power, order, and contestation

Presenting the project for the "rebirthed' National Theater in 2018, PM Rama (2018) introduced the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels as one of the best known in contemporary international architecture, who was returning to Tirana "not because he needs work" but because "he has a connection […] with this big endeavour that has started for a while, and is currently continuing, to transform Tirana into a European metropolis." Rama's modernizing and Europeanizing endeavour began during his decade-long term as Mayor of Tirana, where the core group of architects, urban planners, designers, curators, and other professional international partners was cultivated and activated for urban development projects—a group that was now being reactivated to undertake the urban Renaissance of the whole country. Bjarke Ingels and the Dutch architect Winy Maas (designer of the transformed Piramida) were indeed renowned European architects. In the true spirit of the European Renaissance, where princes and popes commissioned exclusive artists for major projects, these architects in the 21st century Tirana were not selected through public competition, but rather summoned to bring to life the Rama Government's urban Renaissance vision and were presented as the masterminds behind these urban visions. They were "protagonists", as Rama introduced them in 2013 (Ora News 2013b), and their grandiose projects unfolded materially through Albania's contested heritage. The Rama Government mobilized these European architects, along with the European Union and UNOPS, as the authoritative and authorized voices (Smith 2006) to turn heritage from contested in-limbo sites to timeless heritage for posterity.

Contested heritage emerged in the eyes of Rama's urban Renaissance as spaces left in limbo, as "issues" to be resolved, needing decisive intervention. In line with Mouffe's (2005; 2013) critique of the modern post-political *Zeitgest* that venerates consensus and relegates antagonism to the stigmatized margins of modern politics, I trace the Rama government's approach to contested heritage as a political problem of stigmatizing contestation. By stigmatizing contestation, they promoted a hegemonic, unitary, and unifying order of a Past and a Future. As contestation was stigmatized as divisive and a marker of political battles, and contested heritage was defined as a

problem needing solutions, "resolving" contested heritage through either preservation or destruction meant taking sites out of their in limbo misery into an ordered decisiveness. As sites were rebirthed through either preservation or demolition and rebuilding, they would stand as trophies of a superimposed vision of a Past and of a Future, of a hegemonic order that systematically produced dissenting subalterns and foreclosed their ability to affect the built heritage of their lived environment. Through an alternative reading of contested heritage, these sites could have been conceptualized in ways that encapsulated the plurality of dissenting perspectives on diverse approaches towards the past and future, the multitude of peoples as agents that had very different lived realities, sentimental and affective reactions, and cognitive and sensory experiences when approaching heritage. Contested heritage stands as the material testimony of the political inscription of plural pasts and futures in the built environment of shared living spaces. It is the impulse to de-contest heritage that emerges as hegemonic instead.

In this approach to contested heritage, it is government-mandated decisive and hegemony-producing intervention in contested heritage that emerges as the ultimate site of power. Contested heritage presents governments with a *seductive* opportunity (on seduction I follow Huyssen 2003; Wedeen 2019) that manifests as an *attractiveness for political intervention*, or political investment, because such heritage can allow governments to impose their own hegemonic political readings *on* sites and *through* sites. First, because contested heritage sites stand as living semiotic objects of plural interpretations of the past, any hegemonic order has to inscribe meaning *on* them in order to neutralize what stands as ambiguous and indecisive, yet whole (the very order of plurality inscribed in space). Second, because they are spaces of encoded ambiguity—and attractive to hegemonic discourses seeking to impose order because of such ambiguity—power cannot but materialize *through* them on its way to producing an ordered and hegemonic reading of the past and the future. It is this plural sovereignty of contested objects that stands at the core of their seductiveness for political actors who seek to inscribe orders of the Past and the Future.

The Rama Government has constituted contested heritage as both a problem in need of a solution, and a productive site through which to build a hegemonic view of the Past and Future where its self-image as *a radical modernizer of the country* and a *reconciliatory unifier of the mnemonic community* is manifested and symbolically produced. The authoritative and authorized actors, voices, and creative visions that the Rama government gathered around the urban

Renaissance of contested heritage were disguised as protagonists of decisiveness, i.e. the very actors who could legitimately ordain what was "heritage" worth preserving and what were "remains" worth discarding, reconceptualizing, or rebuilding from scratch. I trace this productive conflation of where the locus of decision-making about contested heritage resided as the invocation of an *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (AHD) (Smith 2006) by the Rama Government, meant to pre-empt contestation about political decisions on the fate of heritage sites. Decisions to preserve or demolish contested heritage sites in practice were not made by European experts and architects, but rather were governmental, political decisions on how to approach the contestatory repertoire inscribed in these sites—which is a particular type of competition for *symbolic capital* (Forest and Johnson 2002). The government activated European experts and partners for projects that materially inscribed its political decisions (to preserve or demolish) and situated their contribution around the symbolic reprocessing of heritage on its way to "rebirth" through restoration, transformation, or reconceptualization.

Contestation, plurality, and monumental seduction

Celebratory sentiments around the presentation of heritage as a unifying feature of a shared unproblematic past are particularly emergent in Europe, as the European Union has aimed at "the mainstreaming of cultural heritage across EU policies" (European Commission 2019) and the presentation of shared heritage as a mark of cultural diversity (European Committee of the Regions 2018). This celebratory view of heritage is neither historically accurate, nor representative of the sentimental repertoire that characterizes heritage. European heritage is in fact often dissonant and contentious, as is the history of Europe, which is conflictual instead of simply "diverse". In that sense, contestatory attitudes towards heritage were more accurate in their representation of the multiple/plural pasts of Europe than was this emerging EU sentiment on shared heritage. This EU-promoted heritage sentiment seemed to aspiringly constitute rather than accurately represent "shared heritage". Contestation of heritage was neither mentioned nor intelligible in the celebratory, colorful language and videos of the EU,[9] especially around the European Year of Cultural Heritage in 2018.

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[9] See for instance the promotional video from the European Committee of the Regions (2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zD0851NGk0

But instead of promoting a political imagination where contestation is stigmatized or conceptualized as an issue to deal with (see for instance European Expert Network on Culture 2013), cope with, or manage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Nyaupane 2009; Battilani, Bernini, and Mariotti 2018; Liu, Dupre, and Jin 2021),[10] I propose that contested heritage may stand as a testimony to irreconcilable political views about the past and future, as well as the multitude of lived experiences. For Hardt and Negri (2000, 103), the very concept of *the People* as a unitary homogenizing imagined community is in contrast with the multitude as a "plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous." For Mouffe (2005; 2013) antagonism is an inherent quality of the political, one which democratic societies should sublimate instead of trying to negate or erase. Antagonism is the bearer of pluralism in society, as it articulates different political options that may only be addressed through political choices rather than an assumed compatibility, "rational" decision making, or a consensual approach to what may be fundamentally irreconcilable. In fact, "what antagonism reveals is the very limit of any rational consensus" (2005, 12) that a polity could use to "solve" its political issues. A truly pluralist society does not assume congruence or unity as either the *modus operandi* of the political community, nor as its operational base for how decisions are made. Deciding on contested heritage from a place of power and political authority, to materialize one interpretation of a unitary Past and Future, negates the plural pasts and futures already inculcated and inscribed in the contestatory capital of contested heritage.

Given this modern political aspiration for consensus and unity on the one hand and the reality of antagonism, stigmatization, and conflict aversion on the other, I argue that the tension inherent in contested heritage is seductive to political power because it emerges as a productive space in which to turn legitimate antagonistic positions into mere subordinate and particularistic variation of a "unified" collective (see Laclau and Mouffe 1985 on hegemonic frames). Once constituted as such, the legitimate antagonistic contestatory positions inscribed in heritage can then be stigmatized and discarded in favor of unified visions of the past and of the future. Contested heritage then emerges as a productive political space for seeking symbolic dominion (Nijakowski and Kosicki 2006) and besting other elites (Forest and Johnson 2002) through unitary visions of a Past and a Future inscribed into heritage.

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[10] Notice for instance how Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996 recognize dissonance as a quality of heritage, but see it as something to be managed, for instance "managing dissonance for political and economic sustainability", "dissonant heritage and political stability" in (Chapter 9 – *Retrospect and Prospect of the Management of Dissonance*)

Where contested heritage stands as a site of multitude, plurality, and irreconcilable legitimate positions, political power seeking to impose hegemonic imaginaries sees ambiguity, tension, and indecisiveness. It is this essential freedom—or a democratic plurality if you will—that contested heritage retains and contains as long as it is contested, that makes it seductive for ideological investment. Seduction captures a certain allure, originating from the tensions inscribed in places, spaces, and affective structures, that makes them attractive to political elites who desire to build unified collective orders. Contested heritage activates an almost reverse seductive power—yet of the same nature—to the one Wedeen (2019) attributes to ideological containment. While ideologies as form contain tension and perform soothing work through mechanisms of seduction and incitement, contested heritage sites stand as unruly objects of plurality. They thus become seductive objects for political intervention, because they stand as containers of unresolved political tension. Dealing with contested heritage is political work that attempts to empty the tension inscribed in it,[11] while particularizing, stigmatizing, and discarding legitimate political contestatory stances.

Authorized Heritage Discourse and the ordination of heritage

"There is, really, no such thing as heritage" posits Laurajane Smith (2006, 11), kicking off the emergence of a critical heritage studies that started questioning the very constitution of heritage as heritage. Heritage in this view emerges as both a *historical* concept primarily infused with a Western cultural, aesthetic, and civilizational conception of the old, beautiful, and valuable to be preserved and transferred to future generations, and as a *discursive* and *material practice* carried out by an emerging army of experts, curators, conservation practitioners, and scientific methods that 'gaze' at the world in search of the preservation-worthy. For Smith, this dominant AHD of our modern times delimits the boundaries of materiality as a hierarchical system of worthiness (constituting what is and what is not heritage) through the authorized expert gaze and voice who "can 'speak' about and 'for' heritage" by ordaining it (12). Smith's conception of AHD resembles a category of *authoritative discourse*[12] that is culturally derived and universalized but at the same

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[11] The pristine "resolution" of tension is its own containment, which is then generative of further tensions, ambiguities, and anxieties (see Wedeen 2019, 7-8) that then stand relegated beneath the official space for processing.
[12] See for instance Yurchak's (2005) analysis of Bakhtin's conception of *authoritative discourse* (14-23).

time self-referential, dominant, and encoded in a script that is hard to decipher as ideological or culturally specific.

At the core of what Smith describes as an AHD is the Foucauldian *knowledge/power nexus*, an army of authoritative voices that make the discourse on heritage "authorized". The authorized gaze is intrinsic to heritage ordination and embedded into a dominant civilizational discourse on preservable past(s) (Bell 2013) that are co-constituted as heritage is delimited as an object in the first place. Deployed from the parochial European scale to the global scale this knowledge/power nexus is embedded into real bodies and voices, vested with the power of scientific knowledge, professional degrees, curatorial careers, and an 'invisible' aesthetic and civilizational bias derived from a Western hegemonic discourse of what constitutes "'old', grand, monumental and aesthetically pleasing sites, buildings, places and artefacts" (Smith 2006, 11). This army of "legitimate" agents distinguish mere ruins from valuable authentic sites of a past worth preserving. Our modern conception, imagination, and constitution of heritage has been primarily built around the UNESCO AHD ecosystem,[13] its authorized gaze and ordaining of world heritage, its preservation and preservationists, and its appeal to a universal repertoire of intrinsic and extrinsic values, and preservatory ethics. A global network of experts ordains the heritage of the world that is worth preserving for future generations.

Vested with enough authority and legitimacy, different sources of expertise can ordain heritage at a national or local level. National scientific institutions, museums, historical and archeological centers, universities, and particular practices of discovery and preservation in place routinely ordain national cultural and historic heritage. They may deploy particular colonial, national, ethnic, racial, scientific and aesthetic categories and practices that have authorized the voices of these institutions in the first place (Bennett 2017). These authorized gazes derived from

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[13] This universal repertoire of values professed to be found "in" heritage is a particular type of ontology and gaze, resembling a universalized European parochialism (Pitts 2018) rather than a representative imagination of how different peoples and cultures of the world conceive of value and of the nature of time. This universal and universalized conception of heritage has limited our imagination of the precious, aesthetically pleasing, and valuable and often decoupled value from the communities where it emerges. Universally professed heritage preservation values may be in tension with local conceptions of value, or local practices that may process dissonant layers of heritage through other means than preservation. As Bell (2013, 434–35) argues, "preservation establishes a sanctioned perspective presented and interpreted for posterity that then serves to exclude and marginalize other layers of meaning." UNESCO's AHD is an ecosystem of agents and values that ordain heritage around the world as the people of the present are conceptualized as custodians of heritage for future generations.

colonial projects, privileged classes, elites, educational and cultural capital, and specific appeals to a European-informed aesthetic gaze of the beautiful and valuable are then mobilized to ordain heritage (García Canclini 2014). Because Europe has been the cradle of a parochial heritage discourse that has been universalized (see Pitts 2018 on "parochial universalism"), expertise originating from Europe has a particular appeal to legitimacy and authority.

In Albania, the Rama Government gathered around its urban Renaissance governance a plethora of such authoritative 'voices' to provide input and legitimization through their professional expertise and the presumed objective *gaze* from the West as well as through their artistic credentials as famous architectural firms, curators, and associated with international regimes of heritage. Two important streams of expertise were mobilized: (1) the Next Generation Albania Conference group of urban planners, architects, artists, curators and designers, gathered throughout PM Rama's personal political career and proclaimed the expert "protagonists" of development in 2013; and (2) EU and UN expertise mobilized in particular for the Mosaic rebirth project. National assessment institutes on heritage, safety, and sustainability were also mobilized throughout the urban Renaissance projects to back governmental decisions.

The Rama Government harvested the superpower of camouflaging political decisions on contested heritage as decisions ordained through European expertise, aesthetic tastes, and professional contributions. It did this by conflating for the public the locus of the European involvement from one dimension of decision-making to another. While the European architects and experts, and the EU and UN restoration projects were deployed in the design process of rebirth following government decisions on which contested sites to retain or destroy, the Renaissance heritage discourse implied that European experts had a say in the initial ordination of contested heritage for either retention or destruction. I trace how heritage was ordained politically in Albania through the framework proposed by Forest and Johnson (2002).

Inter-elite competition, symbolic capital, and contested heritage

Forest and Johnson (2002) trace how post-communist elites in Russia engaged in a symbolic dialogue among themselves and with the public during the first decade of transition, which manifested in these elites' different approaches towards monuments inherited from the past. Following Bourdieu and Verdery, Forest and Johnson define symbolic capital as the medium of

"prestige, legitimacy, and influence" in society (524). Post-communist elites' approach to this monumental heritage through either co-optation/glorification, disavowal, or contestation is described as a competition for symbolic capital, as elites advanced their competing conceptions of the national project for post-Soviet Russia. I draw on this framework to trace how the Rama Government engaged in a symbolic competition with the post-communist elite during the transitional period, as well as with the symbolic repertoire inscribed in heritage itself. Rather than a simultaneous competition for inscribing competing visions, as was the case in Moscow, the Rama government faced the past and past elites from a place of governing power and in a position fertile for authoritative and authoritarian impositions of government-mandated visions of collective identity. The transitional elite's visions of the past and future were discarded as either divisive on memory, or too cautious on modernization. Instead, the Rama Government, through its urban Renaissance at the end of transition, willed contested heritage anew at the intersection of a unified reconciliatory mnemonic community and a radically modernizing Albania.

Rather than obvious, intuitive, rational, or expertise-based decisions on whether to preserve or destroy contested heritage, the Rama Government's decisions were political ones that approached transition from communism as a space of inter-elite symbolic contestation and the dictatorship as a space of the original symbolism, sometimes reprocessed during transition. As I trace the genealogy of power and struggle encoded in the contestation of the Mosaic, the Piramida, and the National Theater, I argue that the Rama Government engaged in two layers of decision making, one answering the question "to preserve or not to preserve?" and the other answering the subsequent question of "what to do about the preserved or destroyed places?" I argue that the first question demands a decision to *retain* or *destroy*, and the second question demands a decision to *restore*, *transform*, or *rebuild*. The first set of decisions primarily dealt with the contestatory actions of transitional elites (*the contestatory repertoire*), while the second dealt with *the symbolic repertoire* of the sites inscribed through their origin and usage.

The contestatory repertoire inscribed in the Piramida and the Mosaic was disavowed as mnemonically divisive, while the contestatory repertoire inscribed in the National Theater was embraced as it could be used to stigmatize the previous elite for its reluctance to embark on radical reforms to modernize the cultural scene. On the second order of decisions, the Mosaic with the help of the EU and UN was restored as iconic. The Piramida through the Dutch architect Winy

Maas was transformed as a place transcending both transition and the dictatorship. Finally, the National Theater was reconceptualized anew through the work of the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels (Table 1).

Table 1: Decisions on contested heritage

	Contestation repertoire	**Result**	**Symbolic repertoire**	**Result**
Mosaic	Disavowed	Retained	Embraced	Restored
Piramida	Disavowed	Retained	Disavowed/re-processed	Transformed
National Theater	Embraced	Demolish	Disavowed	Reconceptualize/ Rebuild

The first set of decisions ordained heritage as worthy of retention or not and allowed the Rama government to accumulate symbolic capital at the expense of transition elites, while the second set navigated the resulting symbolic reprocessing and brought in primarily European authoritative voices to legitimate the original decisions. This productive and demobilizing political conflation was inscribed into the very discourse of urban Renaissance. To urban Renaissance all projects brought sites from their purgatory state of limbo into rebirth, regardless of their mode of transition through either preservation or demolition. The discursive labeling of all sites as "rebirthed" allowed for this productive conflation. The Mosaic, Piramida, and the National Theater were all "rebirthed" while the different sets of decisions were semantically unified into the "rebirthed Piramida", the "rebirthed Mosaic", and the "rebirthed National Theater".

The expert base and strategies of depoliticization

The expert base that the Rama Government mobilized to build the authoritative voice for its urban Renaissance was not only used to invoke authority, as I argued above, but was also deployed to disguise political decisions about the retention/demolition of contested heritage as expert-originating or expert-approved. This strategic conflation, I argued, disguised the 'mode of death/survival' (retention/demolition) with the e mode of rebirth (the restored Mosaic, the transformed Piramida, the demolished and redesigned National Theater building). The government

used the expert base of technical skills, knowledge, and assessment, along with the credentials of officialdom and Western/European association, more as "channeling avenues" for the "rebirth" projects, which followed political decisions rather than preceding them. Differently from an AHD where the expert base ordains heritage, in the case of the Rama government's Renaissance of contested heritage, the expert base only ordained post-facto projects on what had already been deemed heritage or not. This useful and strategic confusion was particularly deployed in moments of inauguration of preserved contested heritage, where celebrations, ceremonials, and festivities brought together the expert base and the government as contributors, partners, friends, and collaborators. The ordinary citizen was not meant to dissect the protagonists that *willed* heritage (the government), from the protagonists that designed and executed projects *on* heritage (the experts and international partners).

This important distinction also points to how the Rama Government claimed that it used one type of expertise-based politics (delegating political decisions to expert bodies) while actually deploying another (concealing political decisions on contested heritage as expert-derived consequences). A first generation of scholars focusing on depoliticization was primarily concerned with the depoliticizing effect of politicians transferring or delegating political decisions to expert bodies, also known as "the process of placing at one remove the political character of decision making" (Burnham 2001, 128). This trend was observed throughout the developed world as politics was moving towards expertise-based policies. This paradigm is what an AHD also professes to rely on when using a techno-scientific base to ordain heritage. Instead, a second strand of literature on depoliticization better captures how the Rama Government navigated expertise and political decision-making on contested heritage. For Jenkins (2011, 160) a strategy of depoliticization "entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or removing contingency." As depoliticization in speech and in action varies, I found Wood's "merged" definition of strategies of depoliticization useful because it is versatile in capturing speech, action, and the disguising of one strategy for another when relevant. Wood (2016, 529) sees strategies of depoliticization as "a set of tactics, tools and processes that place at one remove the political character of decision making and reduce the capacity for collective agency." I spell out these strategic moves of expertise-use throughout my chapters.

Finally, I also suggest that the Renaissance discourse relied on other well-established authoritative discourses and authoritative voices, internationally and within Albania, to pre-empt contestation over these heritage sites and reduce the capacity for collective action. In the case of the Mosaic's restoration project, financed through the EU4Culture project in partnership with the EU and UNOPS, I trace how the image of "iconic" heritage is crafted by discursively tapping into both an international regime of preservation and the respected credentials of the UN and the EU. In the case of the Piramida, I trace how the government piggybacked on the Berlin Process Summit in Tirana to inaugurate the transformed building while artificially associating the project with an idea that is universally embraced in Albania: EU integration. Finally, in the case of the National Theater, I trace how the EU served as a tool to dislocate the center of debate from heritage preservation into competition modalities for the new theater building.

Constituting hegemonic discourses on the Past and the Future

In this section I expand on the memory discourse and the modernization discourse that have animated the Rama Government's urban Renaissance approach towards contested heritage. I argue that heritage has been ordained and symbolically interpellated at the intersection of a reconciliatory discourse on memory and a radical discourse on modernization. This interpellation of contested heritage has been constituted at the intersection of the *memory discourse* and the *modernization discourse*, defining what is "safe", "valuable", and "useful" to carry forward for posterity, along with what is undesirable and to be discarded as "being in the way" of modernization.

I borrow the concept of *interpellation* from Lisa Wedeen (2019), who borrows it from Louis Althusser, as I invoke the constitutive power of discourse on what is deemed and constituted as heritage and what is discarded as not heritage when facing contested heritage. Ideological interpellation—"Hey, you there!"—hails subjects and inscribes them in social/political positions as it constitutes them in their subjecthood and subjection (8-10). Heritage is also hailed, interpellated, and constituted discursively and materially. Because of the modern conception of heritage and our preservatory bias towards the idea of "heritage", in modern democratic societies heritage status is generally constituted by law and protected as such. But as Smith (2006) helps us understand, these practices have a specific cultural and civilizational genealogy, which is universalized rather than universal. In addition, and importantly for my analysis, heritage in authoritarian countries or countries with authoritarian tendencies may be inscribed in law and

through law, but "law" is a weak deterrent to government action. Law instead resembles an instrument of power (Popova 2017), with enough discursive potency to be a valuable instrument to use, yet not enough of a deterrent for it to dictate boundaries on power. What is inscribed in law or erased from it then becomes data or an indicator to trace *mechanisms of heritagization* that are part of governmental strategies of depoliticization. Heritagization signals what the government marks for protection as it "emancipates" it for preservation, while de-heritagization opens the space for demolition. Hence, interpellation is invoked to account for how the intersection of a memory discourse and a modernization discourse constitutes heritage-hood in the same way that power constitutes modern subjecthood and its ideologically encoded identities.

There is a key anxiety in modernity that is constituted in the modern concept of heritage, Harrison (2013) seems to suggest. While modernity as an era and modernization as a process are obsessed with "novelty, progress, speed and rupture from the traditions of the past", Harrison argues (2013, 24) that "in its obsessive attempts to transcend the present, modernity becomes fixated on the past" (25). The birth of nostalgia as a specific historical sentiment of modernity (Boym 2001) seems to be inseparable from and a form of balancing with the pace of change and the obsessive need to transcend the present. The past becomes both a site of longing and a site of transcendence. For Harrison (2013), this epochal anxiety is manifested in a duality over heritage, which on the one hand obsesses over decline, decay, obsolescence and disappearance that manifests in a preservatory push to save, while on the other pushes for selectivity, categorization and distillation of the "savable" and valuable past that permits its separation from the discardable rest in order to make space for the new (26).

Interpellating sites at the intersection of a memory discourse and modernization discourse engages with this key anxiety of modernity, which manifested in the contingent choices of the Rama government. The memory discourse was activated to interpellate sites for symbolic propriety, affective resonance, belonging and representativeness of the remembering peoples, while its field of analysis concerned the memorable, the nostalgic, the iconic, the historically instructive, as well as the harmful, the stigmatized, the better forgotten or the unforgettable. The modernization discourse was activated to interpellate sites for necessity, usefulness, adaptability, and robustness, while its field of analysis concerned progress, change, 'moving with the times', backwardness or forward-looking-ness, aspirational belonging in civilizational communities, the

preservation of the past only insofar as it is iconic, sacred, spectacular, and somehow fetishized for the future. Such memory discourse present-proofs the past and past-proofs the present, while the modernization regime future-proofs the past and the present with austerity.

I trace in the first chapter how the Socialist Government dedicated an entire curated material ecosystem to consolidating a reconciliatory discursive regime on the past (one museum and two permanent installations), which also served to pre-empt contestatory claims on the Mosaic and the Piramida and to disavow the previous government's efforts towards demolition or neglect. Both these sites were deemed heritage. Regarding the modernization discursive regime, the Socialist Government kickstarted its governance by proclaiming a "national emergency" in Albania and inaugurating radical reforms, urban rebirth, sustainable development, and the Western orientation of the country for expertise, political integration, and belonging. As a radical reform to modernize the cultural sector was proclaimed, the government honed in on the National Theater as a place unjustifiably shielded from radical reforms through the transition era, dismissed it as not heritage, and eventually demolished the building after more than two years of civil resistance, promising a "dignified" modern new theater. The reforming ethics of the early 1990s were embraced, while the reluctant modernizing impetus of the transitional elite was disavowed.

The memory discourse and contested heritage

The memory discourse that has informed the interpellation of contested heritage in Albania is situated within the wider memory field that was built and cultivated after the fall of communism and pertained in particular to the memory of communism and its deeds. After the initial "de-Hoxhaisation" impetus and the euphoria of the fall of the dictatorship along with Hoxha's statue(s),[14] the memory field has been dependent on the lack of a proper and consistent transitional justice process. The nominally anti-communist Democratic Government in the early 1990s delivered a de-facto amnesty to the communist political elite, situating the mnemonic paradigm of the new polity's social contract[15] on a "forgive and forget" basis following President Berisha's

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[14] Stalin's statues had the same fate, and their fall was the signal of the changes to come. A few statues of Stalin, Lenin, and Hoxha were stored at the back of the Gallery of Arts in Tirana and remained there for the occasional visitor or artistic and political acts. For instance, the statues were painted red in 2012 by a group of student activists. See Vizion Plus TV (2012) reporting https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WMhQArYIrk.
[15] See how Brendese (2014) theorizes the founding of social contract(s) on amnesty and the implications for democratic politics.

1992 words that "We are all guilty, we all jointly suffered" (Austin and Ellison 2008, 182). This approach to memory and justice promoted a mindset of everyone being both victims and accomplices (Godole 2023, 237). I propose the concept of *underspecification* as a heuristic (better develop it in chapters 2 and 3) in order to capture the tendency of the memory discourse to under-determine issues of guilt and responsibility, tending towards the grey area of overlapping victimhood and complicity. I argue that specification would tend to better outline the areas of victimhood and complicity/responsibility, while overspecification would point to the other extreme of over-determining victims from perpetrators.

The DP's further flirtation in the 1990s with patchy and inconsequential transitional justice measures and the use of secret files as political "weapons"[16] did a disservice to the proper political articulation of the justice and memory grievances of the formerly persecuted, as it failed to change the "forgive and forget" paradigm and maintaining the memory field underspecified. Later failed attempts at lustration, even when the DP had a solid parliamentary majority, not only kept the field of guilt and responsibility underspecified, but it provided the SP with the opportunity to decisively control the process of transitional justice by being the government that declassified the security files of the dictatorship. In line with Nalepa's (2010) and Kaminski and Nalepa's (2008) observations on Central and Eastern Europe, the SP in Albania as a communist successor party took pre-emptive steps to both prevent harsher transitional justice measures and to control the ones being implemented.

In chapter 1 and 2, I show how the general attitude of "forgive and forget"—or amnesty and amnesia (Brendese 2014)—has underspecified the memory field in Albania, systemically producing subaltern accounts about the past with limited ability to politically articulate their grievances. In chapter 2, I demonstrate how the unified memory regime on the arts and culture foreclosed the ability of subaltern accounts about the past to be intelligible in public debates, especially in tempering celebratory attitudes towards intangible heritage and the artistic space of the communist period. I argue that unified memory regimes order, discipline, and govern not only the official but also the everyday spaces of judgment and affection.

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[16] See Mëhilli (2019) on the way secret files, documents, and archives have been weaponized in Albania. In addition, see also Austin and Ellison (2008) on certain blackmailing practices in how the past is instrumentalized.

This general attitude of amnesty and amnesia towards the past informed the attitude towards the built heritage that post-communist Albania inherited from the previous regime. After the fall of statues in the early 1990s, from Stalin to Hoxha, the elite-mandated ethics of the early 1990s was generally preservatory, retaining heritage while sanitizing its overt regime symbolism. Both the Mosaic and the Piramida were sanitized this way through palimpsesting[17] as a symbolic layering. The Mosaic lost three of its most overt communist symbols, while the Hoxha museum was exiled from the Piramida, with the building repurposed and then officially renamed. In the general sphere of arts and culture, the artistic heritage from the previous regime was approached through preservatory and celebratory tones, with waves of nostalgia particularly prominent since the second decade of transition.

The late 2000s saw the Democratic Party unsuccessfully attempt to discursively turn the memory field (see Bernhard and Kubik 2014) towards greater specification of guilt and responsibility, a move that was accompanied by the emergence of contestation over the memory regime that governed inherited sites. The DP, trying to assert its anti-communist identity after coming to power for the first time since the state collapse of 1997, passed a lustration law in 2008 (Law 10034/2008) that was deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. Having failed to produce and pass a law that would have a chance of approval by the Constitutional Court, the Berisha Government threatened to demolish the Piramida. The Socialist Party, then-Mayor of Tirana Rama, and civil society mobilized at the time to protect the Piramida, which managed to survive demolition. The Rama Government, once in power in 2013, re-consolidated the memory field, delineating a memory regime on sites and heritage that would disavow the contestatory impetus of the previous government. The Socialists successfully passed the first law on the opening of the security files from the communist dictatorship (Law 45/2015) and established a special state Authority to carry out the job.[18] The memory field was moving towards being less forgetful, but was still forgiving, retaining its underspecified nature.

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[17] For practices of urban palimpsesting after regime change see Huyssen (2003) on Berlin, Forest and Johnson (2002) on Moscow, and Mëhilli (2017) on early communist Albania, and Daly (2023) specifically on the Fascist heritage in Tirana during post-communism.
[18] The Authority for the Opening of the *Sigurimi* Files was stipulated in Law 45/2015 and was the authority in charge of managing files and their accessibility.

In addition, as I trace in chapter 2, Rama inscribed and constituted this memory contract "in stone" through the opening of the Museum *House of Leaves* and two permanent memory installations, *BunkArt1* and *BunkArt2*. These curated sites, designed and completed with the help of foreign curators, presented the dictatorship as ubiquitously violent, situating responsibility for its crimes with dictator Hoxha and the violent apparatus of the regime (*Sigurimi i Shtetit*). While some suffered in prisons and internment camps, the narrative suggested, the whole of Albania was in fact a bunker and a prison, as the curated a newly built bunker-entrance of BunkArt 2 seems to suggest. We were all victims, claimed the updated memory field. The memory regime that would inform the approach on contested sites then re-embraced the Piramida and the Mosaic, with its remaining symbolism deemed either innocuous (the Mosaic as art) or productive for symbolic reprocessing (Hoxha's exorcism at the Piramida). The modernization regime would then designate the Mosaic as "iconic" and the Piramida would emerge as a symbol transcending the past and transitioning into the future of technology and artificial intelligence.

The modernization discourse and contested heritage

A modernization discursive regime has a particular relationship to modernity and development and a propensity to change and transform, a change that may be multi-fold and situated in large economic, cultural, and societal transformations. Generally speaking, a modernization regime scans the past only to retain what is strictly necessary, useful, or iconic. The rest must be discarded as it stands in the way of progress and development, impeding the future from manifesting.

The early 1990s in Albania saw the regime crumbling as students were chanting "We want an Albania like the rest of Europe" ("*E duam Shqipërinë si gjithë Evropa*") (Abrahams 2015, 56). Despite an initial reluctance from the communist elite to embark on rapid economic reforms (Tarifa 1995; Meksi 2010),[19] the new and recycled political elite seemed to agree on the general direction of the country towards democracy, reforms, and market economy, along with a turn towards Europe and the West.[20] Modernization in the early 1990s meant Westernization, freedom,

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[19] Meksi brings in documents and transcript form the parliamentary sessions in the early 1990s, demonstrating how the elite was contemplating what directions to take, particularly on economic issues.

[20] President Alia would have hoped for a similar slow, relatively nonviolent, moderate transition from central economic planning to the market economy, if one was to occur at all. The Parliament session minutes brought by Meksi (2010) report communist President Alia claiming that the market economy is one option "if we want to go that way at all". Given the deplorable state of the economy in the 1980s and pressure for reforms in the early 1990s, he introduced the New Economic Mechanism in 1990, a conservative set of measures meant to reform central

capitalism, radical reforms, restructuring, consumer goods, urbanization, cultural consumption, and cultural mimicking of the West (Tochka 2016, 129–66; Bejko 2021, 243). The early 1990s would see the rapid transformation of cities, with public space shrinking in favor of emerging small and larger private enterprises.

Although the emerging national consensus on modernization meant reforming the public sector, not all reforms would bring radical transformations. The Ministry of Culture, for instance, claiming that the cultural sector was too fragile to be rapidly exposed to market dynamics (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.83; f.513, v.1992, d.48), managed to retain jurisdiction over the central art and cultural institutions, initially shielding them from major loss of space and radical reforms in art production (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.45).[21] The film production institution Kinostudio "*Shqipëria e Re*" started embarking on market reforms as a state-owned commercial enterprise (ltd) (Demo 2022)[22] and music production was easily channeled through new recording industries, media, and TV,[23] while performing arts such as theater were deemed particularly fragile in the new competitive environment, prompting the Ministry of Culture to be especially protective of the National Theater and the National Theater of Opera and Ballet (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.83). The modernization regime that characterized the 1990s was thus prevented from "modernizing" all spaces and places, the central art institution in particular, inherited from the communist regime.

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economic planning. A slow transition to a market economy, starting with the permission to hold private property and the setting of conditions for the privatization of state enterprises, would start only in March 1991 after the first pluralist elections. The Stability Government, under the economic leadership of Gramoz Pashko who championed shock therapy, decided to go further and implement radical economic reforms to quickly turn the country into a market economy (see Bufi and Krasniqi 2016). In August 1991, the government presented its economic reform package, including price liberalization, market exchange, and privatization.

[21] In 1992 the ministry presented the so-called privatization platform with very few sites that could be immediately privatized. The platform was composed of three major categories: (1) institutions that would not be privatized, including all national art and culture institutions, galleries, museums, circuses, libraries, theaters, archives, film studios, and cultural monuments; (2) institutions and state enterprises that would not be privatized within the next 1-3 years, mainly including distribution agencies and publishing houses; and (3) institutions and enterprises that could be privatized immediately such as cinemas, art studios (for rent), and libraries that were in deplorable conditions. In the few years following this platform the ministry would take a proactive approach to fighting both formal and informal, public and private attempts at appropriating space, with different degrees of success.

[22] Elsa Demo traces the rapid transformation of Kinostudio starting from the 2000s when the Socialist Government came to power. She traces the institutional and space dismantling as private media practically occupied its territory with the blessing of the state.

[23] Any art with a direct connection to media and television thrived, because of the booming industry throughout the 1990s.

At the dawn of the second decade of transition, after the state was back on its feet after its collapse in 1997, the central institution of the National Theater, the theater building, and its artistic labor and labor relations would all emerge in concert in the Ministry of Culture's discourse as an unreformed and resisting *place*, warranting the close inspection of modernizing reforms. The 2000s saw the Socialist governments embark on public sector reforms, privatization, and the overall resumption of the reform mantel from the early 1990s that had collapsed in 1997 (Kajsiu 2013; 2016).[24] Minister of Culture Rama, fresh in office in 1998, was committed to the reform and modernization of the art and cultural sector, taking issue in particular with the national theater(s) and the permanent artistic labor they had preserved. A new law "For the Theater" was crafted (Law 8578/2000),[25] mimicking provisions from laws that led to the radical transformation and dismantling of the Kinostudio and film production (Council of Europe 2000, 35).[26] Minister Rama's reformatory and modernizing approach to the art and cultural sector secured the accolades of the Council of Europe's (2000) country report at the time. Simultaneously, under the same reforming and modernization impetus it began to frame the National Theater building as old, wrecked, irreparable and better replaced. The modernization regime emerging at this time reaffirmed the reform ethics of the early 1990s, but not its half-hearted implementation. "The first decade of transition showed and taught us the costs of postponing a reform", claimed Rama in Parliament defending the law, adding that the reform would stop "parasitism, [and] vegetation among theatrical bodies" (RTV Klan 2019). The national theater(s) were thus stuck in time, full of state-employed artists engaging in parasitism, resistant to reform and modernization, and particularly stubborn as they continued to mobilize against reform. The modernization regime governing the space of arts and culture would remain fractured, with these reforms not taking hold in the theater.

After the Rama Government took office in 2013, it established a new modernization governing consensus that scanned the built environment of Albania in search of that which prevented the rebirth of the country and that which was worth preserving for posterity. The

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[24] In Gramoz Ruçi's (2021) farewell to politics, a veteran of the Socialist Party from the early days, the Socialists "put the market economy on rails."

[25] The law "For the Theater" 8578/2000 proposed a reorganization of the theater into a system of new centers and companies, which would see the theaters turned into "centers" and artistic labor organization and contracting decoupled from the theater and channeled through public or private "theatrical companies".

[26] The 2000 Country Report praised the law "On cinematography" from 1997 for bringing cinematography "into a competitive system to adapt to the free market economy" (35).

National Theater emerged as a place stuck in time since the end of communism, resistant to reform, wasteful and infested with state laborers who cheated the system by getting paid without ever performing, a place lacking meritocracy, and a disgrace to the iconic art and artists from the communist period. Amendments in 2014 (Law 25/2014) to the Law "On Art and Culture" (Law 10352/2010) abolished the National Center of Arts and Culture, recentralizing funding and decision-making through the Ministry of Culture. The same year, temporary contracts were introduced to replace permanent ones and effectively change the permanent relationship of artists (deemed as parasitic and lazy) to the theater. The past was concurrently mobilized as the building started acquiring new and repurposed old faults: its second-hand nature even for the Fascist protectorate, cheaply built, and a temporary building that lasted for far too long.

Artist, citizens, and activist mobilized for more than two years to protect the building—occupying it for nine months—which speaks to a fractured modernization regime, to competing visions of modernization (Isto 2023), and, ultimately, to the limits of disguising government-mandated heritage discourses as AHDs. As the modernization discourse discarded the place as a disgrace, the memory discourse was briefly invoked to stigmatize the resistance protecting the building. While mobilized transitional-period artists considered themselves the heirs of the previous generations of artists, the government invoked the memory regime to separate the iconic art and elite artists of the communist period from the stigmatized artists of the transitional period, while particularizing their resistance. The National Theater as a *place*, with its transitional resistance to reform, its mediocre artists, and its meager art, could only be disavowed as an institution. Albanians deserved a better, contemporary, modern National Theater, proclaimed the government.

CHAPTER 2 – The Ubiquity of Violence: Albania as a prison and the memory contract

"None of us escaped repression *in one way or another* because *the whole of Albania was a prison for years*," (emphasis added) claimed Minister of Culture Mirela Kumbaro in 2016, speaking about the newly opened National Museum of Surveillance, *The House of Leaves*. Harvesting the power of political metaphors to inculcate productive images about the past, Minister Kumbaro was cultivating an important discursive trope of "communist Albania as a prison", where all Albanians "in one way or another" were repressed. This ubiquity of violence and repression, I argue, was at the center of the reconciliatory memory contract that the Rama government reinstated in speech, law, and materiality, a mnemonic investment to serve the interpellation of contested heritage. This reconciliatory memory contract stigmatized previous attempted fractures of the transitional justice regime by the formerly persecuted and the Democratic Party as *politicizing* memory, and as fueled by a mindset of revenge and divisiveness. As the faults of the dictatorship were attributed to Dictator Hoxha and the totalitarian system, the Socialist Government delimited and reclaimed the rest of the symbolic space of the dictatorship as malleable for symbolic appropriation and reprocessing for the future.

In this chapter, I trace how the Rama Government invested in a comprehensive memory contract to reinstate a unified yet underspecified reconciliatory regime of remembrance of the communist dictatorship. I invoke the language of contract from social contract theory, as a way of indicating its civic nature, but also to point at its implications as a foundational discourse of the political community (Brendese 2014). I trace how the early 1990s saw Albania embark on an official memory contract of amnesty and amnesia, a consensus that underspecified guilt and responsibility in favor of a 'forgiving and forgetting' mnemonic community trying to start fresh with democracy. Guilt and responsibility, the narrative goes, were ubiquitous, distributed throughout society, with victims and perpetrators overlapping in a gray middle zone of complicity and a lack of agency to make moral choices. Against the Democratic Government's attempt in the late 2000s to specify and purge some of those responsible for the dictatorship through a lustration law, the new Rama Government in 2013 started a comprehensive re-unification of the mnemonic

community through a successful articulation of justice grievances as dangerous for democracy, unattainable, divisive, unintelligible, and 'politicized' given the totalitarian nature of the communist regime in Albania. Instead, all the mnemonic community could peacefully, ethically, and democratically seek was truth and disclosure of the past, exemplified through the government's passing of a law to open the former *Sigurimi i Shtetit* (State Security)[27] files and the opening and curation of a predominantly underground network of mnemonic sites, including one national museum of surveillance and two permanent installations. Disclosing to the public this "vast 'underworld' of the dictatorship" (Isto 2017), was meant to be enough to assuage the trauma of the collective subconscious.

As memory and transitional justice are complex webs of "discursive, symbolic, material, and spatiotemporal" spaces (Cole 2020, 199), I trace the institution of the memory contract in three sites: law, speech, and space/materiality. More specifically, I argue that the Socialist memory contract unfolded through the government's approach towards the *Sigurimi* files (law) and in the public discourses about memory of PM Rama, Former Minister of Social Welfare and then Mayor of Tirana Veliaj, and Minister of Culture Kumbaro (speech). This contract was embedded into the new museums and permanent installations memorializing the communist past, primarily in Tirana (space and place). In terms of space, I focus on three sites opened by the Socialist government in their first term in power (2013-2017) and promoted throughout their two subsequent governing mandates (2017-present): Bunk'Art1, Bunk'Art2, and the House of Leaves. I focus on the House of Leaves in particular as it encapsulates the totalitarian logic underpinning the new memory contract. I argue that these museums, although part of the same concept of an exotics and ubiquity of violence, served different functions for Socialist memory governance. Bunk'Art1 built a narrative about the bunker-country, a violent prison-country that produced direct and country-wide victims. The other two sites are directly concerned with the Sigurimi but differ in intent. While the House of Leaves focused on *episteme, mechanisms,* and *structure of violence*, and its systemic nature, Bunk'Art2 focused on *techne*, *mechanics* and *infrastructure of violence* and further built a case for the culpability of the violent apparatus of the regime, including the police force, the Sigurimi, and the violent infrastructure of prisons and internment camps. All these spaces unfolded

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[27] The Albanian state security agency during the communist dictatorship. In this chapter I will refer to State Security as *Sigurimi*, the most common reference in Albanian, and a widespread format of reference for similar units in Eastern Europe (KGB, Stasi, Securitate, etc.).

as "affirmative memorials" (Buckley-Zistel 2021), targeting the body, the senses, and the affective field (Sumartojo 2019; Smith 2020; 2022) and aiming for an embodied experience that directly conveys the ubiquity of violence to the visitor by individualizing it. This experience was superimposed on the visitor through particular sensory triggers, stirring emotions of terror and anxiety along with the message of ubiquity. Finally, the museum triad is almost silent on the Party and leaves the elite off the hook by obscuring issues of privilege and relative power, as systemic forces are fore fronted.

I analyse this spatial manifestation of the socialist memory governance that permeates Bunk'Art1, Bunk'Art2, and especially the House of Leaves, through a double iteration of visits at each of them, spread throughout my fieldwork in 2021, 2022, and 2023. I visited the sites first as a visitor, navigating their exhibition halls with an open mind and an open sensory field, emotionally available for the exhibitions to govern my sensory and emotional experience in the ways they are meant to affect every visitor. I walked, read, perceived, and processed these sites as a visitor would. I visited Bunk'Art2 and the House of Leaves a second time in 2023 as a researcher, recording my analytical experience of these places, looking at the principles that governed their materiality, design, and raison d'être, and paying attention to what is included, excluded, emphasized, or obscured and absent, as power works through these emphases and absences. In both museums and speech, I analyze form and content, appearances and emphases, as well as what is hidden and what is de-emphasized.

Discursive co-optation

I follow what Jensen (2012) defines as *discourse co-optation* in order to capture how the Socialist Government rebuilt a unitary Past by co-opting the totalitarian paradigm that had previously served to articulate the suffering of the formerly persecuted. For Jansen, discursive co-optation is a process that "describes how one discourse burrows into the heart of a counter-discourse, turns its logic upside down and puts it to work to re-establish hegemony and re-gain political support" (36-37). This discursive hijacking is a political jackpot as it serves to proportionally empower a political cause by disempowering an 'adversary' or subaltern that may be threatening. As Jansen puts it "one discourse is strengthened by the addition of a new, powerful argument; the other is weakened almost to the same degree" (37). The victims of the dictatorship in Albania relied on a discourse framework on totalitarianism for purposes of *emancipation*—making their particular

victimhood intelligible in the face of a hegemonic memory discourse that had amnestied the previous political elite in the name of the new democratic start. This strategy was meant to make justice claims intelligible to the underspecified memory consensus in the post-communist political contract that relied on a "we were all victims and all accomplices" discourse (Austin and Ellison 2008, 182; Godole 2023, 237). Instead, the Socialist Government co-opted the narrative of totalitarianism to denote communist Albania as a totalitarian *prison* for everyone, with systemic forces at play attributable to the totalitarian system and its mastermind: the violent apparatus (*Sigurimi)* and Dictator Hoxha. Justice claims, then, are unintelligible in this space as their base for articulation is made unattainable, unethical, and unimaginable.

While Subotić (2020) traces how anti-communists and far-right movements and parties instrumentalized the totalitarian framework in their nationalist (and fascist) turn, I explore the use of this framework by a Socialist Party in a quest to pre-empt political claims for justice, to prevent the emergence of political cleavages on memory, and to reconsolidate a reconciliatory memory contract on the Past. In line with Nalepa's (2010) observations about communist successor parties pre-empting harsher transitional justice measures by controlling the process through implementing lighter ones, the SP in Albania declassified the security files and built a narrative of victimhood and reconciliation that affected the very intelligibility of claims to justice. The memory contract, like a social or civic contract, is meant to reconsolidate a memory consensus that identifies the polity as a unitary whole. It is meant to turn multiple pasts, memory landscapes, and effective experiences into the Past (Macdonald 2013, 4) with capital P. Reconstituting a unitary Past in 2013 meant pre-empting these plural discursive, affective, and semantic claims to multiple, different, and diverging pasts into a consonant Past. It meant co-opting the discursive base of the direct victims of the dictatorship into the sea of Albania's "all victims and perpetrators" memory paradigm, victims who were the traditional 'subaltern' of this memory consensus and whose claims to justice were invoked by the previous Democratic Government when attempting a lustration law. Although the reinstated memory consensus acknowledged the formerly persecuted as the 'direct' victims of the dictatorship, it negated this acknowledgement in practice with is overarching claim that all Albanians were victims "in one way or another", to quote Minister of Culture Kumbaro (2016).

The opening of the *Sigurimi* files

The Rama Government, having freshly assumed power in 2013, rushed to settle its bill with the past early in its first mandate in office. As both a symbolic precondition for its Renaissance mandate and a strategic measure to assuage and temper the Democratic opposition's attempts to pass a mega law for the opening of the Sigurimi files and lustration,[28] the Socialist Government drafted a less ambitious law on opening the Sigurimi files (Law 45/2015) that was passed in Parliament in April 2015. As I argue in this section, the Socialist Government managed to build a discourse of lawfulness, openness, civility, and national reconciliation in and around this law, as opposed to lawlessness, political blackmail, punitive revenge, and divisiveness that it attributed to the DP's attempts at lustration. This political investment in a solid discursive foundation pre-empted further attempts at transitional justice. Hence, through this law, the Socialist Government successfully set the foundation of its memory contract, whose stabilizing semantics would be manifested and institutionalized in museums and government-mandated permanent installations.

The new democratic regime in the early 1990s implemented a de-facto amnesty of the political elite of the communist dictatorship (Austin and Ellison 2008; Austin 2015) and a subsequent 'forgive and forget' mindset, amounting to a new mnemonic polity founded on amnesty and amnesia. In the first decade of transition—a decade marked by violence and the infamous fall of the state/civil unrest in 1997—attempts at transitional justice were secretive, inconsequential, and with dubious results,[29] seeing the Sigurimi files instrumentalized and weaponized for electoral purposes and political blackmail (Austin 2015; Mëhilli 2019; Godole 2023). As Ash (2002, 269) argues for transitions that do not properly process past crimes, "[d]irty fragments of the past constantly resurface and are used, often dirtily, in current political disputes."

The law on the Sigurimi files was the culmination of these various inconsequential attempts at transitional justice measures in Albania, with the opening of the files being the least severe law

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[28] Draft law on "The opening of the files of Sigurimi i Shtetit and the process of lustration" (2015).
[29] The DP spearheaded two laws on legal proceedings and lustration (the so-called Genocide Law and Verification Law on Genocide and Crimes against Humanity Committed in Albania during the Communist Rule for Political, Ideological and Religious Motives (8001/1995) and Law on the Verification of the Moral Character of Officials and Other Persons Connected with the Defense of the Democratic State (8043/1995) in 1995, and in 1998 the SP created the Bezhani Verification Commission in an attempt to demonstrate commitment to the screening of government officials.

and the smallest common denominator between parties in 2015. The SP and the DP had more often than not exemplified the communist-successor (SP) and the anti-communist (DP) party stances on dealing with the past, although high elite recycling from the communist period into the post-communist era had haunted both parties and arguably prevented a comprehensive approach to either prosecution, lustration, or the opening of the Sigurimi files. After the 1997 state collapse—which occurred when the DP was in power and deemed responsible for the managing of the pyramid schemes and the subsequent fall of the state—the DP had been on an identity quest to regain power in the mid-2000s. This quest saw the DP try to capitalize on an anti-communist cleavage, which manifested primarily in its attempts at lustration, along with a discourse centered on de-Hoxhaisation and a threat to demolish the Piramida.

In March 2010, the SP successfully mobilized the Constitutional Court to prevent the DP government from implementing the first serious attempt at a comprehensive law on lustration. In 2008, relying on its parliamentary majority, the DP passed the Law on the Cleanliness of the Figure of High Functionaries of the Public Administration and Elected Persons, the so-called Lustration Law (Law 10034/2008). The Socialist opposition, leading a group that included the National Association of Prosecutors and the Albanian Helsinki Committee, sent the law to the Constitutional Court in 2009, claiming a breach of the "highest constitutional orders/spirit" (*urdhërimet e epërme kushtetuese*), of the independence of core state institutions (4.1), and of the legal guarantees from 'organic laws' (4.2) (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Albania, Decision 9/2010).[30] Overall, the group led by the SP was accusing the DP of starting a witch hunt through a lustration law. Given the sensitivity of this decision and its high political stakes, the Constitutional Court forwarded the law to the Venice Commission, which issued an amicus curiae opinion concluding that "the scope of application of the law raises serious issues in terms of compliance with the standards of the rule of law" (Venice Commission 2009, VI. 57, October 9-10, 2009). Once the Constitutional Court dismissed the law as unconstitutional, the SP had a free hand to spearhead the process of dealing with the past once in power.

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[30] Furthermore, the SP requests listed fundamental rights such as the right to work (4.4), the right to preserve privacy and human dignity (4.5), the right not to be convicted of the same crime twice (4.6), the right to be elected (4.7), the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty (5.6), etc.

While in opposition the Socialists had fought the last and most serious DP lustration attempt through the Constitutional Court, and once in power they could rely on their parliamentary majority to pro-actively and pre-emptively control the process.[31] By the time the SP took office in 2013 it was clear that dealing with the Sigurimi files was a matter they had to address sooner rather than later.[32] Moreover, the time for reactive measures aimed at tempering DP initiatives was past now that the Socialists were in power themselves—instead, they could go on the offensive. During the last year of the DP mandate, fractions of civil society had mobilized to push for a new draft law that required both the opening of the files and lustration.[33] This new lustration draft law was sponsored by two DP MPs, Dodaj and Idrizi, who fought for its passage in parliament. At the beginning of 2014 civil society presented the draft law in parliament. The Socialist majority led by the Minister of Social Welfare and future Mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj, presented a competing draft law that required only the opening of the files. The Socialist majority passed the government-sponsored law in April 2015.

The "winning" law had a strict and limited "right to information" spirit, cautiously stipulated the categories of the population that could request files,[34] and created the Authority for the Information on the Documents of the Former State Security (the Authority) as a custodian of the archives and a screening and vetting intermediary between the demands of the public and the granting of information. From the onset, the law emphasized the right to information, but through

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[31] On pre-emptive processes of transitional justice from predominantly communist-successor parties, see Nalepa (2010), as well as Kaminski and Nalepa (2008) on how to "suffer a scratch to avoid a blow".

[32] In September 2014, a year after the Socialists came to power, Pope Francis visited Albania in a ceremony that was widely compared to the visit of Pope John Paul II in the early days of regime change in 1993. The Catholic Church in Albania became a symbol of communist resistance because of the brutal ways in which priests were impressed, tortured, and killed. Muslim imams and Orthodox priests were also brutally persecuted. The visit of Pope John Paul II in 1993 was one of the most emotional moments of the early regime change in Albania. In preparation for Pope Francis' visit and in a symbolic move that indicated the start of a process to deal with the past, the main boulevard of Tirana was covered with the portraits of 40 member of the clergy that perished in communist prisons and internment camps. The Vatican would proclaim 38 of these clergy members Martyrs of the Catholic Church 2 years after Pope Francis' visit (Vatican News 2019). In my interview with Bishop Gjergj Meta in Tirana (June 8, 2023), he outlined the importance of this visit for recognizing the suffering of the clergy during the communist regime in Albania.

[33] This time around, civil society led the efforts. In addition, organizations such as the OSCE and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) were building programs to support the process in capacity-building, legal guidance, best practices, and research grants. The group working on this draft included former PM Aleksander Meksi, civil society representative Elsa Ballauri, and Elez Biberaj (see Shqiptarja.com 2012; *Sot* 2014).

[34] The main categories that could request access to files were victims, collaborators and third parties, public institutions, journalists, researchers and private persons (Law 45/2015, Articles 19-38). Nevertheless, the law also provided for limited access to files with personal information and gave the authority the right to assess these requirements on a case-by-case basis (Article 28).

a process that would protect "the personality of the individual, as well as national unity and reconciliation (*unitetit dhe pajtimit kombëtar*)" (Law 45/2015, Article 1). The law was initially minimalist in both scope and content, fearing that releasing sensitive and comprehensive information to both victims and the public would provoke inter-personal conflict, vengeful acts, and social unrest (Interview at the Authority for the Opening of the Files, Tirana, 28 December 2022). Not only was access to files strictly limited and sensitive information to be edited by the Authority before the release of a file, but the law was designed to prevent any legal follow-ups based on these files, in order to preserve societal peace. The prioritizing of *societal peace* came at the expense of *societal justice*, a trade-off the Socialist Government made intentionally. Societal peace prioritizes reconciliation (*pajtim*)[35] without accountability.

Governing memory: the principles of a memory contract

In this section I trace how PM Rama and Minister of Social Welfare Veliaj capitalized on this political momentum—the drafting and passing of the law for the opening of the Sigurimi files—to start crafting the general principles of their memory contract and spatialized mnemonic governance. Rama and Veliaj were both pro-active in first building a coherent narrative about the law, presenting it as the only lawful, constitutional, civilized, and reconciliatory option. The moment seemed opportune to situate this narrative in contrast to the DP, a party they framed as aiming at unconstitutional lustration, political revenge, and backward-looking justice. Rama took this opportunity to lay the foundations of a memory contract that would progressively manifest in law, speech, and space. The main principles can be summarized as follows: dealing with the past meant dealing with the Sigurimi files, framing the opening of the files within the imperative of forward-looking reconciliation rather than justice for the victims, and laying the foundations for co-opting the totalitarian narrative to limit and pre-empt the possibility for the DP to capitalize on this cleavage again.

In December 2014 at an evening talk show, a few months before the two draft laws would be voted on in Parliament, Veliaj pitted the draft laws against each other claiming that the government's was the only constitutional, lawful, reasonable, and human-rights-respecting law,

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[35] The Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture (IDMC) has been critical of the fore fronting of reconciliation without accountability for past crimes as an approach to the past (see for instance Godole 2021).

inspired by the German example (and thus drawing on the authority of a Western nation that experienced totalitarianisms). Asked about lustration, Veliaj claimed that "reasonable minds come together for what is lawful" (BalkanWeb 2014), relegating lustration to lawlessness and unreasonableness. A few days later, in a press release, Veliaj (2014) defended a legal option that "aims at transparency and not divisions, aims at illuminating the pains of the past, not the creation of new pains." Although Veliaj oscillated between explicit and implicit references to the old and new draft laws on lustration, he actively generalized his dichotomies to imply that lustration in principle is inherently a lawless, revengeful option, inferior to the government's proposed peace-seeking option. Not only did the government stigmatize whole categories of legitimate and institutionalized avenues of justice for past atrocities, but it also productively projected the unconstitutionality of the 2008 DP Lustration Law onto lustration as a legitimate category of justice. Any attempt at lustration was now stigmatized as unconstitutional because the DP's particular law had been deemed so by the Constitutional Court of Albania. According to this politically productive framework, Albanian society could only legitimately know/discover the past, while trials and lustration were relegated to the space of revenge, lawlessness, and incivility— in short, a morally inferior conflictual approach.

A month prior to the draft laws going to parliament for a vote, in his speech at the meeting *Opening the files of the former State Security – the German experience in handling STASI files*, PM Rama (2015) consolidated this dichotomous narrative. In a 'before and after' style, he contrasted his government's approach with that of the DP. Where the DP had insisted on an unconstitutional draft law, on a project that triggered "the very strong reaction of the whole international community as an unacceptable project and incompatible with international standards and above all, with human rights," his government had consulted the German experience throughout—an experience that dealt, according to Rama, with two totalitarianisms, and that legitimized his political choice of how to deal with the Albanian past. Three times in his speech Rama returned to the DP's use of Sigurimi files for political pressure, associating the period before Rama's 2013 ascent to power with secrecy, blackmail, manipulation, and political pressure. In contrast, according to Rama the Socialist Government started a meticulous process and chose the right path with wisdom and foresight, one that aimed to shed light on a "dark past", to provide a solution that was "right and sustainable", and would end the era of political instrumentalization of the files once and for all. Equating politics with elections, Rama claimed that this law was not

political because it was not meant for electoral purposes, using as proof his government's early start of the process as soon as they took power in 2013.

In the same speech Rama (2015) began by claiming that for many, the opening of the files might seem like an unnecessary luxury (*luks i panevojshëm*), a useless rumination (*përsiatje e padobishme*), or a waste of effort (*shtesë e tepërt*) considering the complex economic situation and corruption that his government had inherited from previous administrations (i.e. more pressing issues). Instead, his government saw dealing with the past "as an inalienable part of its approach towards the future," toward the aspiration of living in a free and democratic society, for the young who, like his son, had not lived during communism and were unable to tell speculation from the truth. The Prime Minister chose to emphasize the suffering, healing, and reconciliation of *society as a whole* (instead of a victim-based approach) and claimed that the country owed the opening of the files to its *future* (rather than dwelling on the past to grieve, provide closure, etc.). Justice was not a frame that Rama deployed in his speech; he chose to focus on a reconciliatory forward-looking, learning-from-history, healing-for-all narrative.

Furthermore, Rama equated the opening of the files with a comprehensive and conclusive approach towards Albania's communist dictatorship. Opening the files was not only a necessary step to moving on from the past, but a sufficient one. Knowing alone would provide healing, reckoning, and reconciliation—and so it should, given the German experience, and the lawful limits on what was possible. As Albania tapped into the "tremendous healing potential" of knowing alone, one was left with no doubts that he regarded the opening of the Sigurimi files as the historical reckoning, the coming-to-terms with the dictatorship that society had been waiting for. This localization of the past-to-be-dealt-with within the Sigurimi files not only made the Rama government's approach appear to be comprehensive, but also pre-emptively concluded the process of transitional justice in Albania.

Finally, this successful situating of both *scope* (society-wide, forward-looking) and *locus* (Sigurimi files) of the past-to-be-dealt-with depended on a third principle of Rama's memory governance: the totalitarian paradigm. One of Rama's (2015) arguments in favor of borrowing the German model was that Germany knew how to deal with totalitarianism, having experienced both Nazism and Communism. Albania was thus borrowing from a fellow ex-totalitarian, more

experienced, and more competent—Rama cared to emphasize—country. It was the totalitarian nature of the Albanian communist regime, then, that warranted embracing the German model, the path that the Rama Government chose in both scope and locus.

The Rama Government proclaimed that its professional, survey-following, reasonable, international-standard-respecting, Germany-inspired, objective approach to dealing with the communist past would be further deployed in the new memory spaces developed to set the memory contract in stone and into people's affective fields. The government deployed knowledge/power tropes (professionalism, neutrality, lawfulness) that intentionally obfuscated the political nature of the government's memory governance. This knowledge/power trope would be deployed further by engaging teams of European curators and architectural firms, primarily from Italy, to conceptualize and curate the museums and permanent installation spaces, to further capitalize on the authority of Western curatorial and artistic tastes in Albania. While the memory contract was a political act, Western curatorial practices and aesthetic choices were presented as the technical expertise that underpinned the objectivity and reasonableness of the memory contract itself.

Totalitarianism for victims' emancipation

The framework and language of 'totalitarianism' has not been equally used by all in Albania. Throughout transition it primarily characterized the discourse of the formerly persecuted, of institutions and research centres concerned with the study of violence and crimes during the communist dictatorship, and civil society organizations concerned with memory, memorialization, and the promotion of transitional justice measures that forefront the victims of the regime.[36] The framework of totalitarianism was used along with language such as 'Stalinism', 'Enverism', terror, and genocide, while the country was often colloquially referred to as the "North Korea of Europe" (Glos and Godole 2017). Meant to convey shock, terror, the severity of the dictatorship, and unspeakable crimes, this framework was generally used to make the suffering of the victims and

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[36] This framework was deployed by the Institute for the Study of Communist Crimes and Consequences in Albania and was present throughout Memory Days, a yearly activity organized by the Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture (IDMC) since 2016. In my interview with Luljeta Progni and Erald Kapri (Tirana, June 23, 2023) from Kujto.al, this was also a representative theme and discourse that came up in their coverage of communist crimes and storytelling.

formerly persecuted intelligible in the face of dismissal, communist nostalgia, and high recycling of the communist elite into post-communist positions of privilege, power, and authority.

In some cases, especially in regard to infamous prisons and internment camps, victims and organizations also used comparisons with the Holocaust to describe their experiences and invoke an established public imaginary of suffering, in line with what Subotić (2020) describes. For instance, former victims like Sherif Merdani (Gazeta Telegraf 2014) or Fatos Lubonja (RTV Klan 2014b) often used comparisons with Auschwitz to describe prison conditions and violence. More recently, in 2018 the Tepelena internment camp was called "the Albanian Auschwitz", which provoked a debate on whether the severity of its conditions warranted the comparison (Lumezi 2018; News24 2018).

These original proponents of the totalitarian framework have been fierce advocates of justice for the victims of the regime and committed actors in pushing against the underspecification of guilt and responsibility. They generally invoked the totalitarian language to describe the inhumanity of the dictatorship while consistently advocating for more severe transitional justice measures, from lustration to trials. For instance, during one evening on Memory Days 2022, the Institute for Democracy, Media & Culture (IDMC) presented the exhibition "Faces of the Dictatorship" at the former Villa of Dictator Hoxha, an event I attended during my fieldwork. They covered a full wall on the left side of the main ground floor room with faces of former members of the Politburo, heads of *Sigurimi i Shtetit*, judges, prosecutors, investigators/torturers, prison and internment camp commanders (*Figure 2*). Those responsible for the dictatorship's violence had faces and names, according to IDMC's director, Jonila Godole.

Museums and the ubiquity of violence: co-opting the totalitarian narrative

The principles of the memory contract and its governance were *legally enshrined* in the Law on the Opening of the Sigurimi Files (Law 45/2015), *discursively cultivated* in speech by PM Rama and Minister of Social Welfare Veliaj, fully *materialized* in the chambers and exhibition halls of the new museum and memory sites opened by the Socialist Government during its first mandate (2013-2017), and promoted throughout the SP's three mandates in power. I analyse the spatial manifestation of this memory governance that permeated Bunk'Art1, Bunk'Art2, and especially the House of Leaves, through site visits that took place between 2021 and 2023.

These newly opened sites are meant to shock and fully immerse the visitor into experiencing the paranoia of the communist dictatorship in Albania. Making use of installation and curatorial practices (Isto 2017; Gashi 2022), superimposing aesthetics and invoking all senses, the visitor's museum experience is one of both observation and participation. Faced with powerful images, sometimes marked with signs from the era, as well as emotional audio ranging from partisan songs, to record of testimonies, to the distinct pathos of the Albanian Radio Television presenter's voice from the communist period to gunfire, to barking dogs, to the distinct smell of underground bunkers, the visitor's senses are overwhelmed and resemble immersive experiences. The violent apparatus of the dictatorship comes alive through this immersive experience leaving the visitor with a sense of the ubiquity of violence, surveillance, and terror.

I argue that these newly opened museums provide fundamental insight into Rama's government memory contract. These immersive sites[37] plunge visitors into an experience of the Albanian dictatorship that conveys the ubiquity of violence, situates perpetrators within a systemic account of Sigurimi and Hoxha-led paranoid leadership, and builds an Orwellian 1984-like world "aimed at the total control over the human bodies and souls," as the House of Leaves' entry wall proclaims.[38] Not only were these sites officially dedicated to "the victims of communist terror" and to the full disclosure of a technology of violence, surveillance, and paranoia, but they have fully co-opted that experience. They transform it into an immersive giant art installation for domestic and touristic consumption,[39] and attempt to instil in the visitor a moral certainty that the violent apparatus of the regime and its dictator bear all of the blame and responsibility. They absolve the communist and socialist elite and other privileged supporters of the regime from guilt by focusing on the overall victimhood of the totalitarian regime, the ubiquity of violence, and the lack of agency within the living prison of a paranoid regime. Along with reinforcing this common memory

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[37] Bunk'Art1 & 2 both offered a VR-experience in addition to the real-life immersive experience. The poster at the bunker promised games and history. The Minister of Economy, Milva Ikonomi, spoke of "augmented reality" at the opening ceremony of Bun'Art2 (Report TV 2016).

[38] These words are inscribed in the museum's entrance and were on the online description of the museum too (House of Leaves 2017b).

[39] On the sites' touristic consumption see Isto (2017), as well as the conversation between Elsa Demo and Vincent Van Garven Oei on the superficiality of curatorial practices (ABC News 2017). On the politics of installation see Gashi (2022). On the banality of a certain exotics of the regime, see the five-article series published by Eda Derhemi (2017) in the online magazine *Peizazhe të fjalës*.

mission, I argue that the three sites serve different, complementary roles for the government's memory regime.

Bunk'Art1 led the way into the 'opening' mandate of the Socialist government in late 2014. A former massive anti-nuclear bunker in Dajti mountain with 106 rooms and a conference room, designed to host the higher regime elite—the nomenclature—in case of an attack, Bunk'Art1 captured the imagination of the local and international press (Eilers 2016; Barger and Bellingreri 2021; Taylor 2022). A perfect metaphor of a bunker-country, of the actual bunkerization of Albania, this installation site primarily focused on the army, the weaponry of a paranoid dictatorship (including chemical weapons), the barbed-wire border of Albania and its surveillance (resembling a huge living prison), and the Cold War. One can hear dogs, gunshots, and sirens when approaching a room with barbed wire representing the border. The exhibition also discussed WWII, the installation of the communist regime, the public trials of the democratic opposition, the onset of paranoia, borders, bunkers, prisons, industrialization, and footage of Tirana mourning the death of the dictator in 1985. One could also visit the rooms built for Hoxha's family and Mehmet Shehu's family in case of an attack, "speak" to Enver Hoxha on the phone, and press a big red button to simulate a chemical attack with mustard gas in another room.

The National Museum of Surveillance, known as the House of Leaves, showcased the ubiquity of surveillance, attributed violence to a mechanics and techne of power, and designated all Albanians as victimized people in addition to the direct victims of state violence. At the entrance, the House of Leaves was "dedicated to those innocent people who were spied on, arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and executed during the communist regime." Once inside, the epilogue promised to showcase activities carried out within the walls of the museum and reveal a "picture(s) of the Albanian society under a regime that aimed at the total control over the human bodies and souls." The particular and the universal cohabited in this museum, conflating those directly harmed and killed with a society living under the threat, unpredictability, and the ubiquity of violence.

One would then walk through the history of the building, a maternity ward before communism, to move on to the victims of the dictatorship, the show trials, the forms of torture, the organizational chart of the *Sigurimi i Shtetit* splayed out around a bug-like figure, a room of

surveillance bugs and other surveillance technology displayed to the sound of the secret surveillance of a former victim, and a wall mapping the larger societal infiltration of the Sigurimi with anonymous agents, informants, hosts, and collaborators. These anonymous identities were meant to convey ubiquity, the omnipresence of the eyes and ears of the Sigurimi, and the penetration of state surveillance within the individual's private life and most intimate human relations. The exhibition also introduced the foreign enemy and the enemy within, the propaganda machine, the laboratory where domestic and foreign mail was inspected, opened, and confiscated, as well as testimonies of surveillance and persecution. One sector of the museum (Sector 8) was called "Panopticon – Panacusticon" and claimed that communism "brought society under total control, similar to Bentham's prison." It is no coincidence that the House of Leaves was the Scientific and Technical Branch of Sigurimi i Shtetit, the epitome of the rationalization of state control through scientific methods, the logical conclusion of modernity.

Bunk'Art2, the former nuclear bunker of the Interior Ministry in Tirana city center, consolidated the other two narratives of the bunker-country led by the paranoid dictator, and of an ubiquitous violent apparatus that produced a plethora of victims through the total control of bodies and souls. While the House of Leaves focused on *episteme, mechanisms,* and the *structure of violence*, Bunk'Art2 focused on *techne*, *mechanics* and the *infrastructure of violence*, further built a case for the culpability of the violent apparatus of the regime, including the police force, the *Sigurimi*, and prisons and internment camps. With its entrance shaped like a hemisphere bunker— a piece added to the installation and not part of the original bunker—and its internal walls covered with headshots of victims, Bunk'Art2 started with a dedication "[i]n memoriam to the victims of the communist terror." Some rooms were marked "+16" due to explicit execution pictures and mannequins and three-dimensional objects depicting prison conditions, clothes, and figures. Situated close to the Interior Ministry, Bunk'Art2 was more explicit about the history of the police force, the founding of the *Sigurimi i Shtetit* and the building of a network of prisons and internment camps throughout Albania. It listed names and pictures of prison and camp commanders, of the heads of the *Sigurimi i Shtetit*, and the interior ministers. One could also look for hidden bugs in one of the rooms and visit an interrogation room in another, in which a torturing light and sound goes on and off. The experience left visitors feeling shock and terror on the one hand and an implied moral certainty about where to situate blame on the other: the violent apparatus of the regime.

In his opening speech at Bunk'Art, PM Rama (2014b) pointed to the "absolute banality of a regime of evil," invoking Arendt's (2006 [1963]) 'banality of evil'. "This is an open tomb of a bygone era, to remind us that we have not made it to bury in peace the temptation to hijack the future though the past. This is why we will open all these 'graves' of memory," continued Rama. One paragraph in particular stands out from his speech:

> "Certainly, the opening of buildings and the opening to this story, *setting peaceful relations between Albanians today* and pictures of the past and leaving people free to browse history, to be able to touch the famous state secrets, to look closely at the kind *of hell a whole people was put* [through] by an ideology that promised paradise. […] For like no other people in Europe, we have been prevented for so many years from having a normal relationship with the past. We have been prevented for so many years by an old jacket turned inside out, which has been sold to people for years as if it were a new jacket. But this is incomplete without opening all of the archives of communism, without bringing into the sunlight all the misdeeds hidden in these recesses, in the form of evidence, in the form of voices, in the form of cooperation "to fight personal comfort," *not to blame people*. Nor to pit people *against each other*, but to *liberate Albania and Albanians* from the *deceitful weight of politicization of collective memory*; the treacherous weight with which those who knew Communism were loaded and overloaded and who, unfortunately, continued to remain divided, not secretly anymore but openly, to bring forward a *damned project* for Albania, the project of division into "us and them" and "ours and theirs" […]" (Rama 2014b) (emphasis added).

Highlighted in this paragraph was the aim of "setting peaceful relations between Albanians today," as we stand united in recognizing "the kind of hell a whole people was put [through]." The aim is to shed light on the past and to "liberate Albania and Albanians from the *deceitful weight of politicization of collective memory*" and "not to blame people," or set "people against each other". This was a project to unite the mnemonic community through its shared experience of violence and shared experience of divisive memory wars potentially hijacking their futures. It was not the past that divided Albanians, according to Rama, but rather its instrumentalization and divisive intent by political forces trying to politicize memory. The memory of the past should instead be

unifying by its very nature of having been deployed on a whole people indiscriminately, systemically, in its totality, the narrative goes.

This reconciliatory memory that PM Rama pointed to was further packaged as conveying the *authentic* Past and as being in line with "European standards". At the opening ceremony of the Museum of Surveillance, *The House of Leaves*, the leading Italian architect Elisabetta Terragni from the Italian *Studio Terragni Architetti* that led the museum's curatorial project, spoke of how her team spent two years studying the objects and surveillance machines, and preserved the original wooden structures and cracks in the walls in order to curate an authentic experience. "We used all data, statistics, texts, graphics, every material" (House of Leaves 2017a), she said, pointing to the plethora of data that led the curatorial choices. "The museum was designed according to European standards by a group of experts including foreign experts and international consultants from institutes and museums with similar themes," (House of Leaves 2017a) read the concluding remark on the page describing the opening ceremony of the museum. 'European standards' were an interesting choice of words in this setting, invoking expertise, authority, and standards to legitimize the memory narrative inscribed in the museum. It served the purpose of endorsing the museum and the narrative it conveyed as meeting a European standard of memory.

Ordering the space of guilt and responsibility

In concert, the deployment of this memory regime of the bunker-prison-country, of 'total control over bodies and souls', of panopticons and panacousticons, and of the ubiquity of surveillance that produces victims of different kinds, strategically redistributed responsibility and victimhood. I have demonstrated that the Socialist government strategically redistributed responsibility by co-opting the totalitarian paradigm, by building a narrative of the ubiquity of violence, and by situating responsibility with the violent apparatus of the regime. The formula was as follows: 1) all society under totalitarian control was a victim; 2) a smaller portion of this society was subjected to the direct violence of the regime through the Sigurimi, army, police, prison and internment camp guards while the rest of society lived with the ubiquity and permanent paranoia of the threat of violence; and 3) only the Sigurimi, its systemic and systematic logic of control and violence, and Hoxha himself (the mastermind) are perpetrators. This logic was best exemplified in a newspaper article that Minister of Culture Mirela Kumbaro published a few months before the opening of the House of Leaves. She claimed that:

"It is the duty of the entire Albanian society to contribute to showcasing the truths, to show the suffering and the martyrs, *the victims* and the *mechanisms* that produced victims. One of them was the psychosis of terror, of surveillance, of pressure, of persecution that tortured thousands of Albanians in the hell of the dictatorship, *but which ultimately also imprisoned an entire people*. None of us escaped repression *in one way or another* because *the whole of Albania was a prison* for years. We are the generation that lived through it. We are the generation that must show it. We are the generation that must explain to the young people who didn't experience it, before it is too late." (Kumbaro 2016) (emphasis added).

Not only was a whole People imprisoned in the big Albanian prison, 'in one way or another', but Minister Kumbaro effectively used the collective *we* to point to the co-suffering of her generation of privileged Socialist and post-Socialist elite. While Kumbaro's generation of younger Socialists also experienced the late dictatorship, the most prominent younger Socialists are sons and daughters of the Communist elite, some of the most privileged youth of the 1980s, with access to educational resources and ability to travel abroad that was either not available or prohibited to the rest of Albanians. In fact, as Filtzer (2014) argues, income gaps or ownership of the means of production were not the defining class differences in communist societies, but rather a set of distinct privileges that came with social status including a parallel service sector tailored to the elite (health, housing, education, transportation, access to the West and its cultural space, superior elite jobs, a network of patronage, etc.). According to Filtzer, the communist-era elite preserved its class privilege by reserving much of the higher education and the art and culture spheres for their families as well as through elaborate systems of patronage typical of these societies. Education, in particular, became a class signifier, and in late communism social mobility was substantially reduced, with the elite reproducing itself at a higher rate. As Filtzer concluded, "privileged access to higher education became a substitute for inherited wealth" (Filtzer 2014, 516).

Asserting the legitimacy of the Socialist Party, the communist successor party, to share in the victimhood of the Albanian people was an interesting political maneuver. Bundling their experience together with that of the people in general required building an infrastructure of memory to meticulously convey the narrative and inculcate it through a complex sensory field. "In one way or another"—the term minister Kumbaro used to denote the violence experienced by

everyone—was a powerful mnemonic maneuver to discursively conflate the differences between the 'one way' and the 'other way' that Albanians suffered under the dictatorship. On the two extremes, 'one way' was prison and internment and the vast destruction of generations of human life under absurd conditions. The 'other way' was people leading relatively privileged lives that resembled a near-segregated aristocracy living in a gated and state-protected community (the Blloku area, or Tirana for that matter), with access to cultural capital and resources that disproportionally defined their wellbeing and status, and their very ability to lead the country decades after the fall of the regime, and to then define its collective memory. The 'one way' and the 'other way' merged in the Socialist memory contract, obscuring the difference through political means.

The totalitarian framework in particular could be effectively misused for purposes of strategic absolution and selective concession of culpability. I focus on two further points to make the case that the choices to ordering the space of remembrance in this way were neither intuitive nor 'natural', but rather political. I briefly outline why the framework of totalitarianism can be misused for purposes of absolution. I then move on to make two observations about the absence of the Party and the elite in the three memory spaces.

Totalitarianism is often associated with a lack of agency and an inability to make free moral choices within a system that dictates thought and restructures personhood and subjectivity. In fact, this is a complicated matter especially when it comes to questions of responsibility, complicity, and judgment (Mihai 2022). One may well argue that Albania was a Stalinist regime, at least for a good part of the dictatorship (Bejko 2021), that penetrated the subjecthood of individuals to the core of human expression, reasoning, and affection (Vehbiu 2007; 2019). At the same time, the regime elicited a spectrum of responses and different ways of relating to the regime from its subjects (Idrizi 2018), with collaboration and complicity being only one position people could take. While the debate on the limits of moral agency under totalitarian regimes may be unsolved, it was a political choice for the Socialist Party to use the totalitarian framework to strategically distribute blame and absolution: to attribute blame to the system while absolving nearly all of its elite.

The Party of Labour of Albania, the predecessor to the Socialist Party, rarely made an appearance in the three sites I observed. Sometimes implied and predominantly absent, the visitor to these museums is not left with the impression that the Party shared in the culpability of the system, in the systemic use of violence, in the building and especially maintenance of the totalitarian regime. While violence was ubiquitous in these museums, politics was not. Apart from the early appearance of the Party as a historical fact (for instance, the founding of the Party, WWII, etc.), the Party as a unit is absent. In one case in the House of Leaves (room 16), the Sigurimi and the Party are brought together under the banner "Sigurimi: the pyramid of the dual Party-Administrative dependency", showing the corresponding four levels of Party-Sigurimi governance with Dictator Hoxha at the top of the chart. But while they seemed to be on par on the chart, the museums did not scrutinize the Party as it did the Sigurimi for its contribution to the panopticon, the total control of the body and souls, and the production of paranoia. The Sigurimi emerged as the corrupt soul of the regime, the indefensible villain. There could hardly be an account of culpability for the Albanian dictatorship that would absolve the Sigurimi from responsibility, but nevertheless it took political craftmanship and the exoticization of violence to center the Sigurimi within the narrative.

Along with the 'missing' political elite, apart from Hoxha, the memory regime embodied in these museums depicted a specific narrative regarding the cultural elite and art produced during communism. I analyse the three most prominent instances that dealt with the arts and culture in these museums to show that the narrative projected was that of a victim-elite that was instrumentalized, subjugated, surveilled, and persecuted. Bunk'Art1 depicts the 11th Festival of Song (*Festivali i Këngës*) of 1972, with a banner reading "Festival 11 … 47 years after". The 11th Festival was the harshest deployment of state violence on the regime's own cultural elite and marked the official turn of the regime towards a full cultural revolution. The soundscape of the first Festival of Interpreters (1983) appeared in Bunk'Art2 in the Interior Minister's office, as he watched it from the first color TV produced in Albania in 1982. The note on the TV read "Propaganda through songs", explaining how the regime and "Enver Hoxha's communist party" closely monitored artistic activities and used them as "populist forms to propagandize the joys of Albanian socialism behind which the regime hid its horrors" (Room 13). The tight control of the regime on the arts and culture and its use for propaganda is also depicted at the House of Leaves, where the banners of movies with party/war/partisan/ideology themes were depicted. Finally, the

House of Leaves dedicated a wall to the persecution and prosecution of the painter Edison Gjergo, along with the painting he was indicted for ("*Epika e Yjeve të Mëngjesit*")—painted in dark pessimistic colors, according to the indictment,[40] pessimism being a subversive sentiment to a regime that used art to showcase the joy of socialist life.

This story of a cultural elite hunted by the Sigurimi and instrumentalized and subjugated by the regime is incomplete, rather than inaccurate. The relationship of the cultural elite with the regime was instead more complicated and nuanced, involving both privilege and violence, both status and surveillance, both authority and subjugation—a socio-political contract of sorts that delivered status, privilege, and promotions in exchange for compliance and artistic alignment with ideological requirements. In fact, following Nicholas Tochka (2016) foundational work, a coercion-centric understanding of the relationship of the cultural elite to the Party and the socialist realist canon limits comprehension of how the ideo-aesthetic order in communist Albania was cultivated.

Finally, the Socialist view on the status of the cultural elite and its persecution by the Sigurimi and Hoxha came alive in the speech of the Minister of Culture Margariti at the inauguration of the opening of Hoxha's former villa to the Albanian and international artistic communities. Along with the ghost and exorcism metaphor, so prevalent in the Socialist government's urban revival of communist-era buildings (see Walker 2019; Higgins 2023), the public was introduced to a 'reparation' narrative of giving back to the artistic community for the violence and persecution it faced during the regime.

> "It is difficult to tell whether an object possessed by the ghosts of the past evoked more fear or curiosity. […] [We were] in the midst of the dilemma whether we should let it crumble along with its memory or preserve it as evidence of 50 years stolen from the lives of all Albanians. If the walls of this house could talk about what they heard about art from the liberation until the fall of the dictatorship, they would show how the owner of this villa [Hoxha] sometimes used it [art] as a propaganda tool, sometimes to manipulate the crowd and sometimes to close, suffocate, curse, and interrupt the creativity and life of artists,

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[40] Indictment Act: Edison Vangjel Gjergo 1975, 4 (exhibition box 8, House of Leaves).

poets, musicians. And in fact, it is quite a long list of those persecuted and convicted because of art" (RTSH 2023).

Conclusions

Promoting a unified reconciliatory memory contract and maintaining a generally underspecified memory field on guilt and responsibility expanded the space of permissibility for the symbolic reprocessing of the dictatorship as a way to process the past. As the faults of the dictatorship were attributed to Dictator Hoxha and the systemic forces of the totalitarian system, and these dimensions conceded in order to secure a reconciliatory approach towards the past, the Socialist Government delimited and reclaimed the rest of the symbolic space of the communist regime, also encoded in contested heritage, as either innocuous or malleable and productive for symbolic reprocessing for the future. While the reconciliatory nature of the memory contract neutralized the previous elites' contestatory impetuous around built heritage, the symbolic repertoires of contested heritage were relocated from the realm of the disputable into the realm of the processable.

As Tirana's underground bunkers were spaces of mnemonic pilgrimage into the traumas and the subconsciousness of the mnemonic community, the world above was dedicated to the future. While a politics of installation and a curated memory was narrated through the underground, the National Theater, just above Bunk'Art2, a living un-curated testimony to the Communist show trials, would not survive the modernization campaign of the Renaissance. The pictures of those trials appeared in the curated permanent installations as testimonies of violence, while the spaces where they happened were intentionally demolished, a revealing metaphor of the artificial order of a curated memory contract.

Appendix: Photographs

Figure 1: Enver Hoxha's villa, IDMC, Memory Days 2022, Faces of the Dictatorship Exposition (*Fytyrat e Diktaturës*). Author, 2022.

Figure 2: IDMC, Memory Days 2022, Faces of the Dictatorship Exposition (*Fytyrat e Diktaturës*). Author, 2022.

Figure 3: National Museum of Surveillance "House of Leaves". Author, 2022.

Figure 4: Bunk'Art1, entrance. Author 2022.

Figure 5: Bunk'Art1. Author, 2022.

Figure 6: Bunk'Art1. Author, 2022.

Figure 7: Bunk'Art2 entrance. Author, 2023.

CHAPTER 3 – Torture to their ears, music to ours: Memory regimes and the ordering of political space

In February 2014, one of the most renowned singers of the Albanian communist period, Vaçe Zela—People's Artist since 1977, and 10-time winner of the annual Festival of Song—died in Switzerland where she had immigrated.[41] The news was followed by days of mourning in Albania, which culminated in a funeral organized at the National Theater of Opera and Ballet. A nostalgic prime minister, the minister of culture, other politicians, and fellow artists from the communist period and from the post-communist contemporary art scene paid their respects at the funeral, while articles, op-eds, and posts in the media and social media honored her legacy. Referring to her by her first name, Vaçe, adults of all ages recalled her songs in discussions on television and social media. Some even expressed resentment that only the Albanian political and cultural elite could attend the ceremony, while ordinary citizens had to gather outside.[42] In her eulogy, Nexhmije Hoxha, the wife of Albania's late communist dictator, described the singer as the best Albanian star of all time, discovered and cultivated by the socialist state and supported by her late husband and herself (Bushati 2014; Hoxha 2014). The whole country seemed to mourn "the queen of song," "the legend of song," "our glorious singer," and "the absolute diva" (Nikolli 2014c), using superlatives to mark her passing.

But Fatos Lubonja, a former political prisoner of the Hoxha regime and now a public intellectual, columnist, and critic of the Hoxha dictatorship, provided a prominent dissenting voice. Lubonja (2014a) called the de facto state funeral and the public euphoria around Vaçe's legacy a collective "hysteria." He reminded the Albanian public that communist-era songs, especially Vaçe's, were played in prisons and labor camps as forms of torture. He further argued that honoring Vaçe's legacy in the Albania of 2014 was infantile, morally corrupt, hypocritical, and unrepresentative of people's real musical tastes under communism. Lubonja's views met a strong

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[41] Vaçe gave her last performance in the early 90s and thus hardly sang after the dictatorship fell. Her legacy was recognized anew in 2002 when the president of the republic granted her the title "Honour of the Nation." Seven years later, the Ministry of Culture proclaimed 2009 the "Vaçe Zela Year."

[42] See, for instance, how Gjikondi (2014) expresses this sentiment in "Vaçe Zela ish e popullit zoti kryeministër" [Vaçe Zela belonged to the people, Mister Prime Minister].

countercritique from artists and the general public in social media and the press. Commentators positioned themselves as either "with Lubonja" or, more commonly, "against Lubonja," with some of his most bitter critics, mainly artists, demonizing him for "desecrating" the iconic figure of Vaçe. Aurela Gaçe, a prominent post-communist singer, went so far as to associate Lubonja with a devil's emissary (Gaçe 2014). Agim Doçi, a lyricist of both periods, called Lubonja an anti-Albanian and a nihilist, committed to demystifying all national symbols (Nikolli 2014a). Other more sober critiques sympathized with Lubonja and recognized the validity of his story, but relegated Lubonja's account to the margins of the country's collective memory, dismissing his narrative as *particular* and ascribing to the wider cheering public the *universal*, representative, and natural approach toward the artistic heritage of the communist period.

This memory episode is a microcosm of commemorative battles over cultural and artistic heritage. How do societies navigate the symbolic and artistic heritage of troubled pasts? How do they determine what is collectively commemorated or disavowed? How is the space of particularity, plurality, and representation negotiated when heritage is contested? I suggest that such battles happen within memory fields and memory regimes that order the space of remembrance. I build on Bernhard and Kubik's (2014) theorization of official memory regimes in the post-communist space, and conceptually borrow from Chantal Mouffe (2005; 2013) and Lisa Wedeen (2019) to demonstrate how memory regimes actively govern the public mnemonic space beyond the official level. Mnemonic regimes are hegemonic frames that order memory by providing a semantic and sentimental template for the valuation, devaluation, dismissal, and even intelligibility of people's experiences of the past, as well as for feelings of sympathy, empathy, skepticism, solidarity, and indifference toward these experiences. I trace collective memory narrative governance within what Bernhard and Kubik (2014, 17-18) call a *unified memory regime*, in which official actors prefer not to shake up the status quo or to fight battles in and around memory. Unified memory regimes emerge as proactive frames of official political meaning-making posited on unity and consensus as their governing principle, demanding the subversion of competing narratives and sentiments that risk reordering the space of remembrance.

While Bernhard and Kubik are concerned with official memory regime emergence, I explore regime sustenance instead. I argue that unified memory regimes order, discipline, and govern not only the official but also the everyday spaces of judgment and affection. Posited on

unity and consensus at the official level, these hegemonic frames of meaning-making relegate mnemonic tension from the official level to the societal level where discursive battles continue to take place. I further argue that unified memory regimes present particular challenges for societal pluralists during moments of contestation. Because pluralists have a structural commitment to acknowledge and agonistically deliberate on multiple interpretations of the past, they may attempt to facilitate discussion by affirming and trying to reconcile both the emerging societal-level mnemonic fracture and the official unified memory regime. But this consensus-seeking strategy can backfire, inadvertently reinforcing the unified memory regime and disciplining the societal-level challenger through three common discursive practices that I call the *traps of consensus*: semantic alignment, a syntax of disavowal, and the juxtaposition of "universal" and "particular" narratives about the past. Pluralists may be especially prone to fall into these traps when they face unified memory regimes in which the consensus narrative itself appears superficially pluralist (or "underspecified") because such consensus eschews normative judgments that distinguish between perpetrators and victims.

I demonstrate the inner workings of a unified memory regime in the case of the contestation over Vaçe's legacy in post-communist Albania, tracing an attempted fracture at the societal level, an antagonistic societal-level response, and societal pluralists manifesting deliberative discursive behavior that ultimately served to sustain the unified regime. I use two main sets of data throughout the analysis. I conducted fieldwork in Albania in 2021–22 and in 2023, approaching the field with an ethnographic sensibility (Pader 2014; Simmons and Smith 2017). For my analysis of the memory field and its thematic relationship with communist-era art and artists, I draw on a subset of 14 semi-structured interviews conducted with communist and post-communist cultural elites and administrators, two interviews with Albanian members of parliament, and extensive archival research. I approached my interviews through an ordinary language lens (Schaffer 2014) and reflexive thematic analysis meant to explore narrative themes and within-data hierarchies (Byrne 2022). I used archival research for corroboration and to better understand the political and institutional dynamics during communism and the first years of post-communist transition. For the analysis of the contestation over Vaçe's place in the unified memory regime, my primary data includes newspaper articles, op-eds, blog posts, critiques, and countercritiques published by and about Lubonja and his reaction to the honoring of Vaçe Zela's legacy. I approach these statements through the lens of discursive practices (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983 on the Foucauldian

tradition), and I also explore tensions manifested within language structures (Vehbiu 2007; Wedeen 2019; Yurchak 2005).

Memory regimes and the ordering of the past

Originally developed to study post-communist remembrance of the 1989/1991 fall of communist regimes, Bernhard and Kubik's concepts of *memory fields* and *memory regimes* have become pivotal in understanding organized official accounts about the past. Bernhard and Kubik (2014, 16) define a *memory regime* as "(1) an organized way of remembering a specific issue, event, or process (2) at a given moment or period," and it becomes an *official* memory regime "when a government and/or the major political parties are involved in this process." A memory field is the compound of all memory regimes governing the space of remembrance.

The form that a memory regime takes (unified, pillarized, or fractured) is the result of the constellation, interaction, and positionality of mnemonic actors, who are "political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past" (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 4). Mnemonic warriors draw sharp distinctions between their own "true" vision of the past and others' "false" ones, leading to fractured memory regimes when they are politically empowered. Their absence as salient political actors leaves regimes either pillarized or unified. Empowered mnemonic pluralists favor pillarized memory regimes, which embrace an official tolerance and deliberation on different interpretations of the past. Mnemonic pluralists "believe that others *are entitled* to their own visions. If they disagree with those visions, they are ready to engage in a dialogue whose principal aim is the orderly pursuit of 'the truth,' discovery of the areas of overlap among the competing visions, and articulation of common *mnemonic fundamentals* that allow discussion among competing versions" (13, emphasis in original). Finally, official unified memory regimes "are predicated on agreement over the interpretation of the past" on a specific issue, meaning that all official "actors are de facto abnegators" who avoid meaningful political engagement with memory contestation (17).

The concept of memory regimes precedes Bernhard and Kubik (see Langenbacher 2003; Radstone and Hodgkin 2003) and has been further developed in parallel to (see Hannoum 2019) and in conversation with (Dujisin 2024; Nienass 2020) their account, but their contribution was novel in building a theory of mnemonic actors and memory regimes that contends with variation

in both actors and prevailing mnemonic structures. Their operationalization of the effects of political actors' positions and interactions with the structure of official mnemonic regimes has been employed in comparative work (see Björkdahl et al. 2017; Pettai 2016; Trajanovski 2020) as well as extended to the unofficial level (Tomczuk 2016).

Bernhard and Kubik's influential account describes how these official memory regimes emerge, but not how they sustain and actively govern memory. More recent theoretical frameworks on agency and collective memory have revisited this "sticky 'problem of structure and agency'" (Wüstenberg 2020, 11), with Wüstenberg and Sierp (2020) advocating for an epistemology embedded in relational sociology that "highlights agency and practice—and that can also account for the maintenance and transformation of structure" (Wüstenberg 2020, 15). Zoltan Dujisin (2020) draws on Bourdieusian field theory to contend with the original structure–agency problem and makes a useful distinction between mnemonic processes of contestation and those of mnemonic identity/regimes. He suggests that "memory moves from struggle, contestation, and instability to a hard identity that projects sameness, permanence, and homogeneity" (2020, 25). Introducing this *process-to-identity* movement clarifies my current inquiry about the reverse *identity-on-process* conditioning that a memory regime (i.e., identity) has on memory struggles and contestation. While a *process-to-identity* inquiry may have to contend with issues of selection and negotiation, my *identity-on-process* inquiry into the way regime structures condition the space for contestation must contend with representation and the space for dissent.

I draw on Mouffe's (2005; 2013) conceptualization of the ineradicable antagonistic essence of "the political" to distinguish between Bernhard and Kubik's unified and pillarized memory regimes as mnemonic orders different *in kind* rather than *in degree*. While unified memory regimes are posited on consensus and are at risk of exacerbating *antagonism*, pillarized ones are posited on pluralism and are more conducive to *agonism*, differences that become particularly prominent in the face of mnemonic contestation at the societal level. Antagonistic spaces cultivate "enemies" (on a friend/enemy logic) while agonistic spaces yield political adversaries with mutually acknowledged, legitimate claims to political representation.

Mouffe (2005, 9) envisions "the political" as a space of "power, conflict and antagonism […][43] constitutive of human societies," and "charges" our modern democratic orders not with "eliminating" this antagonism through positing an artificial consensus that denies the essence of the political, but with recognizing antagonism and dissent and sublimating it (21) by building agonistic spaces that embrace plurality. Following this conceptualization, I argue that pillarized memory regimes, as presented by Bernhard and Kubik, recognize and sublimate antagonism at the official level, while unified regimes simply relegate tension to the societal level by proclaiming a consensus that stigmatizes antagonism instead of legitimizing it. Consensus-driven memory regimes by definition leave no space for the political representation of dissent, and in doing so they may stigmatize dissent, turn dissenters into enemies, and ultimately risk antagonism and more violent mnemonic fractures. Marginalized narratives about the past, I propose, are thus a systemic side effect of official unified memory regimes. Either because of a prevailing consensus about the past, the perceived risks of politicizing the past, or the political costs of starting mnemonic battles (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 17–18), political actors in unified memory regimes prefer consensus and unity to representation of the polity on mnemonic issues. Pillarized regimes, on the other hand, tolerate different interpretations of the past, even where they may not be fully represented at the official level.

This priming on either consensus or plurality is what makes unified and pillarized memory regimes different in kind. While societal dissent and competing accounts about the past do not existentially challenge pillarized memory regimes, they may lead to regime-threatening fractures in unified ones. In other words, unified regimes are threatened by marginalized accounts of the past, while pillarized regimes are threatened by mnemonic warriors with hegemonic accounts of the past trying to shatter *the order of memory which is plural*. To a unified regime, a marginalized account of the past is dangerous and unintelligible; to a pillarized one it is an account not represented, potentially unsettling but not defying of the regime's essence or nature.

Unified memory regimes and mnemonic tension

While pillarized regimes structurally incorporate disagreement and difference, unified memory regimes conceal such tensions and relegate them to a nonofficial societal level where antagonism

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[43] Bracketed ellipses indicate abridgements to the quoted material. Unbracketed ellipses indicate sentences deliberately left incomplete.

is pitted against consensus. Unified memory regimes, I argue, structure the rational and affective order of *political* spaces in ways that both order and discipline *societal* actors and their mnemonic grievances through an imperative of consensus and unity, setting the discursive and performative standards for public engagement on issues of memory. This order of sentiment goes beyond the invocation of certain affective dispositions (Bieberstein 2016) into conditioning the space of sympathy, solidarity, or aversion. Unified memory regimes are not simply mnemonic "agreements" posited on unity at the official level and among political actors, but they are also sustaining structures of meaning-making that govern the space of remembrance by shaping public judgment and sentiment toward the past as consensual, and by conditioning how agents at the societal level engage in mnemonic battles. This mnemonic governance relies on discursive and performative practicing of semantic concord by politicians and other actors in the public sphere. In unified regimes, "peace" at the official level does not foreclose mnemonic battles at the societal level where warriors, pluralists, and abnegators position themselves toward both the unified memory regime and one another. Mnemonic actors at the societal level are actors that take positions on a mnemonic battle—their agency manifesting as they engage in these episodes of memory contestation.

Drawing on Wedeen (2019), I trace the performative and discursive manifestation of unified regimes as *structurers of affective and moral judgment* that conceal tension. The assuaging of semantic tension is a political investment that cannot be explained only by reference to coercion or dissimulation (Yurchak 2005).[44] In Wedeen's account of *ideology as form*, citizens have instead a single self with ambivalent feelings and thoughts, one that copes with reality and tries to make sense of its tensions within an ideologically defined semantic field of meaning-making. The function of ideology "as structuring reality is itself generative of further tensions, incoherencies, contradictions, and instances of uneven saturation—all the complexities and intensities that presuppose the political smoothing work needed for reproduction to continue" (Wedeen 2019, 7). Wedeen's account of ideology not only manages to make intelligible ambivalence, (in)action,

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[44] In *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, Wedeen (2019) seems to answer Yurchak's (2005, 17) critique of the dissimulation account of ideology. The dissimulation approach tries to solve tension by arguing that citizens act "as if," thus implying that they do have internal clarity but develop a type of duality—a private and a public self—and simulate compliance in the public sphere while criticizing a regime in their private, authentic spaces. Through the approach of *ideology as form* instead, citizens have a single self.

desire, affection, (de)attachment, "ordinary moments of disavowal," and the paralysis of judgment; it also manages to attribute to the structure of political meaning-making what has been traditionally attributed to other forces (and disciplines) dealing with the societal and personal level. For instance, Wedeen traces the use of disavowal as a mechanism of self-assuagement to rationalize inaction from citizens ambivalent about the Assad regime in Syria—a tension ingrained in a syntax of disavowal of "I know very well, yet nevertheless …"[45] Mass sentimentality and mobilization of affective attachments then soothes remaining tensions, conditioning their articulation. For Wedeen (2019, 107), "mass sentimentality comes with a sense of (implicit or explicit) *moral* assertion, which […] complicates possibilities for *political* judgment so necessary for ideology critique" (emphasis in original). Sentimentality not only facilitates the soothing work of ideologies, but it also helps in their sustenance by foreclosing ideological critique.

The heuristic of *ideology as form* is particularly effective for understanding unified memory regimes because they soothe semantic tensions through their avowedly consensual nature. As mnemonic tension becomes unintelligible at the *official level*, tension is relegated to the *societal*, *interpersonal*, or *intrapersonal* levels. While many societal actors view anti-regime societal warriors through an antagonistic frame as "enemies" and discursively treat them as such, consensus-seeking mnemonic pluralists instead use their discursive deliberative practices as tension soothers, reflexively shielding the unified memory regime from potential challenges from below.

Mnemonic pluralists in unified memory regimes

Mnemonic pluralists recognize different interpretations of the past, favor agreement on fundamentals of mnemonic politics, and practice respect and tolerance toward various accounts of the past (Bernhard and Kubik 2014, 13). Because of these commitments, pluralists favor pillarized mnemonic regimes that resemble agonistic orders. Within these spaces of plurality that valorize difference, pluralists seem to emerge as *structural-discursive agents* with a commitment toward both *the space of plurality* in accommodating different visions of the past (structural imperative), and a signature *deliberative rhetoric* that exemplifies such commitment and sustains the essence

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[45] Wedeen borrows this category of speech from Octave Mannoni's 1985 essay "Je sais bien, mais quand même …" [I know well, but all the same …].

of pillarized regimes (discursive practices). Within such regimes, pluralists perform maintenance work to sustain an order that reflects their worldview.

In contrast, pluralists are not really "at home" within unified memory regimes. Episodes of societal contestation in unified official memory regimes, I argue, present pluralists with an alignment dilemma that goes to the core of their structural commitment to *the nature* of political space and to the *form* of debate rather than its *content*: a challenge or opportunity to grapple with their structural commitment to plurality. If they fall into the trap of deploying their typical deliberative rhetoric predicated on affirming and reconciling competing views while losing sight of their structural imperative to pillarization, pluralists manifest three regime-sustaining discursive behaviors/practices: (1) semantic alignment with consensus, (2) a syntax of disavowal of the attempted fractures that preserves consensus-seeking hierarchies, and (3) the particularization of competing societal narratives, allowing the "consensus" view to retain its claims to universality. I further argue that pluralists are most likely to manifest these discursive behaviors within underspecified unified memory regimes, in which the consensus on underspecification is more easily disguised as plurality.

Traps of consensus in unified memory regimes

I propose *semantic alignment* as a heuristic that best captures political agreement on the main dimensions of debate within a memory regime. Inspired by the recent work of Mihaela Mihai (2022) and her problematization of overdetermination of guilt and responsibility in collective memory, I reimagine guilt determination on a spectrum that oscillates from overspecification on the one end to underspecification on the other. Overspecification of guilt means, for example, thinking of the world in terms of a stark division between victims and perpetrators, taking inspiration from legal imagination and transitional justice, and being unable to comprehend the "messy middle" where compliance, complicity, and shades of gray reside. I suggest that underspecification is the opposite trend: an underspecification of guilt means emphasizing the messy middle and the difficulty of discerning victims from perpetrators in regimes that relied on this conflation to control and implicate people. I argue that memory regimes can be located on this spectrum, and that unified memory regimes will semantically tend toward one or the other extreme. Neither underspecification nor overspecification are simply the natural order of the past: they are consequences of how a memory regime orders the space of remembrance. Agents *semantically*

align with a unified memory regime when they align with a regime's consensus on this spectrum. Pluralists may be more likely to fall into the trap of semantically aligning with an underspecified unified memory regime, because they will have a harder time recognizing underspecification as consensus. Underspecification thrives on the blurriness of boundaries, making this order of the past appear to be a plural space of accommodation even in unified memory regimes. When underspecification disguises as pluralism, it highjacks pluralists' natural tendencies toward complexity and appreciation for multiple perspectives.

On a syntax level, pluralists may practice the structure of disavowal "I know very well, yet nevertheless …" as conceptualized by Wedeen (2019), or employ a similar syntax of "yes, but …" as opposed to an alternative syntax that could retain tension without disavowal such as a "yes, and …" structure. The syntax of disavowal appears to acknowledge pluralism yet retains a semantic alignment—a tension embedded within the structure of sentences or paragraphs that "resolves" within the same space. The function of the "yes, but" is to structure an *order* in which what follows the "but" subsumes the competing narrative. The part of the sentence following "but" semantically prevails and becomes the only actionable statement. Thus, "yes, but …" acknowledges competing statements, confronts them only to preserve the hierarchy of narratives in favor of the dominant narrative, and reinforces semantic alignment with the unified memory regime.

Finally, in line with both semantic alignment and a syntax of disavowal, reconciliatory pluralist speech within unified memory regimes may try to square the competing narrative within a consensus-seeking framework. If the unified memory regime and competing narrative are irreconcilable in some way, consensus seeking will prompt pluralists to solve this tension by recognizing yet particularizing the competing narrative. Accordingly, challenging societal mnemonic warriors and their narratives emerge as particular, isolated exceptions to the dominant universal consensus of the unified memory regime. While a regime-threatening discourse may find a language to convey its reality, classifying its narrative as particular precludes its political claim to disrupt that established consensus in favor of pillarization. While semantic alignment serves to retain a political order of meaning-making, narrative disavowal and particularization serve to order agents and their narratives in ways that discipline the narrative space in favor of reconciliation and consensus. Invoking mass sentimentality in line with the unified memory regime permeates the space of these discursive practices.

A unified official memory regime in Albania

Albania has suffered from an inconsequential, delayed, and inconsistent transitional justice process, which has discursively underspecified the memory field on guilt and responsibility.[46] High recycling of the communist political elite—primarily through the Socialist Party (the communist successor party), but also through the leadership of the Democratic Party (the anti-communists)—encouraged the deflection of meaningful attempts at transitional justice, with electoral considerations often driving the process (Austin 2015; Austin and Ellison 2008; Godole 2023). Not only have the formerly persecuted[47] found themselves facing their persecutors in new positions of power and authority (Tufa 2011), they have also lacked political representation and articulation of their grievances, with the Democratic Party failing to properly act on their quest for truth and justice, despite their nominal role as opponents of the old communist regime.[48] When the Vaçe episode was unfolding, collective remembrance in Albania had paid little attention to former prisons and forced labor and internment camps,[49] with a new wave of commemoration and exoticization of the partisan movement and the Anti-Fascist War (see Pandelejmoni 2015) emerging with the 2013 electoral victory of the Socialist Party.

The lack of a coherent transitional justice process and of an ethics of remembrance (see Booth [2001] on memory as "a face of justice") along with a memory contract founded on amnesty and amnesia (see Brendese 2014) complicated the space of moral judgment and remembrance in the case of Albania (Amy 2021; Fijalkowski 2015) and promoted a "forgive and forget" mindset

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[46] See Stan (2009) for a classification of Central and Eastern European countries on the severity/timing two-dimensional space. Albania would fall in the delayed/low severity quadrant. The Authority for Information on Former State Security [*Sigurimi*] Documents was established only in 2015.

[47] This term is used in Albania to denote those who were imprisoned, tortured, killed, or interned in Albania for political reasons, and their families.

[48] The formerly persecuted, for instance, have often seen their grievances instrumentalized for political and electoral capital rather than represented and addressed. This point was repeatedly articulated in the interview I conducted with Enkelejd Alibeaj, Albanian member of parliament (MP) and member of the Democratic Party (June 30, 2023, Tirana). Another MP, Flutura Açka, argued that the suffering of the formerly persecuted has been barely articulated by the political elite in any meaningful way (June 9, 2023, Tirana). In the late 2000s, the Democratic Party was unsuccessful in specifying the memory field on guilt and responsibility when it passed a lustration law that was deemed unconstitutional. While in power, the party failed to draft a law that would have a chance in the Constitutional Court, or to institute any significant measure regarding truth and transitional justice.

[49] The issue of the memorialization of prisons and internment camps and a wider publication of the patterns of violence and persecution during the communist dictatorship started gaining traction only in the mid- and late 2010s, primarily through the work of three institutions and organizations: the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences in Albania (ISKK); the Institute for Democracy, Media, and Culture (IDMC); and the Authority for Information on Former State Security Documents (AIDSSH).

spearheaded by the political elite. The official memory field on guilt and responsibility coalesced around former Democratic president Sali Berisha's words, expressed in 1992, that "[w]e are all guilty, we all jointly suffered" (Austin and Ellison 2008, 182). This centripetal push toward the gray area of responsibility gave way to a political imagination of all society as "victims and accomplices" (Godole 2023, 237), a de facto moral amnesty that harmed the intelligibility of the grievances of the formerly persecuted and concealed the scale of their suffering under the dictatorship.

This "memory contract" at the official level defined a highly underspecified memory field on guilt and responsibility. The expansion of the "messy middle" to encompass the whole space of victimhood and responsibility emphasized regime coercion, the ubiquity of violence, and the narrow space for agency under dictatorships. While overspecification errs on the side of moral dualism, underspecification errs on the side of moral relativism. In the case of Albania, in 2014 the memory field was underspecified,[50] with responsibility being simultaneously shared among *everyone* and *no one*.[51] This obfuscation harmed anew those who were victimized the most by the regime, while a reconciliatory approach benefited the rest who could more easily forgive and forget.

A unified memory regime governing artistic heritage

The unified memory regime governing communist-era artistic heritage upon Vaçe's death in 2014 was therefore part of an underspecified memory field. Underspecification manifested in two distinct yet interconnected ways: on the *position of the cultural* elite vis-à-vis the communist regime, and on the *political nature* of art produced during this period. Underspecification promoted an official celebratory consensus toward the artistic heritage and the artists of the communist period. At Vaçe's state-sponsored funeral, Prime Minister Edi Rama, Minister of Culture Mirela Kumbaro, former president and former prime minister Berisha, opposition leader Lulzim Basha, and Speaker of Parliament Ilir Meta were united in their grief. They were hardly united otherwise, but heritage brought them together. Vaçe emerged in their condolences as a ray of light in the

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[50] Specification, as opposed to both under- and overspecification, would see patterns of responsibility on a spectrum. For the nuanced picture of compliance, resistance, simulation, fear, indifference, loyalty, and privilege in Albania, see Idrizi (2018).

[51] An exception is situating blame with dictator Enver Hoxha or "the system" (*sistemi*). As Hoxha died in 1985, the same moral relativism on responsibility remained.

gloominess of the dictatorship, a beloved singer invoking nostalgia, and a unifying symbol of the nation (see *Panorama Online* 2014b). Prime Minster Rama recalled his personal tender memories of her voice and songs, claiming that Vaçe would have "electrified the skies of the whole world" in another place and time (Rama 2014a), acknowledging the constraints of the Albanian dictatorship.

My interviews with the cultural elite point to the same underspecification. Artists from the communist era centered coercion, party control, the ubiquity of fear and violence, and the impossibility of dissent when discussing their positions vis-à-vis the regime. They recognized issues of privilege, social status, and regime legitimization, but channeled them through lenses of inevitability, lack of agency, instrumentalization by the dictatorship, and the high quality of art under communism.[52] Thus, as the narrative goes, artists were rightly respected, promoted, and privileged by the regime, and only share responsibility for it to the same extent as everyone else. Nuance as to how choices to support or dissent differently distributed costs and benefits to artists are unintelligible in the prevailing narrative. Coercion foreclosed agency.

Drawing on Nicholas Tochka's foundational work on Albania, I trace how a coercion-centric understanding of the relationship of the cultural elite to the Communist Party and the socialist realist canon limits comprehension of how the ideo-aesthetic order in communist Albania was cultivated. Communist-era artistic space in Albania experienced a complex cocktail of autonomy, coercion, incentivization, experimentation, privileging, and disciplining (Tochka 2016). As the communist state moved through several phases of development (see the compelling periodization(s) in Bejko [2021]; Mëhilli [2017]; Tochka [2016]), the prescriptive nature of socialist realism as the ideological blueprint for how art ought to look, feel, and sound was built, cultivated, and negotiated through a delicate dance between the cultural field and its relation to and embodiment of power within the socialist state. Tochka's (2016) work on music production, for example, traces how the state effectively moved from coercion as its primary strategy of control to more "productive" symbolic-ideological approaches starting in the early 1960s. He traces cultural field-defining "battles" where winning Soviet and Eastern Bloc-educated artistic elites helped to consolidate an "expert ideo-aesthetic language"; the targeting of light music as "a domain

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[52] Artists often contrast quality with what some consider the banality of art during post-communism.

for administration"; the emergence of a thematic, aesthetic, and interpretation spirit for the "spiritual demands of our masses"; and "the consecration of models of composition and performance" through the practices of endorsement, evaluation, and devaluation of festival songs (2016, 65–72).

More than a regime-mandated ideo-symbolic order, audible socialist realism emerged as an ideo-symbolic order constituted and negotiated through and with the cultural field. Rather than a governance principle, coercion was more of a high-level corrective and marker of tectonic shifts in the political winds. As creative work during communism embodied the "irreducible duality of cultural production" that required both individual creativity and "labor of social utility" for the masses, the control and independence of creative work were "not mutually contradictory but must be pursued simultaneously" (Yurchak 2005, 12, citing Arnol'dov et al. 1984, 162, 163). Socialist realism emerged as a complex space of cultivation and negotiation within the cultural field itself as much as between the cultural field and the communist regime in Tirana.

Music production became central to this emerging ideo-symbolic order because of its particular ability to signal the boundaries of ideo-aesthetic permissibility through the popular annual Festival of Song, one of the most important artistic events in communist Albania. The Festival of Song became a laboratory for the building and negotiation of the audible socialist realist canon. Debuting in 1962, the festival cultivated a distinctly popular music genre, *light songs*, and quickly became a space of artistic and ideological scrutiny on form, content, performance, scenography, awards, clothes, hair, facial expression, gestures, and degree of enthusiasm. It also became a space that governed popularity, incentives, privileges, professionalization, propriety, culturedness, rises and falls from grace, standards, and status within the cultural field (Tochka 2016; 2017). The mid-1960s saw the start of the cultural revolution in Albania, with both the Party and the League of Writers and Artists mobilizing to stiffen the ideological space of music production. The famous "Waltz of Happiness" (*Valsi i lumturisë*) debuted in the 1965 Festival of Song,[53] and was embedded in the revolutionary and field-defining dynamics of music production in communist Albania.[54]

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[53] Both Vaçe Zela and Avni Mula have interpreted this song.
[54] Albania would experience a short political spring in the early 1970s with the 11th Festival of Song testing the limits of the regime in 1972 and bringing a harsh response from the Party.

The obfuscation of ideology: where does socialist realism reside?

On the second dimension of the political nature of art produced during communism, underspecification took a particular shape, narrowing "the political" in art to mean overt political symbols only. Overt symbols could be removed, edited, or altered during post-communism. Vehbiu (2015) succinctly called this approach an "exorcism of *identifiers*, starting with Hoxha's name and face" (emphasis added). Once so sanitized, according to the prevailing narrative, art had been depoliticized and could be relegated to the space of art alone as opposed to its original dual nature as *art and propaganda*. This approach, as I demonstrate below, failed to recognize the more encompassing political dimensions of socialist realism, an underspecification that precluded collective understanding of how this heritage retained the political traces of the past.

With the fall of the communist dictatorship, Albania needed to decide how to approach the art produced during the dictatorship. Through archival sources I traced the deliberations of two key working groups that reviewed public-facing art. The two working groups reached similar, narrow conclusions as to where "the political" resided and how to make this art acceptable for a public transitioning away from communism. For instance, the 1994 discussion about showing communist-era movies conducted by the Governing Council of Albanian Radio-Television, the national TV broadcaster, considered *politicized* those movies that explicitly mentioned the Anti-Fascist War, Communist Party, class struggle, or Hoxha, and whose central subject revolved around such issues. The discussions point to few movies being entirely politicized as per their criteria while others needed only slight revision to edit out explicit mentions of the Party, ideology, class, etc. The rest were deemed apolitical and timeless and safe to broadcast (AQSH f.509, v.1994, d.11).[55] During the same period, the Ministry of Culture faced pressure to "deal with" the triumphalist communist-era mosaic on the façade of the National Historical Museum. The working group composed of architects, historians, and artists, including one of the mosaic's creators, recognized the political nature of the mosaic in its entirety, but opted only to remove the two main red stars and to alter the red book representing the works of Enver Hoxha (AQSH f.490, v.1993,

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[55] Notice on pp. 9 and 15 of this folder, the call not to attribute to artists the wrongs/evils produced by the demands of the time. On p. 62, conclusions state that communist-era Albanian movies unfairly had a bad reputation, and given that the "extremely politicized climate" of the preceding 2–3 years (1991–93) was over, movies were to be judged on their artistic merit. The "only real Achilles heel" were movies about the Anti-Fascist National-Liberation War. In practice, communist-era movies were widely broadcasted throughout the post-communist period.

d.740; f.513, v.1993, d.136). Another intervention to review the mosaic more holistically was contemplated, but never completed (AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.12, 2–3). Freed from its overt political symbols, the mosaic remained preserved for posterity.

Beyond the explicit political *regime lexicon*, or overt symbolism, there is an *ideological lexicon* that these institutional actions failed to address. Although the ideological repertoire of artistic heritage retains its socialist coding, underspecification renders it not collectively legible as political. Like the broader socialist realist canon (Dobrenko 2007; Golomstock 1990; Robin 1992) that experienced experimentation, negotiation, coercion, and more prescriptive stages with variation across place and time, in Albania socialist realism as a state-mandated ideoaesthetic tradition resided in a three-dimensional space of form, content, and sentiment, cultivated and negotiated within the cultural field and its intersections with the communist regime. In my interviews, cultural elites tended to focus on the canon at its most prescriptive, paralleling the ways in which they centered coercion in their narratives of the era. For them, "realist in form" meant that art could not be abstract, absurd, or surrealist, but follow the realist tradition. Content limited the subject matter to socialism, with themes like the partisan movement and the war, the "new human" (*njeriu i ri*), industrialization, modernization, the "positive hero," love at the factory, socialist motherhood, and the new life blossoming in the beautiful fatherland. Pro-regime sentiment permeated the works of the era, either in the pathos of winning wars and defeating fascism, imperialism, and defending the fatherland, or in the lyricism of socialist life, conveyed through the warmth of tunes in songs and colors on canvases. People under Albanian socialism had a moral duty to experience happy, cheerful, meaningful lives, a sentiment that art had to engender and cultivate. It is this sentimental dimension that made the broadcasting of Vaçe's "Waltz of Happiness" in a communist prison a particularly effective tool of torture. Form, content, and sentiment in combination made socialist artworks distinct, with ideological symbolism permeating their material, ideational, and creative space. Therefore, an underspecified unified memory regime that acknowledged only overt regime symbolism (content) to be political while neglecting form and sentiment rendered illegible the multidimensionality of communist-era art and the ways in which it reinforced the political order, along with particular associations and affective dispositions it triggered for certain people.

Audible legacies in Albania: Vaçe's monumentality

Vaçe was no stranger to the contemporary soundscape of post-communist Albania, with her voice and songs serving different needs for communist and post-communist generations. I argue that Vaçe's versatility is central to her monumentality, a versatility enabled by the dual underspecification of the unified memory regime. For communist-era generations, Vaçe triggers nostalgia by representing the audible space of their youth, a reflective nostalgia (Boym 2001) typical of those who lived through an era and have personal memories associated with it. For post-communist generations—many of whom emigrated abroad—her audible legacy and the transition-era revival of her songs triggers homeland nostalgia. In Boym's (2001) categorization, this resembles restorative nostalgia, allowing the homeland to be discovered anew. As Vaçe's songs are recognizable to multiple generations of Albanian speakers, her musical legacy inhabits a space of authoritative monumentality.

Vaçe was the sweetheart of the music production sector and a beloved singer of communist Albania. If communism in Albania had a sound, it was Vaçe's voice. Her ascent to unmatched popularity in the early 1960s coincided with the ascent to power within the cultural field of the new Soviet-educated music composers and the emergence of the expert ideoaesthetic language (Tochka 2016). Tochka (2017) demonstrates how Vaçe's voice, performance, and persona became the embodiment of audible "cultured" socialism, a trendsetter emulated by later socialist-era singers, and an icon of affective labor. Not only was Vaçe a singer of great talent, she also possessed a particular type of voice, professional and scenic intuition, and posture that made her a pioneer of "the declarative-heroic mode, using her arms, hands and shoulders to punctuate the grand songs on significant political and nationalist themes she became best known for performing" (2017; 297).

The post-communist Vaçe cult grew after the first decade of transition, once the euphoria around western songs (predominantly in Italian and English) dissipated, resulting in a diverse audio space of foreign, regional (Balkan), and local music. A nostalgia for Vaçe and her socialist aesthetics had already started to emerge among middle-aged people in late socialism, while the tastes of the Albanian late-socialist youth were being cultivated through the Italian and Yugoslav radio waves and TV (Tochka 2016, 135–136; on Italian radio waves and TV, see Mai 2001). Transition was marked by new modes of valorization that saw the socialist professional artistic

class uncomfortably give space to an order of music production, expression, transgression, emulation, and circulation being shaped by foreign inspirations, the emerging market economy, and new imperatives of freedom that, according to Tochka (2016), were also voiced through light music.

The revival of Vaçe's songs was part of the rediscovery of Albanian local music, a revisiting of the Albanian twentieth-century music tradition in search of a sense of belonging and a reflection of the homesickness of millions of Albanians who left for the West after 1991. Vaçe's songs featured prominently in Klan TV's festival *100 Songs of the Century* (*100 Këngët e Shekullit*), rebranded as *Songs of the Century* (*Këngët e Shekullit*)—a popular festival series in which contemporary artists sung covers of twentieth-century popular Albanian songs. *Këngët e Shekullit* also featured an exclusive interview with Vaçe, living in Switzerland at the time (RTV Klan 2014a).

Vaçe's monumental status grew stronger through the two decades of Top Channel's *End of the Year Song* feature. Top Channel, one of the main Albanian national TV stations, started a popular tradition of end-of-the-year songs in 2001. Mimicking USA for Africa's "We Are the World," every December the Top Channel *End of the Year Song* featured all Top Channel employees singing a cover of a famous international or Albanian song. In 2001, they debuted with Queen's *"We Are the Champions"* (Top Channel Albania 2017a), followed by USA for Africa's "We Are the World" in 2002 (Top Channel Albania 2017b). Twenty subsequent years covered an Albanian song, with Vaçe's songs appearing six times, most recently in 2021.[56] Vaçe's repertoire was by far the most featured in the *End of the Year Song* covers.

Many of these songs' lyrics have a patriotic flavor, given the socialist brand of nationalism Albania embarked on during its communist dictatorship. Patriotism in Hoxhaist Albania built on precommunist nation-building efforts (Fischer 1995; Sulstarova 2015) and developed them through modernization, mass literacy, and homogenization efforts through cultural hegemony (Abazi and Doja 2016; Bardhoshi and Lelaj 2018; Lelaj 2015). It cultivated a discourse of national

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[56] The first song, the "Waltz of Happiness," was covered in 2006 (Top Channel Albania 2017d), followed by "Growing Our Life" (*Rrisim jetën tonë*) in 2007 (Top Channel Albania 2017e), "Flows in Songs and Verses" (*Rrjedh në këngë e ligjërime*) in 2009 (Top Channel Albania 2017f), "O Beautiful Arbëri" (*Moj e bukur Arbëri*) in 2010 (Top Channel Albania 2017g), and "In Our Home" (*Në shtëpinë tonë*) in 2021 (Top Channel Albania 2021). In addition, the 2003 song, "For You Fatherland" (*Për ty Atdhe*) (Top Channel Albania 2017c), had popular versions by both Vaçe and Mentor Xhemali.

consolidation and love of the homeland manifested in the 1970s through an inward turn toward tradition and folk music. Folk music was especially promoted once the state cracked down on what it considered to be "foreign shows/influences/manifestations" in art and music, starting with the 11th Festival of Song in 1972 (see AQSH f.511, v.1973, d.116; d.128; f.490, v.1974, d.30; f.511, v.1974, d.116). Most of the songs Top Channel (2017c; 2017d; 2017f; 2017g; 2021) chose from Vaçe's repertoire have a national-patriotic flavor, as she sings about the beauty of the (socialist) homeland ("O beautiful Arbëri," "Waltz of Happiness"), its nurturing of life ("In Our Home"), and its perseverance through storms and invasions ("Flows in Songs and Verses," "For You Fatherland").

The 2010 Top Channel edition featuring "O beautiful Arbëri," a song evoking feelings of patriotism and longing for the homeland, was a tribute to both Vaçe and to the iconic artist living abroad. The cover song video starts with a snippet of Vaçe's original video in black and white and then shows her in old age holding a small present wrapped in red paper (Top Channel Albania 2017g, 0:05). The video then takes the viewer to present-day Top Channel studios where employees sing her song. The cover video returns to Vaçe at the end, tracing the red-wrapped present traveling on a train from Switzerland (where Vaçe emigrated) all the way to the hands of a child in Albania, who then joins a chorus of singing children (2017g, 4:32). Toward the end, Vaçe appears in an emotional moment saying that "it is a beautiful feeling to listen to one's songs sung by young people who have never seen one perform" (2017g, 3:49). The narrative of the cover video flatters both the *youth nostalgia* of those born under communism as well as the *homeland nostalgia* of those who left Albania at various points during transition, proposing Vaçe as a cross-generational unifying popular symbol. The video also conveys the preservation of Vaçe's audible legacy through the emotionally charged chorus of children who received the present arriving from Switzerland directly from a now grandmotherly Vaçe. Not only is Vaçe sad and moved in the interview, she conveys the sentimentality of the artist in exile, forced to leave the homeland because of the violent transition, lack of opportunities, and other problems that evoke the discourse around Albania's massive post-communist emigration wave.

Through the popular *End of the Year Song* episodes, Top Channel facilitated the transformation of Vaçe from a *communist-era* singer into a *timeless* singer, repurposing her songs for the current emotional needs of the young and old, those living in Albania, and those abroad. It

facilitated her songs' transition from old communist-era radio and black-and-white TV into the colorful screens of post-communism, from her vocal cords into the singing of Top Channel employees, and from an association with the communist period into a transcendent rebranding for a homesick audience.

Lubonja's critique: challenging a unified memory regime

In a lengthy newspaper article, Fatos Lubonja (2014a), a former political prisoner of the Hoxha regime and a renowned public intellectual and critic of post-communist politics,[57] took issue with the state and public tribute to Vaçe's passing and the celebratory sentiment of her legacy, accompanying his critique with an imaginary letter from hell that Dictator Hoxha wrote to the Socialist prime minister Rama and the former prime minister, president, and longtime leader of the Democratic Party, Berisha. In this imaginary letter, Hoxha is touched and proud of both post-communist leaders, praising them for uniting for this occasion and for their efforts to honor the communist dictatorship's heritage and its People's Artists. This imaginary letter accompanying Lubonja's critique of the celebration of Vaçe's legacy is meant to denounce the official consensus on celebrating Albania's communist-era artistic heritage. Lubonja imagines Hoxha to particularly appreciate Rama's heartfelt nostalgic eulogy to Vaçe. The imaginary Hoxha further expects Rama—a painter, former mayor of Tirana, and son of the beloved communist-era sculptor Kristaq Rama—to "fix the mistakes" regarding the memory of Hoxha himself, insinuating a hope for absolution.

In his critique accompanying the imaginary letter, Lubonja criticized the de facto state funeral and the public sentiment that celebrated Vaçe's legacy. He pointed out that Vaçe's legacy was inseparable from the communist state, with her songs—the "Waltz of Happiness" in particular—played in prisons and labor camps as mechanisms of torture and oppression. Indeed, Vaçe's rhythmic songs embraced the regime's ideology of the "new human," blossoming youth, love stories in cooperatives and factories, the happiness of people in socialist countries, the prosperity of the farming fields, and the socialist fatherland, covering tropes across the communist lexicon. In both form and substance, these songs were celebratory, joyous, and aggressively

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[57] Lubonja's whole family went through imprisonment and internment during the dictatorship. His father, Todi Lubonja, directed the Albanian Radio-Television agency. He was purged after the 11th Festival of Song in 1972, considered too Western, liberal, bourgeois, and ideologically deviant.

positive. For prisoners, these songs became a violent aesthetic. Lubonja discussed the torture of such happy songs about life in the communist fatherland being broadcast through Radio Tirana to suffering political prisoners at Burreli Prison. For Lubonja, this epitomized the lived dystopia of thousands of intellectuals, artists, clergy, and ordinary anti-regime citizens being forced to listen to propaganda music about the happy fatherland. He asks, "Can you imagine them [prisoners], in Burreli cells, reduced to animals of forced labor, singing with great spiritual and aesthetic pleasure '… along with Spring you also blossom …' [a line from the 'Waltz of Happiness']?" (Lubonja 2014a).

For Lubonja, this torturous legacy calls into question the iconic status of socialist realism's art and artists in Albania and the celebratory sentiment that accompanies them. He further argued that Vaçe's songs were not representative of the musical tastes of late-socialist youth. Instead, this young generation despised the conformist Albanian art of the time (he called it "banal") and secretly listened to prohibited Western songs. Finally, Lubonja claimed that Nexhmije Hoxha's public and unchallenged nostalgia testified to the inappropriately unconditional honoring of the art and artists of the communist period after the regime fell. As a memory warrior, Lubonja aimed at fracturing a unified memory regime that venerated art and artists from the communist period.

Although critics were quick to accuse Lubonja of desecrating Vaçe's memory and of demanding that beloved songs be banned, Lubonja himself never asked for such measures. His critique extended only to the celebratory nature of nostalgia for these songs, the post-communist state's involvement in Vaçe's public commemoration, the unity of politicians on the matter, and the overall lack of public reflection on the open and subtle violences of this heritage. Earlier, Lubonja (2007) had also stated that "I am by no means of the idea that these songs should disappear from the earth, nor that they should not be heard. They should be preserved and heard (just as they were sung) because they help to understand that time." Instead, it is their naïvely nostalgic revival by young singers at new song festivals that Lubonja takes issue with.[58] With few voices publicly supporting Lubonja (see, for instance, Açka 2014), he subsequently published an article 13 days

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[58] In 2007, in "Biznesi banal me nostalgjinë e komunizmit" [The Banal Business with Communist Nostalgia], Lubonja took issue with the nostalgic *Songs of the Century*, in which communist-era songs were restaged by mainly young post-communist singers.

after the first (2014b) claiming that he was being burned at the stake for desecration—an intentional reference to heretics and the Inquisition.

Mnemonic enemies, nostalgia, and the invisibility of socialist aesthetics

In line with the unified memory regime's consensus imperative exacerbating antagonism at the societal level and casting those presenting competing accounts of the past as *enemies*, in this section I focus on defensive mnemonic warriors in society and their harsh critique of Lubonja. The Albanian artistic community of the communist and post-communist period took issue with Lubonja's "politicization" of Vaçe's songs and his claim that she legitimized the communist regime through her art and talent. Politicization was a framework they saw Lubonja impose on songs rather than a quality that the songs inherently preserved. Prominent post-communist Albanian singer and Vaçe fan Aurela Gaçe went so far as to compare Lubonja to a high officer of Hitler's army, and suggested that Lubonja consider shooting himself like Hitler did (Gaçe 2014).

Defensive mnemonic warriors engaged in the debate with arguments that coalesced around the following logic: Vaçe sang about universal topics and dimensions of life beyond political symbolism and her talent transcended the dictatorship in which she, like everyone else, was trapped (see responses in *Gazeta Shqiptare* reported by Nikolli [2014a; 2014b]). They saw her iconic status and the nostalgia she triggered across generations as a testimony to her timelessness and representativeness, and as an argument to legitimize the ascent of a communist icon to a post-communist national symbol. Gaçe (2014), in one of the harshest public responses, asked "how is the song about the grandmother related to the Party? […] Did your grandmother ever caress you? Because it is impossible to listen to [Vaçe's] interpretation and not remember your own grandmother. And the song about her first child? […] [A]nd those simply talking about the flirtation of love, like 'Lenza' [Hiccups] or 'Djaloshi dhe shiu' [The Boy and the Rain]?" The Albanian artistic community mobilized around similar sentiments of hurtfulness and disrespect, pointing to the familiar, intimate, innocent nature of Vaçe's songs and how they reminded people of simpler times in their lives, devoid of politics. Echoing a sentiment that Prime Minister Rama shared in his eulogy (*Panorama Online* 2014a), these artists lamented that Vaçe's great talent had been confined to Albania because of the dictatorship, demonstrating how Vaçe, like other talented people, was also a victim of the regime that she sustained through her art. These underspecified

arguments recalled the messy middle of victimhood and perpetration, in line with the prevailing semantics of the unified memory regime.

Lubonja was thus guilty of three sins in the eyes of these defensive mnemonic warriors. First, he misidentified Vaçe's innocent, mundane songs as socialist propaganda. Propaganda meant only overtly political content—the presence or absence of a narrow socialist lexicon such as the Party, the revolution, and the Anti-Fascist War—and could not possibly include or extend to everyday life under socialism. Second, by critiquing Vaçe's legacy, Lubonja ascribed direct blame to her personally for engaging in propaganda through her art, while in reality she was a victim confined to Albania like other artists of the time. Third, Lubonja sought to deprive common citizens of their youthful memories, of their family stories, of the dance parties and the love encounters of their parents and of themselves, of a nostalgia for a time that was no more. For these Lubonja critics, their affectionate and intimate relationship with Vaçe's songs transcended socialist realism's connection to state violence and oppression during communism, and the exercise of such violence on prisoners like Lubonja. It is no accident that these critics married *moral assertion* with *sentimental nuance*: nostalgia, childhood or youth, family, parents, everyday life during socialism, Vaçe as a ray of light in the gloom of dictatorship. Lubonja's account was nuclear, systemically challenging, personally hurtful to a mnemonic consensus around which Albanians had built a celebratory narrative. He was an enemy to the remembering collective.

Pluralists and the order of memory

Mnemonic pluralists played a mediating role in this fierce debate and in doing so reinforced the unified memory regime. While defensive mnemonic warriors challenge offensive warriors through antagonistic disbelief, mnemonic pluralists perform a more effective disciplining function by engaging in soothing work through semantic alignment, disavowal, and juxtaposition of narratives. In Lubonja's case, as pluralists tried to bring nuance to the debate, they pitted his narrative against the consensus-driven official unified memory regime and challenged the right of his "particular" lived experience to reorder the space of celebratory collective remembrance.

My analysis focuses on two important pluralist critiques of Lubonja, those of Silvana Toska (2014) and Andrea Stefani (2014). Both engage meaningfully with Lubonja's points and recognize his suffering, and thus represent "hard" cases to show that even moderate, thoughtful, and

appreciating responses solidified the status quo of a unified official memory regime that celebrates and rhetorically depoliticizes the artistic heritage from the communist dictatorship. Toska, an academic living abroad, pointed out that Vaçe's songs reminded common citizens of happier, simpler times and reminded her generation of their happy late-socialist childhoods. Albanians' sincere nostalgia deserved celebratory sentiment and could not be reduced to infantility or support for the regime. Stefani, a renowned journalist and editor, also defended Albanians' nostalgia and affection for Vaçe as a natural appreciation for her and her songs, separating peoples' relation to the art of the dictatorship from the dictatorship itself. As opposed to the mnemonic warriors, these mnemonic pluralists used typical pluralist deliberative rhetoric, sympathized with Lubonja's suffering, and closely engaging with his arguments by raising difficult questions. Simultaneously, they appealed to consensus and the need for consensus, invoking and consolidating the semantic order of the unified memory regime through semantic alignment, a syntax of disavowal, and a template that distinguished the particular from the universal.

Semantic alignment reinforced the unified memory regime's underspecification of both the positionality of artists in the dictatorship and the political dimensions of socialist realism. Both Toska (2014) and Stefani (2014) reiterated the complexity of the relationships of socialist art with the communist dictatorship and derived from this an inability to ascribe blame or responsibility to artists for having supported the communist regime through their art, thus valorizing the trope of overlapping victimhood and complicity. Stefani initially entertained the possibility that artists might have a higher moral responsibility than others for having legitimized the regime, but then retreated to an "everyone is responsible" messy middle, typical of semantic alignment. Both also reiterated that Vaçe had no choice but to have her career in Albania, and at least alleviated the gloominess of the dictatorship through her art. Toska, for instance, claimed that both celebration and radical rejection of Vaçe were extreme stances, and that the truth is to be found somewhere in the middle. But instead of a structural challenge to the memory regime itself in order to move toward pillarization, she followed in semantic alignment with the unified memory regime's "everyone is responsible" trope, arguing that it is difficult to ascribe blame to either Vaçe or to one's parents or relatives, who all legitimized the system through "fear, ignorance, or sincere belief."

In an analogous process of disavowal, Lubonja's pluralist critics relied on a "yes, but" (*po, por*) syntax structure to challenge his account of Vaçe's legacy. To paraphrase their main "yes, but" linguistic tropes:

- Communism was violent and maybe sold a fake happiness, but so was the transition from communism and its promises (Stefani 2014; Toska 2014).
- Vaçe may have upheld the system through her art, but her songs represented the life people thought they were living during communism, or were heading toward (Toska 2014).
- Lubonja may have had the opportunity to listen to Western songs, but the rest of Albanians had access only to the local art scene, and their nostalgia is sincere (Toska 2014).
- Vaçe may be the product and upholder of the communist system, but the art in the West, which Lubonja admired, is also embedded in its own reality and struggles (Toska 2014).
- Some of Vaçe's texts and songs may be banal, but so is the capitalist erotics disguised as music today (Toska 2014); and mediocrity is found in art under liberal regimes too (Stefani 2014).
- Vaçe may have upheld the system through her art, but Vaçe's talent stands above the songs she sung (Stefani 2014; Toska 2014).
- Vaçe may have upheld the system through her art, but there was little or no space for dissent (Stefani 2014; Toska 2014).
- Vaçe may have upheld the system through her art, but so did everyone else, from workers to artists, family, and relatives, through sincere belief, fear, or coercion (Stefani 2014; Toska 2014).
- Vaçe's songs may have been propaganda, but they served as a ray of light during those gloomy times (Stefani 2014).
- Lubonja's personal experience with communism may define his personal attitude toward this art, but the rest of peoples' personal experiences also define their attitudes, enthusiasm, and judgment (Toska 2014).

While in Wedeen's (2019) account the use of disavowal assuaged subjects' moral tensions and preserved the regime's status quo, in this episode in Albania the "yes, but" syntax preserved

the consensus of a predominantly favorable narrative toward socialist realist art and artists and justified celebratory attitudes. The function of the "yes, but" in Albania also structures a *moral order* in which the competing narrative is subsumed, or negated altogether, by what follows the "but." The part of the sentence following "but" semantically prevails, obscures what precedes it, and becomes the only actionable statement. It is the "winning" moral statement in a sense, as it acknowledges the preceding statement, but does not recognize its equal validity. "Yes, but" formally preserves tension while ultimately structuring a moral order that negates the competing narrative's validity to affect the dominant collective attitudes toward remembrance and celebration.

This qualification of "validity" is central to discerning particular from representative narratives about the common past. While societal mnemonic warriors defending the unified memory regime antagonistically challenged the validity of Lubonja's stance altogether, pluralists acknowledged his account while relegating it to a personal, particular truth. Even when all personal truths are considered valid, they are "competing" under structurally unequal conditions of a celebratory unified memory regime. A competing principle of representativeness, for instance, could hold that the accounts of the formerly persecuted should be amplified because of their disproportionate suffering, with the irreconcilability of marginalized accounts with consensus triggering a mnemonic regime change instead (toward pillarization). But such a competing principle is unintelligible in a unified memory field in which all are simultaneously victims, perpetrators, and accomplices. Particularization, then, is a discursive strategy that forecloses legitimate claims to regime-disrupting representation.

Both Toska and Stefani acknowledged what torture it must have been for abused and starving political prisoners to listen to songs about the beautiful fatherland and the "Waltz of Happiness." Toska (2014) noted that "it's painful how detached the experience of political prisoners is from the rest of society, as it took Lubonja describing the prison scene for my friends and I to be shaken from our comfort today and reflect on the violence of dictatorial art." Yet in another "yes, but" argument, after this initial sympathy Toska ultimately rejected Lubonja's claim that this experience should influence how the rest of society approaches Vaçe's art: "[B]ut, at the same time, the personal experiences of many others with Vaçe Zela are not tragic." Toska argued that for many, Vaçe's songs trigger nostalgia, remind them of happier times, remind her own

generation of their naïve childhood in the 1980s, or provide a contrast for others of "someone with musical talent [Vaçe] against the capitalist erotic regarded as 'music' today." Stefani recognized that "'the People' were 'us'" in whose name Lubonja was persecuted and had suffered, but stopped short of extending responsibility to "us" to nuance celebratory nostalgia because of these testimonies of trauma. As consensus is sought out as a universal, particularization of competing accounts is a systemic derivative.

Conclusions

Unified memory regimes are mnemonic orders posited on consensus at the official level, and prone to exacerbating public antagonism during memory contestations. Through a case of post-communist heritage contestation in Albania, I illustrated the inability of such orders to guarantee agonistic spaces for memory contestation. Posited on consensus at the official level, unified memory regimes relegate tension to society at large, conditioning an antagonistic space of everyday mnemonic battles where warriors and pluralists continue to "fight." The consensual imperative of the official unified memory regime not only orders the public repertoire of judgment and affection, but it also limits the ability to imagine alternative political "designs" for official memory regimes as more plural spaces that recognize difference as the order of memory. This regime-conditioned consensual imperative may engender particularly counterproductive discursive behaviors in pluralists, agents otherwise committed to plural public spaces and dissent. During episodes of societal contestation within unified memory regimes, practicing deliberation as a pluralist signature discourse without acknowledging the structurally unequal conditions that competing narratives face under unified memory regimes becomes a regime sustaining practice. Pluralists may fall into three discursive traps: semantic alignment with the official consensus, a syntax of disavowal of fractures, and particularization of competing narratives. Pluralists may be more prone to uphold consensus in the face of attempted fractures in underspecified unified memory regimes in which underspecification masquerades as plurality.

Not all is lost for pluralists in unified memory regimes, however. Pluralists are best understood as structural-discursive agents, at home in pillarized memory regimes because of their structural commitment to plurality and their signature discursive practices of deliberation. Given modern tendencies to venerate consensus (as per Mouffe's [2005] critique), it can be difficult for pluralists to recognize the consensus imperative embedded in unified official memory regimes as

detrimental to political representation, agonistic memory spaces, and emancipation of certain groups and their neglected historical memory grievances. But with greater awareness of the fundamental nature of unified official memory regimes, pluralists may better recognize that intense moments of societal contestation and attempted fracture indicate that "the universal" narrative is not working any longer, or for everyone, encouraging them to avoid the potential traps in their own preferred discursive practices and to instead legitimize and embrace meaningful societal attempts at mnemonic fracture as a means to ultimately move toward pillarization.

CHAPTER 4 – A Mosaic for Posterity: The redemption of the iconic

On May 17, 2023, forty-two years after its initial inauguration, the Government of Albania unveiled the restored Mosaic "Albania" on the façade of the National Historical Museum in Tirana's central square. That day, the 565 square meter mosaic was covered by the European Union flag, ready to be unveiled at the official ceremony. The EU partnered with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) in Albania and the Albanian government to implement one of its largest cultural heritage programs, EU4Culture, to restore 23 cultural heritage sites in Albania, the Mosaic among them (EU4Culture 2021a). The ceremony kicked off Europe Week 2023 and brought together the EU Ambassador to Albania, the EU Delegation, high representatives from the UNOPS, and the Albanian Minister of Culture. Artists, dancers, singers, and ordinary citizens gathered for festivities. Festivities continued throughout the evening with the Mosaic itself becoming the billboard of mesmerizing dynamic 3D graphic light projections, suitable for a mosaic of the 20th century being revived in the 21st century.

The Mosaic was a contested monumental piece from the early days of the post-communist transition. The regime change was preceded by the fall of Stalin and Enver Hoxha statues in the major cities of Albania. The Mosaic on the façade of the National Historic Museum stood a few meters from the falling Hoxha statue in 1991. In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Culture urgently had to deal with the symbolic heritage of the dictatorship inscribed in monumental remains like the Mosaic, as well as recurrent calls to get rid of the Mosaic or otherwise risk its damage and destruction from people taking its fate into their own hands (Kokonozi 2015). With this imminent threat of "iconoclasm from below" (Gamboni 2007, 23) the government altered the Mosaic, removing the two main stars and the red book representing the works of Enver Hoxha (AQSH, f.513, v.1993, d.136, 2). This initial palimpsesting of the Mosaic did not prevent the public association of its aesthetics and the historiography inscribed in its narrative with the ideology of the previous regime. Public debates would recurrently unfold in the media on whether the Mosaic should remain in a central public-facing position, with the Democratic Government refusing to act on its maintenance and in 2013 claiming that the Mosaic had been irreversibly damaged (Nikolli 2013a).

In this chapter I trace how the Socialist Government, through its partnership with the EU and UNOPS to restore the Mosaic, constituted the Mosaic as *iconic*. Through the EU4Culture project, the Albanian government subsumed the preservation of a contested mosaic within the heritage preservatory regimes of the EU and the UN, and their authoritative and authorized heritage discourses. While in the case of the Soviet heritage in Moscow, for instance, depoliticization proceeded through the exile, displacement, and decontextualization of statues (Forest and Johnson 2002), in the case of the mosaic in Tirana, depoliticization efforts were deployed through a double act of *alteration* (removal of the overt symbols of the communist dictatorship) in the early 1990s, and then *the constitution of the iconic* during Rama's government preservatory efforts. The second act of depoliticization was necessary to deflect the political contestatory repertoire that the Mosaic had accumulated throughout transition, as its regime aesthetics and embedded historiography were not neutralized by the removal of overt symbolism.

Following Bartmanski and Alexander (2012), I discursively trace the iconic as both *symbolic condensation* and an *authoritative unit that commands respect*. I trace how the "the iconic" emerged along with the EU and UNOPS restoration efforts and was discursively constituted through the preservatory focus of these two authoritative "voices". The constitution of the iconic gradually emerged through the joint restoration efforts after the government decided to preserve the Mosaic. Constituting the iconic implies selective symbolic amplification, which helped the government with two important political needs: 1) to productively disguise the political decision to preserve and restore the Mosaic as a natural consequence of its iconic status; 2) to stigmatize transitional and emerging contestatory efforts as iconoclastic—a secular type of iconoclasm that could be easily discarded and stigmatized as barbaric, uncivilized, subaltern, once the iconic was discursively constituted. Drawing from Islas Weinstein (2015), I explore at the end the limits of the newly constituted iconic to advance a dominant symbolic script, as it failed to subvert subaltern readings of the symbolic space of the Mosaic.

I trace the political life of the Mosaic through the different waves of contestation, which point to its intrinsic political nature. With the help of a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Byrne 2022; Braun and Clarke 2019; 2021), I trace the clusters of themes and debate axes that emerged through each contestation period. I argue that the predominant debate axis after the initial alterations in 1993—the *preservation* vs *removal* debate—was further complicated by the 2021-

23 intervention of the EU-UN-Albanian-government partnership that restored it. While the restoration project presented the Albanian public with a *fait accompli*, the post-inauguration period unleashed two additional debates: the *preservation of the original* versus *alteration* debate axis and the *restore to the original* versus *restore the altered* Mosaic debate axes. This new round of contestations channeled through the Mosaic central themes of the post-communist transition: justice, art, memory, history, heritage, symbolism, and representation. As a simulacrum of this post-communist processing inhabiting a symbolic landscape beyond art and culture, the Mosaic remained political, triggering resonant and dissonant attitudes, despite the government's best efforts to depoliticize it through iconic status ascription.

The power of the iconic

In my reading of Dominik Bartmanski and Jeffrey C. Alexander (2012), *the iconic* as a social construct seems to sustain two interconnected qualities: 1) *symbolic condensation* of the valuable, meaningful, sacred, and morally respectable in society; and 2) *generative power* as a designated unit of these encoded symbolic values in society. For Alexander (2015, 4) "icons are symbolic condensations that root broad social meaning in specific material form." These *symbolic condensations* are "containers for sacred meaning" and morality in either religious or secular terms, and their material substance stands "for an invisible discursive depth" (Bartmański and Alexander 2012, 2; Alexander 2008). Bartmanski and Alexander (2012) emphasize the invisibility of the condensed values, not because they are dissonant with society, but because the iconic power stands in this compression of the valuable and sacred for usability. Like a computer icon, they argue, the users are "illiterate" regarding the coding that goes into the icon (1-2). This compression power of the iconic is also a generative type of power, because it provides "an aesthetic contact with encoded meanings whose depth is beyond direct ratiocination" (2). It is this authority confined in the iconic by assumed/trusted encoding of the valuable that presents the iconic as an actant (Bartmański and Alexander 2012, 3; Kurasawa 2012), a thing of authority once ordained, that engenders moral, cognitive, affective, and sensual effects without the need for society to reason through its symbolic encoding.

Constituting the iconic then, first implied a symbolic compression that the constituting authoritative voices—in this case the Rama Government, the EU, and UNOPS—executed in proclaiming the Mosaic as iconic. Symbolic condensation in the case of contested heritage

necessarily involves selective symbolic articulation and amplification, which for the Mosaic involved the separation of its dual nature as propaganda and art into dimensions of propaganda and art, and the amplification of the latter. As authoritative encoders of value, authoritative voices selected, articulated, and amplified specific symbolic dimensions of the Mosaic, which were packaged as universal and unequivocal. As an icon is constituted as a unit, an actant, it then commands authority as an icon, discouraging decoding of what has been already condensed symbolically to constitute it. In the case of the Mosaic, this generative power of what is ordained as iconic, was retroactively applied to justify retention and preservation in the first place, disguising the restoration efforts as natural, rational, and respectful of an iconic site which retroactively constitute its value as timeless. Political contestation efforts then emerged as iconoclastic, irrational, and politicized, while restoration is not deemed a political act. The act of symbolic condensation was met with both dissonance and resonance in the Albanian public, pointing to both the political nature of symbolic condensation and its selectivity when facing contested heritage.

Methodology

For the study of debates around the Mosaic and to identify issues around resonance and dissonance I deploy a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2019; 2021) and deployed by Byrne (Byrne 2022). RTA is a data-driven, inductive, interpretative analysis, polished through multiple reiterations of coding and recoding, clustering and re-clustering, theme emergence and re-emergence of qualitative data. Differently from other thematic analyses—such as coding reliability approaches (Boyatzis 1998) or codebook approaches (J. Smith and Firth 2011)[59]—RTA does not impose either codes or themes on the data, but lets code-themes emerge organically through different iterations of the practice of reading, coding, and theme emergence. RTA follows an intuitive model of coding and theme emergence, while considering order a function of both the data and the meaning-making of the reader/researcher, and not a structure imposed on data by the codes and themes generated in advance through theories and hypothesis, which subsequently look for deployment on the data.

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[59] See Byrne (2022) for a discussion of the various difference of thematic analysis traditions.

I deploy RTA in two main rounds: 1) in the archival, print press, and newspaper readings of contention episodes around the Mosaic, mainly clustered around 1993, 2008, and 2013, 2) in the public space of television, talk shows, online portals, and social media debates that followed the May 2023 unveiling of the restored Mosaic. In the second RTA round, I record anonymized public-only Facebook posts and comments around the Mosaic, and then conduct a first round of exploratory reading and coding, followed by other more targeted rounds aimed at generating theme clusters. For the subsequent rounds of coding and recoding, and theme generation, I focus exclusively on my codes, themes, and comment extracts to track code and theme evolution. I zoomed in and out of my data, in between details and concepts, as I schematically organized it and generated themes.

A short history of a contested mosaic

Built in 1981 along with the National Historical Museum, Mosaic "Albania" was on the façade of the museum, a triumphant visual representation of the historiography encoded within the pavilions of the museum. The building of the National Historical Museum had been a major political and construction work of the late communist period, with Dictator Hoxha himself providing specific guidelines regarding conceptualization and the pavilions (Hoxha [1977]1988, AQSH f.490, v.1977, d.455.1; f.490, v.1978, d.569; f.14APOU, v.1978, d.5). His input also discouraged the use of his own figure as the center of what was initially referred to as the "Freedom Monument", demanding a collective representation of the people: "[to] put my figure at the center of the Freedom Monument is not right, its anti-Marxist […] the main character of the Freedom Monument should be the People, the homeland, Albania, and we are the soldiers who, under the leadership of our Party, fought for freedom and we are personified to the extent of the People and the partisans" ([1977] 1988, 2–3). Hoxha had previously indicated that this monument should be "a synthesis of all the freedom fighters of our People […] Albania with a sword in her hand, in her dynamism; not static but in motion" ([1976] 1987, 252). The idea of the monument evolved into a mosaic, with the wishes of the dictator and the composition of the museum's pavilions inspiring the visual representation. A female figure, arguably Albania, with a worker to her right and a flag-bearing partisan to her left, stood with a rifle in her hand at the center of a 13-person mosaic (see Figure 9 for a full view). Fighters from antiquity and the pre-communist history of Albania stood

side by side on the left side of the Mosaic, while partisan and peasant fighters stood on the right, all progressively centering on Albania the central figure.

Mosaic "Albania" was a contested monumental piece from the early days of post-communist transition. The change of regime was preceded by the fall of Stalin and Enver Hoxha statues in the major cities of Albania, with the image of the toppling of Hoxha's statue in Tirana's Skënderbeg Square in 1991, a few meters from the Mosaic, being the most renowned image from the student protests. Ramiz Alia, the Head of State, would call the toppling of Hoxha's statue "an act of vandalism" by "irritated crowds, without any sense of logic," who wanted the destruction of Albania (Abrahams 2015, 83). Although the Mosaic on the façade of the National Historical Museum was elevated above pedestrians' reach and too difficult to dismantle, it was often subjected in the early years of transition to stone throwing and other acts of contestation (Kokonozi 2015), conveying that people situated it within the symbolic space of the previous regime.

The Ministry of Culture was faced with the symbolic heritage of the dictatorship inscribed in monumental remains like the Mosaic. Symbols like the red star had penetrated and altered other national symbols such as the Albanian flag, with the star placed on top of the black eagle. In 1992, Law 7637, article 2, stated that the Albanian flag was composed of a black eagle on a red background, prompting all public institutions and Albanian flags on display to follow this standard, with the yellow-framed red star removed from the national flag. But the Mosaic displayed the red star on its flag, prompting the Ministry of Culture to start consultations on what to do about the contested symbolism on display. The Ministry of Culture held a meeting with architects, historians, and artists, including one of the Mosaic's original creators. In a short memoir, Dashnor Kokonozi (2015), the former General Director of Museums and Cultural Heritage, recalled the atmosphere at the meeting, the divided public sentiment around its preservation/destruction in 1993, and an overall urgency to reach a decision about the fate of the Mosaic. Some of the urgency came from the recurrent calls from different organizations to the Ministry of Culture and Kokonozi himself to deal with the Mosaic themselves or others would deal with it for them. Kokonozi recalls understanding the sentiment, especially with the formerly persecuted wandering the streets of Tirana homeless and desperate, living in the basements of the houses the Hoxha regime had confiscated from them, or others who "had left in search of the remains of their relatives, and were expecting not to find the mosaic upon their return to Tirana." With this imminent threat of

"iconoclasm from below" (Warnke cited in Gamboni 2007, 23), the meeting at the Ministry brought all these consideration to the table and suggested to the Council of Ministers that the Mosaic be altered by removing the two main stars and the red book representing the works of Enver Hoxha (AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.136, 2). In an act that resembled Connerton's (2008) "prescriptive forgetting" the Council of Ministers decided to remove the symbols in November 1993 (AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.136, 1).

The change of the Mosaic was initially conceptualized in two phases. The first phase was to remove the overt symbols of the regime, while the second phase would deal with the entirety of the Mosaic, along with the reconceptualization of the National Historical Museum itself, in order to move away from what was considered to be communist historiography. In fact, in a press release in 1993, the Ministry of Culture described the Mosaic as not only "lacking artistic value" and being a random/banal "propagandistic poster", but as representing the regime's version of historiography that heavily centered on the communist period, while obscuring previous eras of Albanian history (AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.44). According to the Ministry, it was this misrepresentation of history and ideologized historiography, in addition to its aesthetic properties, that remained encoded within the Mosaic despite the removal of overt regime symbols.

This approach to "sanitize" communist-era monumental, artistic, and propaganda works via an alteration of their most obvious symbolism was typical of the second wave of dealing with such remains in Albania. If the first wave immediately after regime change primarily saw monuments destroyed, removed, or exiled through either protest or state action (similar to what Forest and Johnson 2002 observed in Moscow), the second wave saw the government or national institutions adopt an alteration approach. I traced in the previous chapter how in 1994 the Governing Council of Albanian Radio-Television, the national TV broadcaster, had similar discussions and conclusion regarding the filmography and the cinematographic heritage/remains from the communist period. Like the decision to sanitize the Mosaic by removing the most obvious symbols of the stars and Hoxha's book, in the case of movies the "winning" model had Albanian Radio-Television concluding that movies had to be cleansed of the most obvious regime lexicon through altering isolated phrases such as the Party, Enver Hoxha, etc. (AQSH, f.509, v.1994, d.11). The Piramida experienced its own symbolic palimpsesting after the Enver Hoxha Museum within was removed, the building renamed, and its function changed.

In January 2008, while another Democratic Party government was in power, Director of the National Historical Museum Beqir Meta claimed in an interview that he had started a new process of consultations for the removal of the Mosaic and proposed its potential storage within the museum after removal, in line with efforts to reconceptualize the museum itself (Mile 2008). Meta claimed that the Mosaic on the façade of the museum, was an ideological piece which neither represented the internal philosophy of the museum nor an accurate depiction of the national history of the Albanian people. Meta questioned the value of the piece in relation to the public-facing and privileged position it held on the façade, and wanted to transfer the piece inside a museum display within its historical communist period. Meta's words triggered a new public debate for and against this position, with those against the removal questioning the prerogative of the museum director to start this process (Demo 2008a), the legality of the move (Tole 2008), its undemocratic nature, its resemblance to measures from the previous regime (Varvarica Kuka 2008), and the moral and ethical implications of this decision on the preservation of artistic heritage from the communist period (G. Qendro in Demo 2008b). Edi Rama, then Mayor of Tirana, claimed that "no representative of the Stalinist culture could have managed to be so Stalinist in the way of looking at history" (*Shekulli* 2008).

In January 2013 the debate around the Mosaic was reopened again, this time because of the Mosaic's visible physical degradation. The Democratic Minister of Culture Bumçi, the Museum Director Malltezi, and the Head of the Regional Directory for Monuments Kadia argued at different points throughout January (Nikolli 2013b) and February (Nikolli 2013a) that the Mosaic had been poorly executed on a technical level from its very inception, that its days were numbered, and that the costs for repairs were either being evaluated or were too high with a small probability of success. Museum Director Malltezi asked whether money should be spent to "repair a mosaic of this nature, or to think of something [new] more representative for the National Museum, [that meets] the spirit of [our] time" (Mile 2013a). The creators of the Mosaic loudly protested what they considered to be its silent destruction through negligence and an institutional refusal to act. Returning to the initial debate on the ideological dimensions of the piece, one of the artists Anastas Kostandini claimed that he did not understand why officials hated the Mosaic so much, since all the creators were artists, not communists (Mile 2013b). Another renowned visual artist of the communist period, Ksenofon Dilo, complained that he noticed "a tendency to renounce

everything that belonged to the past regime, but this is a piece of art that brings no harm" (*Sot* 2013).

Apart from the first discussion of the fate of the mosaic in 1993 when the axis of debate revolved around preservation, alteration, or removal, all the subsequent rounds of contestation revolved around the preservation or removal of the altered mosaic. After 1993, I found through RTA analysis that the preservation stances coalesced around the artistic value of the mosaic, the need to distinguish communist-era artistic works from the dictatorship itself, and the civilizational and democratic value of preservation as a moral imperative. Removal stances coalesced around the lack of artistic value of the mosaic and its propagandistic value, its communist representation of the history of Albania, the need for a new symbolic landscape, and often an overall lack of willingness to restore the Mosaic and to let it run its natural course of decay. For my second round of RTA iteration on the May 2023 media debate, I considered these axes and themes as an orienting compass in navigating a more complex set of issues, the involvement of local and international actors, and the new space social media provided for the general public to express opinions in real time.

The EU4Culture Project and the birth of the iconic

The EU4Culture Project was introduced as "one of the largest cultural heritage programmes funded by the European Union with a total budget of €40 million," (EU4Culture 2021a) a budget meant to restore 24 sites in 11 municipalities in Albania. The project brought together the EU as a funder, UNOPS as an implementer, and the Albanian Ministry of Culture following the deadly earthquake that hit Albania in 2019. The introduction of the EU4Culture project was framed in the language of salvation, a language resembling that used by the United Nations in humanitarian situations and UNESCO in cultural heritage preservation. It started by presenting the deadly aftermath of the 2019 earthquake that hit Albania, leaving "extensive damages in 11 municipalities". It continued by stating that the project would be "focused on renovation and revitalization of major cultural heritage sites damaged by the earthquake." It explained the "Building Back Better" principle (a UN post-disaster principle) and the UN Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (EU4Culture 2021a).

The project page suggested that the Mosaic was part of the EU4Culture project because of the consequences it suffered from the 2019 earthquake. Although the Mosaic had been damaged throughout transition, and the previous government had claimed that it was already irreparable, the EU4Culture project situated the damage within the earthquake purview, framing intervention within this disaster mediation strategy and with the techno-scientific language invoking a preservatory salvation imperative. In fact, the Mosaic had needed attention for a while, and its "limbo" situation was as much a result of contestation as of financial limitations.[60] The EU4Culture project circumvented this material and political history as it activated its restorative efforts under the earthquake-damaged umbrella.

The EU4Culture preceded its rationale for intervention with a grand opening paragraph, accompanied with vintage sepia pictures from communist Albania, from the time when the Mosaic was first built:

> "The iconic mosaic of the façade of the National Historic Museum is considered to be one of the finest examples of late Albanian Socialist Realism. Installed in 1981, it showcases some of the important milestones of the country's history, spanning from antiquity to the Communist era, across its 565 m2 surface area. Its intricate design was crafted by the renowned artists of the time, including Vilson Kilica, Josif Droboniku, Agim Nebiu, Anastas Kostandini, and Aleksandër Filipi" (EU4Culture 2021b).

While the text and pictures appeared nostalgic, two issues were immediately visible: 1) the assessment of the Mosaic as "iconic" and "one of the finest examples of late Albanian Socialist Realism"; and 2) the claim that the Mosaic "showcases some of the important milestones of the country's history, spanning from antiquity to the Communist era." As the previous history of contestation indicated, this aesthetic and historical assessment of the Mosaic presented multiple issues for discussion—and contestation—that the EU4Culture seemed to ignore. Aesthetically, the early 1990s assessments from the Ministry of Culture and the reports from their meetings with the

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[60] The EU4Culture provides pictures of damage, attributing it to the earthquake (EU4Culture 2021b), see for instance: https://eu4culture.al/location/mosaic-of-the-facade-at-the-national-historical-museum/. But the museum was severely damaged long before the earthquake. In my collection of printed press articles tracing the contestation of the Mosaic in 2008 and 2013 (and a few instances in 2015 and 2017), often what spurred the debate was the complaint by one of the creators about the damage to the mosaic. See for instance the pictures of damage reported in Shekulli (Mile 2013b), Sot (2015; 2017), and Gazeta Shqip (2015).This damage reported in the Albanian newspapers had occurred over time, either from structural issues or negligence.

original artists and other professionals did not claim the Mosaic to be an artistic masterpiece (AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.44; f.513, v.1993, d.12). Dashnor Kokonozi (2015), in his memoir about the early days discussing the Mosaic at the Ministry of Culture in 1993, wrote that "The mosaic, since it was created, at least among my friends, was considered worthless, completely confusing, sought to synthesize centuries of history and ended up in a parade of costumes from different times. But it is also done quite badly." While the Ministry of Culture in the early 1990s may have politically stigmatized the Mosaic, and the assessment from Kokonozi may represent a personal opinion, the EU4Culture's assessment of the Mosaic as "one of the finest examples of late Albanian Socialist Realism" seems at best hyperbolic. Moreover, socialist realism was not a typical aesthetic like any other, but a tradition in non-democratic regimes and countries where propaganda and aesthetics were intertwined, as the affective and sensory experiences of this lived tradition engender nostalgia for some and unpleasant memories for others. Describing socialist realism as an artistic style like any other was a *political* choice, whether or not it was meant intentionally to be such.

Apart from its questionable artistic value as a representative of a state-mandated artistic tradition publicly contested in both value and legitimacy, the Mosaic also represented a particular form of historical primordialism in line with the historiography cultivated during the communist regime. The Mosaic was not meant to "showcase some of the important milestones of the country's history" as the EU4Culture gaze assessed, but was rather meant to showcase the *communist* view of the history of Albania through a particular ideological reading (Jost, Clayer, and Lubonja 2021)[61] and a dialectics of history synthesized in the central female figure, supposedly Albania, with the partisan and the proletarian on her right and left (Marku 2023). Finally, by describing history as spanning smoothly "from antiquity to the Communist era", the EU4Culture presented the Communist era, still a recent and scarring political moment for Albania, as an unproblematic point in history on par with antiquity.

The remaining text from the EU4Culture (2021b) description was technical, professional, and "uncontestable." The pictures included were colorful, collaborative, of people with yellow helmets at work, measuring, designing, polishing, presenting—a fitting aesthetic for both disaster

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[61] See in particular Lubonja's essay in this volume.

management and the act of rebuilding. One is amused by the pictures of the stones, the meticulousness of craftmanship described, the professional pictures of the work, and at times moved by the fact that the new tesseras (mosaic stones), were purchased at the same factory in Venice (Italy) where the original stones were purchased 40 years prior. The story of an iconic mosaic comes full circle, from its birth during the dictatorship through the nostalgia of vintage pictures, to destruction attributed to natural disaster, to its rescue by the EU4Culture project and preservation professionals at work, to the restored Mosaic, and finally to the spectacle of inauguration day (EU4Culture 2023b). Iconicity accompanied this story from its very start, giving the Mosaic a status that appeared to be reclaimed rather than constituted through the EU4Culture project.

The Ministry of Culture

The Ministry of Culture of Albania, the main stakeholder of the project, best outlined the rationale that underpinned the *symbolic condensation* required to generate and constitute the iconic in the EU4Culture project and partner discourses. For the iconic to emerge as a productive political category, value should be articulated and inscribed in it as a unit, as an actant. Referring to the Mosaic and other works of complex symbolism, Minister of Culture Margariti stated that "[w]e must study and talk about these works, but we must separate the craftsmanship, the work of art from the politics, the ideology of that time" (Delia-Kaci 2023). This work of separation also involved a work of selection and amplification that the ministry had already applied by including the Mosaic in a restoration project. As the ministry chose what to preserve and what to actively obfuscate, the superimposition of this value derivation could now be locked in the iconic as a generative political category.

As this work of separation and amplification came with value judgment, the Ministry of Culture could label contestation as being on the wrong side of the value divide, and decisively face the previous transitional elite through its efforts to preserve. On the day of the inauguration, Minister Margariti recalled, "[t]he preservation and restoration of the Mosaic has been debatable for many years. There were those who wished to remove it from this façade, however it is easy to demolish the past for the sake of the present" (EU4Culture 2023b). In another instance, Minister Margariti called the debates advocating the removal of the Mosaic "barren" and "base" (Delia-Kaci 2023). This stigmatization of contestation not only managed to accomplish valuable

discursive work in support of preservation, challenging the contestatory repertoire inscribed in the post-communist life of the Mosaic, but it also discarded and stigmatized the emerging fractions within the Democratic Party that since Rama's second governing mandate had politically articulated the need to legally regulate the public use of communist symbols.[62] The regulatory power of the DP's unsuccessful draft law proposed in 2022 would have also extended to the artistic works from the communist period and their public broadcasting (Parliament of Albania, Draft Law 2243, August 4, 2022).

The stigmatization of contestation was also facilitated by the involvement of the EU and UN in preservatory efforts and the discursive reliance on the globalized Western bias towards preservation through its universalized AHD, with "destroyers" of heritage being successfully stigmatized as barbarians, vandals, uncivilized destroyers of history, iconoclasts. The EU4Culture project grounded the preservatory efforts of contested monuments within this wider legitimation narrative of the authorized global heritage discourse, a discourse that the government strategically avoided when choosing to destroy the National Theater. Like an actants, "seeming to possess volitional qualities relative to human ways of being," as Bartmanski and Alexander (2012, 3) describe the iconic, the Mosaic seemed to acquire personhood through being constituted as a space for intervention and salvation. It 'has gone through a lot' and survived becomes a discursive trope, a strategy which arguably provokes sympathy for this almost "warrior Mosaic" while serving to stigmatize and delegitimize its threateners. As the Mosaic was constituted as a "masterpiece", contesters were stigmatized as oblivious to its greatness, and potentially iconoclasts. Instead of adoration for a great piece of art, contesters and disputers were the reason why the Mosaic has been 'through a lot'.

Minister Margariti, after stigmatizing contestation, transitioned in her inauguration speech into a global repertoire of discursive tropes on memory and learning from the past, a resonant script with the partners the government had mobilized. In Margariti's words: "[…] preserving the memory of the past with all the good and bad, is vital for any people; a necessary catharsis for the journey to the future" (EU4Culture 2023b). This project of restoration financed by the EU and

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[62] These efforts started in 2017, with DP MPs investing in a draft law to ban the symbols of the dictatorship, triggered by the public use of pictures of Hoxha. These initial efforts concerned the political symbols of the dictatorship.

implemented by UNOPS, argued the minister is also "a confirmation of the path towards the European family," with the EU representing a universally shared aspiration in Albania, further situating these restorative choices within the path towards the EU.

UNOPS and EU

Like EU4Culture, the UNOPS office, under the title "Preserving the Past, Embracing the Future," called the Mosaic "a renowned masterpiece of late Albanian Socialist Realism […] widely regarded as one of the finest examples of this artistic style" (UNOPS 2024). On a similar celebratory note, and in preparation for the grand inauguration a year after, the iconic began to emerge as a discursive and material reference in the broader EU discourse, on its way to engendering affective connections with the people of Albania. During Europe Week 2022, the EU Delegation in Tirana placed a wooden replica of the Mosaic on one of the most popular pedestrian streets of Tirana, not far from the Mosaic itself, with empty circles for the three key figures' heads on the Mosaic. "Come to Pedonale in Tirana on May 9 to take an iconic photo as the mosaic character!" (European Union in Albania 2022)[63] the EU announced through social media, inviting people to go and place their faces in the holes and "become" those "beloved" figures for one day. The EU was inadvertently aiming to reshape the emotional connection of citizens to the Mosaic through its pop PR.

The limits of symbolic condensation: resonance and dissonance

To kickstart Europe Week 2023, the European Delegation in Tirana circulated a colorful public invitation to the inauguration and grand reopening of the restored Mosaic of the National Historic Museum of Albania (EU4Culture 2023a). On the afternoon of May 16, the restored Mosaic was covered by a giant EU flag, awaiting its unveiling that evening. During the previous two years, the Mosaic had been covered by another EU billboard, hiding the background restoration work, and showing a poster replica of the Mosaic and the restoration project's details, sponsors, and timeline under the title "Building back Albania's cultural heritage for the future." The EU flag was lifted in the presence of flash mobs, music tones, glitter, and ovations. As the glitter settled, festivities dispersed, and the public could gaze on the uncovered Mosaic, a public paranoia spread in social

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[63] See the original Facebook picture at:
https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=367755408730768&set=a.112356977583947

media and then the online media. Where were the stars? Although the stars had originally been removed in 1993, many observers and news outlets examined the Mosaic anew after the EU4Culture restoration, apparently noticing this removal for the first time and claiming that they had been removed during the EU4Culture restoration project.

In this section, I follow the debates that emerged over the restored Mosaic, to outline the limits of a freshly ordained iconic actant and its symbolic resonance. Through these debates and a glitch in communication, like in a mythical time compression that the iconic also encapsulates, the Albanian public processed the restored Mosaic and its 1990s alterations in few days. This traditional media and social media "town hall" pointed to issues of resonance and dissonance, the perception of overt symbols and the perception of aesthetic form. Most importantly, it revealed the limits of symbolic condensation in a newly generated "iconic" category emerging from a particular government-mandated political processing of the contestatory repertoire inscribed in the Mosaic throughout transition.

I identify three debate axes by deploying RTA. These debates point to a complex space of resonance and dissonance, amplified by its location within the Facebook "public space" with the public commenting and engaging in real time, and portals and national TV feeding on it.[64] In a span of few days, TV, social media, and news portals all circulated news, statements, and positions, from one space into another and back, through a loop that resembled a public agora. The three debates I trace simultaneously and identify separately for analytical purposes are: (1) the *preservation of the original* versus *alteration* debate; *(2)* the *restore to the original* versus *restore the altered* mosaic debate; and (3) a more traditional *preserve* vs *remove* debate. Once I trace them each individually, and code and thematically cluster them, I bring the big picture together in Grid 1, with themes and subthemes organized within.

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[64] I exclusively focus on social media and TV talk shows as primary data in tracing the debates. There was another cluster of scholars, academics and cultural analysts that engaged with this issue without taking stances, or took stances on issues such as the Mosaic's representation of Albania's history, or its aesthetic and symbolic nature, without commenting on its fate as such. Others brought in experiences from other post-totalitarian/authoritarian cases, especially East Germany, in an attempt to derive principles for dealing with monuments and artistic remains. The online magazine, *Peizazhe te fjales*, was a critical space where such views were discussed in long article formats.

The star removal controversy: the 'preservation of the original versus alteration' debate

Only four days after the confetti came down and the visual hangover of the spiraling 3D effects on the Mosaic subsided, posts started circulating on Facebook that the Mosaic was missing its original red [communist] star(s). Before and after pictures inundated social and online portals, claiming to represent the pre- and post-EU restoration project. The online controversy on social media was instigated by a Tirana-based journalist, then *amplified* by online portals and their Facebook pages in turn (Gazeta Drita 2023).[65] While providing before and after pictures of what was claimed to be the before and after EU restoration project, these initial posts first pointed to the missing stars on the Mosaic: a big red star that originally stood behind the central female figure of the Mosaic and a smaller red star, originally on top of the eagle on the Albanian flag (ObserverKult 2023a; Gazeta Tema 2023; Dosja.al 2023). Gazeta Drita's before-and-after post on the missing big star posed the question of whether the star should have been removed during restoration. Shortly after, posters and commentators noticed that the cloth the central male figure to the left (known as the Proletarian) was holding had originally been a red book. People on Facebook could not decide if the red book was meant to represent Enver Hoxha's writing (*Veprat e Enverit*), Marx's Capital, or another placeholder for the Party (the Party of Labor of Albania). For two days and a half, gazing into the internet, as people on Facebook were coming to terms with the alleged recent loss of the stars and red book, the posts, comments, and shares resembled a live survey, where respondents cast their "votes" and sometimes thoughts on whether the symbols should have been removed by the restoration project. Although a public historian, Kastriot Dervishi, posted archival materials proving that the alterations were actually made in 1993, the debates that unfolded around the controversy are an interesting window into the symbolic processing of the Mosaic in 2023.[66]

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[65] Most of these online portals' public posts that engaged thousands of Facebook users during May 20, 21 and 22, 2023 are now deleted. In my documentation of posts from online portals and news sites as the controversy was unfolding, media and portals such as Gazeta Drita (still publicly available on Facebook in August 2024), BalkanWeb, NewsBomb, Dosja.al all provided before and after pictures attributing the removal of overt symbols to the 2023 restoration project.

[66] Following this uncontested debate-settler moment, Facebook posts and online portals feeding on Facebook followed suit. Dosja.al (2023), for instance, updated the title of their piece "The red star got removed", with an "EXPLANATION", while Gazeta Drita, was fact checked in a reporting piece from Faktoje.al. Faktoje.al (Topi 2023) called out Drita on their Facebook "survey" that misled the public, and Drita (2023) edited their Facebook "survey" (which didn't have much effect on commentators' inclination to continue casting "votes" on the debate as if it were a recent one). Gazeta Tema, on the other hand, did not bother to change their inaccurate reporting. By May 22, TV channels called in the artists that had worked on the original mosaic, experts and the Minister of Culture to

By deploying a second round of RTA on more than 400 Facebook comments generated by the posts of these first instigators and amplifiers, and being cognisant of the debate axes that had emerged through the transitional period, I find that the prevailing debate axis was *preservation of the original* versus *alteration*. Holding the debate on these grounds, from both instigators and amplifiers, affected how commentators on social media positioned themselves and approached the fate of the Mosaic. Because of how the "questions" were posed, only a minority engaged with the *preservation* vs *removal of the original* axis by arguing that the original should have been removed in the first place. This Facebook public "moment" recalled a debate that could have happened in 1993, when the original decisions about the artistic and monumental remains were taken. In the prevailing *preservation of the original* versus *alteration* debate, I noticed the emergence of two main subthemes which I theme-code as art and as testimony/justice (see Table 2). Those that would have wanted the preservation of the original mainly argued that art should not be altered, that this tendency represented the woke and cancel culture of today, and/or that the original mosaic was a testimony of its time and democratic regimes should not censure art like dictatorships do. Those praising the altered version pointed at the propagandistic nature of the Mosaic, and how the original upheld the symbolic landscape of communism.

In the meantime, analysts, researchers, academics, and a more informed subset of the public space were engaged in two parallel debates that were tangentially informed by this wider public controversy (as the noise could not be ignored), but also developed independently from it: (1) the *restore to the original* versus *restore the altered* mosaic debate, and (2) a more traditional *preserve* vs *remove* debate.

The 'restore to the original' versus 'restore the altered mosaic' debate

Some of the experts on TV, media, and social media, building on the debate over the assumed alterations and having checked their facts accordingly, pivoted discussions towards a new debate: whether the EU restoration project should have restored the Mosaic to its pre-1993 original version. A vocal public proponent of this debate, and of the position that the EU restoration project should have restored the Mosaic to its original version was Auron Tare. Tare was an advocate of

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reconfirm that the alterations had happened in 1993 and that the EU4Culture restoration project had not further altered the Mosaic.

cultural heritage preservation, a former chairman of the UNESCO Scientific and Technical Committee on Underwater World Heritage, and a former MP of the Socialist Party (the communist-successor party of Albania). He shared these views on social media and participated in talk shows defending this position (Top Channel Albania 2023). Praising the artistic value of the Mosaic as one of the renowned pieces of socialist realism, Tare questioned the "historical *retouche*" of the Mosaic and argued that the alteration was perhaps justified immediately after the fall of communism, but that its artistic value should now be fore fronted and that the post-communist period should not operate according to the same standards as the communist regime. For Tare, the dictatorship was over and what remained from its artistic and cultural production had artistic, cultural, and historical value. The shortcomings of the hasty moves in the early 1990s were merely tolerated, but the EU should have known better. Tare asked, "should a piece sponsored by European funds represent an altered/touched up history?".

Supporters of his position restated these arguments, questioned the culturedness/civility of those who had altered the mosaic originally, and appealed to common Balkanist tropes (see Todorova 2009) about civilizational standards and Albanian backwardness, bringing in examples of superior European attitudes towards "art as art". Some commentators, because of the overlap with the controversy on the "recent" missing stars, used the opportunity to grieve the alteration of 1993. A minority defending the altered version argued that the overt communist symbolism was not representative of all Albanians and that symbolic *retouche* was a necessity for this Mosaic to remain on the façade of the museum in a central public place. One of the original artists of the Mosaic, who was also part of the consultations and alterations in 1993, defensively argued that the updating of the overt communist symbolism on the Mosaic in those early days of transition was the only way to save it during the post-communist period.

The preservation vs removal debate

The most prevalent debate during transition, *preservation* vs *removal*, re-emerged during this contestation episode. This time, some of the debaters could not but engage with the original vs altered dimension sparked by the public discussions. If the previous round of debate had seen actors engage with the options available for the post-1993 Mosaic, this round saw actors take stances on which version of the Mosaic they would have liked to preserve or destroy, and for what reasons. Furthermore, while throughout transition indignation came from the preservationist

proponents of the altered Mosaic, and indifference meant the decay and potential removal of the Mosaic, this time around, after the EU-sponsored project guaranteed the life of the altered version for posterity, indignation came from those who would have rather seen the original removed and stored in a museum, while indifference meant the preservation of the altered version after restoration.

Most actors in this debate came from civil society, academia, and the wider research community. Proponents of removal were divided into those who would have liked the original Mosaic stored unaltered in a museum, and others who argued that the Mosaic, in whatever format, still retained the symbolism of the communist period and did not belong on the façade of the museum, having an undeserved public visibility in the central square of Tirana. For instance, Jonila Godole, Executive Director of the Institute for Democracy, Media, and Culture in Tirana (IDMC), argued that the piece should not have been altered, but removed in the 1990s and placed in a museum (*Panorama Online* 2023). The EU, according to Godole, "financed the falsification of history, and not the preservation of cultural heritage." She argued that the money invested in restoring the Mosaic could have been invested in building museums of prisons and labor camps instead, which would better serve the younger generation learning the history of communism than the restored Mosaic ever would (ObserverKult 2023b).

The cacophony and complexity of stances ultimately showed the limits of an authoritative symbolic order to neutralize the contestatory capital that has been inscribed in the mosaic through both its aesthetic qualities and their political articulation through transition. Overall, in my thematic reading of the commentaries, people on Facebook and the media were also undecided as to what the function of such monuments should be in the present. The views on the function of these monuments varied from tools of memorialization, of education, of justice (preserved or destroyed), of truth, or of nostalgia. The Mosaic, for instance, variously taught something about the past (unaltered); taught something about transition (altered); represented the period that gave birth to it (either the dictatorship or socialist realism); either honored or dishonored the memory of the regime (a plethora of stances on the primacy of those that suffered the most, or the common citizen); represented the history of the country, or misrepresented the history of the country by "telling" the historical narrative designed and propagated during the communist regime. The Mosaic played all these roles and more, and now that it had been altered, people argued that its

function and significance was either amplified, reduced, gained, lost, or different. This episode in the life of the Mosaic served to bring these thoughts, feelings, and stances to the fore, ultimately demonstrating the limitations of authoritative symbolic orders. The Mosaic thus remained a repository of contestation, resonance and dissonance, as it was being celebrated, grieved, and challenged 42 years after its creation, 30 years from its alteration, and mere days from its restoration.

Conclusions

In this chapter I explored the tactics and the limits of constituting contested heritage as iconic. By tracing the constitution of the Mosaic "Albania" as iconic during its EU4Culture restoration project I traced the selective logic of preservation, the discursive power of authoritative heritage voices, and their instrumentalization in promoting selective government agendas on contested heritage. Strategies of depoliticization emerged in my analysis as a tool of political power. I explored the concept of the "iconic" as a discursive construct in order to understand its political power as a signifier when deployed by authoritative voices. I also explored its limits as symbolic condensation when authoritatively constituted on contested heritage, unable to fully neutralize the contestatory capital inscribed in sites. Resonance and dissonance emerged as both testimonies of symbolic plurality, and as public effects of government-mandated symbolic selectivity which fails to dominantly constitute a site as unequivocally preservable.

Ultimately, this freshly and authoritatively constituted icon may over time reshape the sensory and affective experiences of the public towards a visual site that retains signifiers that can inform contestatory sentiments. While the visual and aesthetic retains a certain power to directly affect the experience of the viewer, their symbolic translation passes through political articulation. Ultimately, the rapid "modernization" and radical transformation of Tirana in the past decade of Socialist urban governance may do more work to iconize the Mosaic than any government-mandated discursive tropes, as it is one of the few remaining familiar sites in a deeply alienated Tirana.

Table 2. Thematic analysis of the May 2023 debates on the restored Mosaic "Albania"

		Altered mosaic	Original mosaic
Preserve/ retain	As testimony	Retain it given the banality of today's art, a sense of nostalgia found because of today's alienation. Preservation as passivity [proactivity would be to destroy, which is unreasonable] [justice inclusivity] retain as a more acceptable form of inclusivity, for pro-communists and anti-communists alike. We have bigger problems to solve with Rama's crony capitalism. The city is changing too fast, due to the Rama government construction. Let's retain it as a memory of the city we have already lost.	As a testimony to terror [justice/educational/testimonial] As a testimony of history [education/testimony/built heritage] As a testimony of socialist realism [education/testimony/built heritage]
	As art	The alterations removed the propagandistic and overt ideological elements, leaving the artistic value intact. The EU restoration preserves this artistic value. An overt ideological piece should not have a central position on the façade of the Museum.	Democratic societies preserve art – the Western experience proves this. Dictatorships destroy or alter art. The destruction of art is acting like barbarians and uncivilized. Civilizational moral imperative to preservation.
Remove/ alter	As testimony	Unrepresentative of history and promotes the a national mythology developed during communism. Unrepresentative of history because it forefronts the communist period disproportionately; it is still socialist realist symbolism, although the overt symbols have been removed. Still reminiscent of the era.	The original Mosaic should have been preserved, removed from the façade, and stored in a museum. It has educational value, but only within a museum, where it does not appear in public as representative for all.
	As art	Not valuable or aesthetically valuable; Not art but propaganda; still propaganda because of its style, typical socialist realist aesthetics, and schematics.	Not valuable or aesthetically pleasing, not art but propaganda Banality of art under dictatorships, or subsumed to ideology

Appendix: Photographs

Figure 8: The original Mosaic "Albania". Clemens Schmillen, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 9: The Mosaic "Albania" in 2017 before restoration. Bruno Rijsman, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 10: The Mosaic "Albania" after restoration. Author, 2023.

CHAPTER 5 – A Pyramid for the Youth: The eschatology of the Museum of the Dictator

In a *New York Times* article about the rebirth of the *Piramida* (Pyramid) from the museum of Dictator Hoxha into a coding and technology center for youth, Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj shared triumphantly that "Hoxha will be rolling in his grave to see his memorial turned into a celebration of capitalism, jobs, and the future" (Higgins 2023). In doing so Socialist Party Mayor Veliaj, reiterated a discursive trope cultivated by Socialist Party leader and Prime Minister Edi Rama. In a 2019 article about the opening of the Villa of Dictator Hoxha, Rama told *The Guardian* that it was important for Hoxha's spirit to inhabit the Villa while "all the things the guy would hate should happen" inside (Walker 2019), insinuating that Hoxha's spirit would be tortured by the openness to culture, art, and foreign visitors in his house. Two years later, at the opening of the 'revitalization' project to turn the Piramida into a technology center for the youth, Rama reiterated that this project represented the opposite of what Hoxha would have wished for. On Hoxha's birthday, October 16, 2023, the Rama-Veliaj duo inaugurated the rebirthed Piramida in a celebration that intentionally coincided with the hosting of the Berlin Process Summit 2023, bringing European and Western Balkans leaders together in the Piramida for a final exorcism of the spirit of Hoxha.

In this chapter, I argue that the Rama Government "depoliticized" the Piramida by transforming it from a symbol of the dictatorship and a contested piece of the transition period to a symbol of urban revival. I trace the transformation of the Piramida as a process of "transcendence," with the Piramida passing through multiple rounds of depoliticization that foreclosed contestation. I understand the Piramida's previous political nature in two dimensions: (1) *power* – the embodiment of the power of the dictatorship (communism) and (2) *contestation* – its contested existence throughout transition because of its association with the dictatorship and the symbolic capital it generated for elites (transition).

The Rama government transcended the Piramida's political dimensions related to *power* and *contestation* discursively, materially, symbolically, and functionally in four steps: (1) casting

the earlier transition period as a wild time of destructive impulses and banal and erratic use of space, along with categorizing the previous elite as destructive and lacking a sense of historical preservation; (2) the exorcism of Hoxha through metaphors of spirit, grave, and mausoleum[67]; (3) the functional transformation of the building into a neutral, future-oriented "apolitical" space of technology for youth; and (4) relying on the power of the spectacular (Mitchell 2003) and aspiring towards a new universal by inaugurating its new form and substance on the last day of the EU Berlin Process Summit 2023 in Tirana. This final move during the "rebirthed" Piramida's inauguration associated it with the European Union, a "universal," uncontested and uncontestable supranational entity to which all Albanian political parties aspired. These steps manifested as intertwined, closely connected, discursive threads that built a story of transcendence from a violent dictatorship through the wild contestation of the 1990s transition to an apolitical coding center for youth.

While the Mosaic was preserved as *art* and the Theater was destroyed in the name of *modernization* (both alternative strategies of depoliticization), the Piramida transcended politics through transformation. Following Giesen (2005, 275–76) I understand the performance of transcendence in politics as the constitution of ordinary social reality by reference to and juxtaposition with something extraordinary. This *governance trope* embedded in the transformation of the Piramida deployed in performing symbolic and material transcendental work was a metaphor of rebirth. The Piramida embodied the symbolic transposition from Dictator Hoxha—the fallen "god" and "cult of the individual" of the secular communist state—to artificial intelligence, retaining *shape* but transforming *content* and *function*. The rebirthed Piramida emerges as a palimpsest shedding the dystopian political layers of the past to embrace a technological utopian future—a new transhumanism of sorts. If the Renaissance urban governance metaphor had a materialized embodiment, it would be the Piramida.

For this chapter, my primary data is archival research (1987-1995) and the media analysis I conducted on the Piramida (2008-2023), in addition to governmental strategies, key laws and decisions, maps, videos, and reports. I conduct *a political genealogy* of the building to locate where *power* and *contestation* resided discursively and materially over time. I use archival research to

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[67] The Piramida was not Hoxha's mausoleum, but a museum.

understand the origin story of the building and key decisions during the early transition. For the media analysis I process-trace events and discourse by identifying thousands of articles that mentioned the Piramida and by focusing in on 182 articles and news reports that traced the debates through various episodes of contestation, primarily to identify the discursive tropes and the actors' politicization and depoliticization strategies. I follow Jenkins' (2011) understanding of politicization and depoliticization strategies to identify clusters in data: "a strategy of politicisation, in its broadest sense, entails exposing and questioning what is taken for granted, or perceived to be necessary, permanent, invariable, morally or politically obligatory and essential," (159) while "a strategy of depoliticization entails forming necessities, permanence, immobility, closure and fatalism and concealing/negating or *removing* contingency" (160). I complemented these articles with videos, talk shows, and inauguration speeches, focusing on Prime Minister Rama and Tirana Mayor Veliaj as the masterminds behind the projects, with an eye for décor, aesthetics, mannerisms, visuals, and sounds.

Birth: a museum for the dictator

The Piramida was built to immortalize the memory of dictator Enver Hoxha and signal the continuation of the dictatorship and of his governing doctrine of communism. Following Hoxha's death in 1985, Albania's communist leadership vowed to preserve his memory, his version of communism, and the cult of Hoxha (*Zëri i Popullit* 1985; Albanian Affairs Study Group 1985; AQSH f.14APSTR, v.1985, d.1945; f.490, v.1986, d.715). Sculptors and architects were mobilized for the task and in 1988 two major sites of memorialization were inaugurated: Hoxha's statue, placed in Skanderbeg central square, and the Museum "Enver Hoxha". Klement Kolaneci, Hoxha's son-in-law and leading architect of the project together with Hoxha's daughter (AQSH f.511, v.1986, d.206) revealed that the project costed the equivalent of three million Euro (Delisula 2010a), with expensive materials and other objects for the exposition halls of the museum imported from abroad (AQSH f.490, v.1987, d.643), a luxurious bill for the impoverished self-reliant Albanian state of the late 1980s. But secular gods need their own temples. In addition to the 22-ton marble statue,[68] central to the main hall of the museum, and other imported goods, Hoxha's

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[68] Higgins 2023 New York times article reports on its proportions. Kristaq Rama, the father of PM Rama is reported in the archives as one of the architects that made the marble statue of the main hall (See AQSH folders 513 – 1987 – 53 – 001; 490 – 1987 – 643 – 026.)

family gifted personal belongings including books and clothes (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010h) for exhibition.

With the agony of the regime in 1990 and the toppling of Hoxha's statue in Skanderbeg square the museum of the dictator was counting its last days, as the fall of the dictatorship would demand the fall of its symbolic order. In August 1991, the Council of Ministers put the museum under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture (AQSH f.490, v.1991, d.608, 1) facilitating its transformation into the International Center of Culture (ICC) (AQSH f.490, v.1991, d.608, 23-24; DCM 286/1991). Prior to its "death", the Museum staff advocated for the preservation of both building and its expositions. They called on the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Public Order to protect the building as property of the People and called on the Socialist Party of Albania (newly renamed) and the Ministry of Culture for the preservation of the exposition (AQSH f.1390, v.1991, d.4). The enormous central white statue of Hoxha in the main hall was destroyed,[69] while the relics of the museum started their exile first at the National Historical Museum and later at the Kinostudio (Jupaj 2016).

The decoupling of the building from its symbolic power-signaling interiors that commemorated the dictator left the building in an ambiguous symbolic state. What had constituted its identity as the museum of the dictator—its interiors—were now in exile or destroyed. But the building was built to host the museum, and its particular shape continued to invoke the symbolic, secular, yet anti-religious fanatic mythical order of the regime.[70] With the interiors gone, the building remained nevertheless politically haunted—as the favorite political metaphor of post-communist would have it—by a primordial original association with the communist dictatorship and Hoxha.

Purgatory: transition

The symbolic ambiguity of the building facilitated the re-appropriation of the site for the new symbolic order of transition to democracy and market economy. Throughout the first and second

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[69] According to Higgins 2023, citing Frrok Cupi at the time, the statue of Hoxha in the hall was a liability for the survival of the building itself.

[70] Its leading architect Kolaneci argued that the Piramida was not an accurate name for the shape of the building, and was not designed to resemble one, but the shape reminded people of a pyramid, and it was baptized as such during the student movement in the early 1990s (see Tarifa 1995).

decade of transition, the Piramida was a typical transition space, undefined, unspecified, in-between, fragmented into pieces of public and private entities, and functionally adapted to the chaotic needs of the emerging market economy. The building officially remained the International Center of Culture (ICC), although parts of the space were leased through various contracts with other public and private entities (see for instance the lease contracts in 1993 at AQSH f.513, v.1993, d.139), resembling the fate of VDNKh in Moscow in the 1990s (see Forest and Johnson 2002). The Democratic Government renamed the ICC as ICC "Arbnori" after Pjetër Arbnori, a former political prisoner of the Hoxha regime and Chairman of Parliament in the first mandate of the DP majority in 1992.

Transition, through its restructuring and deregulation *Zeitgest*, re-conditioned the symbolic space, giving way to a new symbolic order of permissibility that manifested in the building of the former museum of the dictator. The power of the state to name and semantically order society—to inscribe meaning on Albania's building, hills, factories, bridges, and beaches through its notorious slogans—was also gone. This semantic deregulation manifested in the building now colloquially referred to by the people of Tirana as the *Piramida*. Its new name "Piramida" arose during the early transition when the student movement dubbed it the "Pyramid of the Pharaoh" (Tarifa 1995, 149). It also pointed to the functional indefinability of this entity which ceased to be a museum, and became a multitude of spaces of culture, fairs, media, private night club, USAID offices, the background for burning cars and desperate people during the anarchy and civil unrest of 1997, NATO headquarters during the Kosovo war, and a favorite playground for the children of Tirana, who would climb its marble exterior before sliding down its walls. A city accustomed to toponyms of function to indicate distinct places around the city center (the museum, the square, the theater, the opera, the gallery, the academy) needed a holistic name for this building lacking a single function, and the consensus by popular use was Piramida. This baptism stuck, as both a mark of the semantic deregulation of the early transition, and a signal of a symbolic transition that could make space for new functional accommodations.

Judgment Day: a battle for demolition

On a quest to polish its anti-communist identity, re-activate the communist vs anti-communist discursive cleavage, and resituate itself vis-à-vis the dictatorship, the Democratic Party of Albania decided to start a political battle over the Piramida starting in 2010 in order to justify its demolition.

The Piramida rarely made it to national headlines until fall 2010 when the Democratic Government unexpectedly announced a plan to build the new Parliament of Albania where the Piramida resided. An idea first articulated by the Chairman of Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, and later trumpeted by Prime Minister Berisha, Albanians were promised the unveiling of the new Parliament on Albania's 100th anniversary of independence in November 2012. Berisha claimed that his government was on a quest to destroy the cult of dictator Hoxha and that "defending his heritage was apologizing for his monstrous crimes" (Blushi 2010a). He even invited the Socialist opposition to take pieces of the to-be-destroyed Piramida to keep as relics for their nostalgia for communism, invoking the practice of collecting pieces of the Berlin Wall (Blushi 2010a).

The Democratic Government's strategy at the onset of the third decade of transition contrasted with their approach to this same heritage during their first mandate in power after the fall of the dictatorship. At that time, the new Democratic Government generally shielded these late communist remains from political contestation by altering overt political symbolism that venerated the communist dictatorship. In the case of Mosaic "Albania" in central Tirana, for instance, the two communist stars and Enver Hoxha's book were edited out of the mosaic. In the case of the Piramida, Hoxha's museum was dismantled, and the site was officially proclaimed the International Center of Culture (ICC) and later ICC "Arbnori". Both of these sites were cleansed of overt symbolism and re-appropriate or re-purposed for the needs of transition and those of the transitional elite. Now that the Democrats were trying to demolish the building, politicization seemed like a necessary step, especially since the Democrats had worked in the early 1990s to depoliticize the building through their own interventions.

A defense front for depoliticization: civil society and the Socialist Party

The Democratic governing majority started moving quickly on this newfound political mission for demolition, passing in parliament an initial decision in October 2010 to create a State Committee for the Building of the New Parliament (the State Committee) that would include PM Berisha, Speaker of Parliament Topalli, Mayor of Tirana Rama, two relevant ministers, and the heads of parliamentary groups (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010a). This decision was unexpected as other plans for a new parliament building went back almost a decade (2001), and in June 2007 the same Democratic government had enthusiastically launched an international competition for the

building of the new parliament. The location for that project had been set at the Chambers of the Presidency of the Assembly/Parliament and a winning project by a Swiss-Albanian architecture firm had been selected. The firm was waiting for the go-ahead when the government announced its plans for the new location and a potential new project (Delisula 2010b). In addition, at the time the Piramida was also being considered as a new home for the National Gallery of Arts and the National Theater, and millions of Euros had already been spent on transforming the building for these projects. In addition, some commentators were enraged that millions of Euros had also already been spent on a makeover of the existing Parliament Plenary Hall, now to be abandoned for an entirely new building, making the government decision at best inefficient and wasteful. As a result, political commentators started calling this new turn of the Democratic government a "pyramid scheme" (Baze 2011), given the millions of Euros spent in vain.

The Socialist opposition was against the demolition of the Piramida from the very start, initially contesting the discursive basis of the Berisha Government at the political level, and later integrating into its discursive repertoire the expert-technical cues coming from civil society's movement to depoliticise decision-making around the fate of the building. Initially, resistance in Parliament was spearheaded by Gramoz Ruçi—a veteran of the Socialist Party from the times of the preceding Party of Labour—echoing some of the sentiment from intellectuals and other public voices that the Piramida was a property of the people,[71] and that the Democratic majority was undoing the legacy of their own member and formerly persecuted Arbnori, whom the ICC was renamed after (Blushi 2010a). Edi Rama, Mayor of Tirana and Leader of the SP, argued at the State Committee against the demolition of the Piramida and aimed at delegitimizing Berisha's narrative about shuttering the cult of Enver Hoxha. During the heated exchange with the older Democratic PM Berisha, the Socialist Rama reminded PM Berisha that Berisha had been a member of the Party of Labour and held proximity to communist power as a doctor during the regime, insinuating that the cult of Hoxha lived within him despite Berisha leading the anti-communist movement, and then party, in the early 1990s (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010d). Hoxha took center stage as the two party leaders fought over personal and party legacies, contested who was Hoxha's "spiritual son," and disagreed on the origin of anti-communist credentials. The muddy waters of the highly recycled

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[71] See for instance the sentiment expressed by Maks Velo (Nikolli 2010b) and Artan Shkreli (Blushi 2010a, 3) as well as the overview of opinions in Gazeta Shqiptare (2010c) on October 20.

communist elite, their personal old and new choices, and the legacies of their post-communist parties were stirred anew by the Piramida debate. The spirit of Hoxha from the Piramida was summoned for some reckoning.

Civil society took the threat of the Piramida demolition seriously, mobilized accordingly, and consistently pushed for the *depoliticization* of the Piramida by invoking expert language that relied on a UNESCO-style preservatory discourse. From the early days of the announcement of the plans to build the parliament where the Piramida resided, some intellectuals expressed their disagreement (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010c), and started acting through the Forum for the Protection of the Historical Heritage of Albania and the Society of Architects. The Forum submitted a request to the government against arbitrary, expensive, and harmful decisions on cultural and historical heritage. They called on the government to respect the law on cultural heritage, build a commission to craft a restoration project, consult with experts, and also suspend any actions until these steps were followed (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010g). A few days later, the General Assembly of the Society of Architects passed a resolution describing the architectural values of Piramida, demanding that the building be preserved along with its transitional association with youth and culture and asking that the parliament be built elsewhere (Nikolli 2010a).

Architects invoking "advanced western standards" as an argument for depoliticization were in line with these efforts to situate the debate over the destruction/preservation of the Piramida within an expert-technical domain rather than a political milieu. The architect's resolution invoked what they called "the specialized international community"—UNESCO, Getty Institute, and ICOMOS were mentioned explicitly—to defend their core argument that this case demanded "the separation of political decision-making from techno-professional decision-making." They called this approach "the advanced Western standard" (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010f). Civil society capitalized on the pronunciation of Engelbert Ruoss, UNESCO Director of the Venice Office, who at the time was cited in the Albanian media saying that the communist period was a period like any other in history, and that the monuments inherited from this period were part of heritage (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010e). Invoking a common knowledge-power nexus and imperative of UNESCO's preservatory regime that aimed to transfer heritage from the political realm into the expert-technocratic one, Ruoss was also reported to have called for the debate to be led by experts.

A political and institutional battle

Borrowing language, arguments, and political impetus from civil society, in addition to being personally close to some of the main activists, Mayor Rama boycotted the State Committee on the Building of the New Parliament in November 2010. He sent a letter to the Chairman of Parliament arguing that the Committee lacked both competence and expertise to make decisions on such an issue, echoing language from the architects' resolution, and also called on the Committee to stop reinventing the wheel and to refer to practices of the "civilized world" (Blushi 2010b). On the same day, the Socialist Party of Albania sued the Ministry of Culture for wasteful spending of public funds on the Piramida, and also claimed inappropriate intervention on a monument of culture (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2010b), an argument that they began to make following the mobilization efforts from civil society. The SP also accused the government of not securing the appropriate permits (from the Municipality of Tirana) necessary to begin work at the Piramida, thus starting a central-local government battle that substantially delayed the government plans to demolish the building.

Throughout 2011 and the beginning of 2012 the Piramida was a site of contestation. The Government continued to make steps towards its demolition, the Socialist opposition and Mayor of Tirana continued to take steps against demolition, and civil society pushed for citizens' action for protection. Activists and intellectuals gathered under the banner *Citizens' Action to Save the Piramida* started a petition, collected 6100 signatures, and sent the petition to the President of the Republic (Top Channel 2011). Their efforts to depoliticize the debate around the building informed the protective discourse of the Socialist Party and Mayor Rama and were channelled through the opposition, but they failed to dislocate the debate from the political space where the battle would now be fully situated.[72]

The political battle continued in Parliament and the courts, with contesting sides fighting with every means at their disposal. The Democratic majority had proceeded with a Parliamentary Decision (66, October 21, 2010) for the new parliamentary complex followed by the drafting and passing in parliament of a law (Law 10449/2011) specifying the rules and procedures for

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[72] Other fractions of civil society, less organized and mobilized, had different opinions. For instance, speaking on behalf of the formerly persecuted, Besim Ndregjoni called plans for the demolition of the Piramida "delayed" (Madani 2011b).

construction, with Democratic MPs triumphantly arguing that the Hoxha's ghost would be out of the Piramida once and for all (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2011a). The government had already launched the call for projects and quickly selected a winning project from an Austrian architectural firm (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2011b). Negotiations were also reported to have started with Saudi Arabia for a loan (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2011c). The Socialist opposition and Mayor of Tirana contested each and every step, slowing down the process until the project was abandoned for lack of funds. Although unsuccessful, the Mayor of Tirana and the Socialist opposition sent both the 2010 Parliamentary Decision (*Panorama Online* 2011)[73] and the 2011 law (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2011d) to the Constitutional Court. The government's negotiations with Saudi Arabia about the loan were not successful (Madani 2011a) and by early 2013 the Government quietly abandoned the project altogether.

After three mandates as Mayor of Tirana, Rama lost his fourth bid for mayorship, but not before signaling in his campaign the dawn of his upcoming urban governance program, inspired and practiced through the recent battle for the Piramida. On his electoral campaign for a fourth mayorship mandate, Rama made sure to craft a dichotomy between himself and PM and DP leader Berisha, a dichotomy that would be upgraded, formalized, polished, and made a marching "anthem" in his bid for general elections in two years. His and Berisha's visions separated at the Lana River, he claimed (Tanushi 2011),[74] a poignant political metaphor in retrospect, as the Lana river became the poster child for his mayorship achievements after the cleanup of the riverbank in the wake of the chaotic constructions of early transition along the river. Rama was thus casting himself as a symbol of order, transformation, and progress, with Berisha being crafted as a symbol of chaotic building, backward mentality, and destruction. Soon, this distinction would become important for a renewed depoliticization of the Piramida.

The Piramida was not demolished but left abandoned after multiple ideas and battles inconclusively tried to take shape within its halls and marble exteriors. Internally, a platform was built to accommodate the new theater project, but it was left incomplete. NGOs, international organizations, the night club, and Top Channel media residing there all slowly relocated. Part of

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[73] The SP arguments included the violation of the principle of separation of the central and local government; the appropriation of prerogative for the management of territory, and the violation of the urban plan of Tirana.
[74] The Lana river runs through Tirana. A symbol of chaotic construction in the 1990s, it became one of the symbols of order and transformation during Rama's mayorship. The Lana river is also on the side of the Piramida.

the exterior marble disappeared, affecting the smoothness of its sliding properties that had made it attractive as a playground. Attempts at exorcism had left a ghost Piramida.

Rebirth: coding for the future

While in 1992 depoliticization of the Piramida passed through *symbolic sanitization*, reframing, renaming, and repurposing, the Rama Government's first mandate in power was characterized by depoliticization through *heritagization*, fully situated in the civilizational-preservatory-expert language of the international preservation regime that transferred remains from the domain of "the political" into the domain of techno-expertise preservation. These two different strategies, I argue, were conditioned by the different understandings of "the political" that these two governments in 1992 and 2013 positioned themselves against. In 1992 the Democratic Government was depoliticizing against the political understood as *the power of the dictatorship* and its symbolic associations—which constituted the political layer the government had to scrape from the building. In 2013, the Socialist Government was depoliticizing against the political understood as *contestation*—hence the advance of heritagization as a strategy that would take the Piramida out of political contestation. During his second and third mandates, PM Rama—having also secured a new Socialist mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj—would situate plans for the preservation of the Piramida against transitional contestation first, and then craft plans around its transformation by facing the symbolic repertoire of the building second. The final project would transcend both periods.

Facing transition: Heritagization against contestation

Once in power as the new Socialist Prime Minister in 2013, Rama situated the rebirth of the Piramida within his urban revival mandate. Rama's first mandate as PM was characterized by an inertia of his oppositional impetus to the previous government's plans for demolition, now infused in his grand narrative of Renaissance (*Rilindja*), urban Renaissance in particular. Discursively and practically the government retained the depoliticizing *heritage protection discourse* borrowed from the civil society battle to preserve the Piramida, while making so-called *professional expertise* (as opposed to politics as usual) central to his urban revival governing program. Most importantly, he framed Berisha and his bid to destroy the Piramida as the symbol of politicization and contestation, in contrast with his government's rational and expertise-driven approach toward

both Berisha's demolition choices, as well as the super-imposed Hoxha symbolism of the communist past.

In August 2013, after winning the general elections, the Socialist Government and Rama himself organized the "Next Generation's Albania" conference (*Shqipëria e Gjeneratës Tjetër*), which gathered professionals and artists from all over Europe and Albania to discuss issues of urban planning, sustainable territorial management, economic developments, and the youth.[75] Civil society and architects from the battle for the preservation of the Piramida were present, along with 22 European architects, art critics, development experts, and architectural firm representatives from Rama's mayorship (Binjaku 2013).[76] Some of the Albanian representatives from the Piramida battle would become Rama's advisors, like Artan Shkreli, while some of the European architects and architectural firms would become the government's favorite firms for the upcoming urban revival projects. Winy Maas, from the Dutch MVRDV firm, would be commissioned to redesign the Piramida without an open public competition. Rama retained both his earlier partners and his vision for Tirana, but now infused them with his "revival and rebirth" grand framework, along with language more attuned to heritage and professional expertise.

The Rama government moved quickly to situate the Piramida within a new repertoire of legal-discursive heritagization. The Piramida was part of the new government's Program for Cultural Heritage 2013-2017 (Ministry of Culture of Albania 2013), where it was envisioned under plans for the "restoration and revitalization of some important monument from the late historical heritage." In 2018, the Council of Ministers' Decision 582 (DCM 582/2018) reconfirmed the Piramida[77] as being within the Historical Center of the City of Tirana, "an urban space with important urbanistic-architectural values, which documents the historical development of the city and achievements in architecture" (DCM 582/2018, Article 3, point 1). This designation was

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[75] The conference was blessed by Tony Blair, Rama's socialist spiritual father and the PM's advisor. See Blair's message in this video: https://kultura.gov.al/en/shqiperia-e-gjenerates-tjeter/

[76] During the conference working groups, experts proposed a national development plan that recommended re-purposing the Piramida and Hoxha's villa (Binjaku 2013). For the Piramida they recommended reconstruction, restoring its slick marble exterior. Bjarke Ingels, the architect that would later be commissioned to reconceptualize the new National Theater, argued that these symbols of the past should not be erased, but renovated and reconceptualized for the new Albania (Binjaku 2013, 2).

[77] The Piramida had already been designed as within the monumental ensemble of the central Tirana in 2000, but was removed briefly in 2017, and redesignated in the "protected" map in 2018 (DCM 582/2018).

accompanied by specific stipulations around protection and conservation that derived from its status.

Transformation as transcendence

While heritagization tackled the contestatory repertoire of the building moving it away from its transitional contestation and helped the government resituate it within a protection mandate, this action did not determine what exactly the building was to become. The original symbolic power inscribed in the Piramida— its symbolic repertoire—provided the government with an impetus to transform rather than simply protect. Transcendence then resembled a Hegelian type of synthesis, challenging both the original symbolic order of the dictatorship and its signature trope of dictator Hoxha on the one hand, and the latest push of the Democratic government to destroy it due to that seductive symbolic power on the other. As contestation was a dimension of politics emerging to challenge the symbolic power of the dictatorship, transcendence was meant to upend them both, subsuming them into a new object: a building that retained its shape but changed its content, function, and aspiration, marking its own time while relating to the dictator as an extraordinary trope to be exorcised.

In the summer of 2014, the government already showed early signs of an intuition about this transcendence, but it lacked a final idea as to what the building would become. In an international competition launched by the Ministry of Culture during Tirana's 2014 Architectural Week, architects from around the world were invited to propose solutions for "emblematic spaces" like the Piramida, "once upon a time symbols of the communist heritage in Albania" and of a transition period that layered itself over the authoritarian regime (Ministry of Culture of Albania 2014). "A solution for their [of these two periods] harmonious co-habitation is yet to be found" the call claimed. The competition was situated within the "strategy of the Ministry of Culture to reactivate the ghost spaces of the communist past." A harmonic co-habitation would transcend both the communist dictatorship and the transition, encompassing them both while transition and dictatorship continued to confront each other.

Throughout these first years of indecision about what the Piramida would become, the theme of blending, co-existence, and re-appropriation was cultivated by the art community, but

especially curated with the help and supervision of the Ministry of Culture.[78] Singer Elida Duni returned from Switzerland for a concert at the Piramida in 2014 (*Shqiptarja.com* 2014a). The space would become quite attractive to foreigners, as communist ruins seemed to have a specific allure and an exotic story to be capitalized on artistically. The trans-Adriatic art project and exposition "ART IN PORT – Coexistence: for a new Adriatic koinè" would take place at the Piramida in 2014, curated by Italian curator Roberto Lacarbonara (*Panorama Online* 2014c). In 2017, the Piramida was one of the hosts of the "Mediterranea 18 – Young Artist Biennale," that brought 230 young artists in Albania, considered as bridges between Albania and Europe by Minister of Culture Kumbaro (*Panorama* 2017). Meanwhile, in 2015, the formerly persecuted had asked Mayor Veliaj to turn the Piramida into a multi-museum of the dictatorship (Madani 2015), a proposal that wasn't appealing to the government.

The government and the municipality of Tirana built a robust discursive base for transcending both the dictatorship and the transition period in 2017 and especially in 2018 once its central-local super-government had sorted out land/building ownership, commissioned a project and architect without public competition, found a source of funding, and ultimately decided on the new function of the building. In 2016, land ownership of the Piramida was transferred from the Ministry of Culture to the Municipality of Tirana (DCM 847/2016) and by 2018 the Rama government had commissioned the Dutch architect Winy Maas to redesign the Piramida, with funding from the Albanian-American Development Foundation in Tirana (MVRDV 2023). Winy Maas had built a particular personal brand over these years, with a blog post about the reconceptualization of the Tainan site in Taiwan's southwest coast calling him "the urban exorcist" (Cunningham 2020). The blog described how the Tainan Spring was believed by many Taiwanese people to be haunted and questioned whether Maas' reconceptualization would "exorcise its demons". It was thus rather fitting that Maas was mobilized in Tirana to exorcise Hoxha from his former museum.

The Piramida was set to host the TUMO Center for Creative Technologies. At the presentation of the "The Revitalization of the Pyramid of Tirana" project, Rama claimed that "This

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[78] Artist Armando Lulaj had preceded this "wave" of government-supervised and promoted artisticization of the Piramida space. See for instance his project *It Wears As It Grows* (2011), the first video of the *Albanian trilogy*. 18', 2011. Written and directed by Armando Lulaj Produced by Debatik Center Film, Artra Gallery, cinqueesei https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIq9cFbyrvQ

building is the picture of the state that we inherited. I believe that the project has managed to solve a key point of the challenge, which was not solved all this time, between the rebirth of this building and its function" (Basha 2018). As political metaphors were an important governing trope for the Socialist government, Mayor Veliaj spelled it out for The Guardian in 2019 when he claimed that the Piramida is "a metaphorical display of what we've gone through. If, instead of the pyramid, you said Albania, it is that story. The paranoia and so-called glory of communist ambitions, the brutal transition to casino capitalism, and then this renaissance. So now it's time for the pyramid to match the renaissance of the city" (Walker 2019).

While the Piramida had to engage both the transition and the dictatorship on its way to being reborn, it was not simply their antithesis but retained traces of the past in its progression to transcendence. In a nostalgic moment, Mayor Veliaj claimed in a meeting with students that "in principle the Piramida is a school. Once upon a time we used 'the palace of pioneers', and now in capitalism it's the 'Palace of Pioneers' for IT" (Alla 2023). On a similar occasion, he claimed that in his youth (meaning during the transition period) "the Piramida was in fact the center for youth, boiling with activities," RiniFest in particular (later Tirana Art-Fest) (*Panorama* 2016b). Traces of the ethos and ethics of youth-related references were reactivated from both the dictatorship and transition eras.

TUMO Center for Creative Technologies Tirana—the new technological center residing in the Piramida—appropriated the symbolism of the building's transformation as an identity marker, asking "What do an Albanian dictator, an architectural firm from The Netherlands, and the newest TUMO Center have in common?" (TUMO Tirana 2023). The story of the building followed in the same blog post, echoing the long-time discourse cultivated by Rama and Veliaj. TUMO also made a final helpful claim for the depoliticizing repertoire of the government, attributing the government's decision to preserve the building to public demand: "The debate, 'to rebuild or to take down' was resolved in 2015; a national poll showed that the majority of Albanians were against the demolition of the pyramid. The road to realizing the public's wish in keeping the pyramid alive started in 2017 when the Albanian government publicized the initiative of transforming the building into an educational and cultural center." This democratic moment of preservation, along with the trope of exorcism and transcendence, became a life narrative of the TUMO Center itself.

Above all parties and into the future: the Berlin Process Summit for inauguration

The Rama-Veliaj governing duo used the Berlin Process Summit 2023 for a final symbolic transposition of the Piramida from its past of dictatorial power and contested transitional existence, into the supra-political space of the EU and the future, where everything would smoothly fall into place towards a future utopia of technological advance. Aspired to by all political parties and trusted and supported by a Euro-enthusiastic population (European Commission 2023),[79] the European Union was a perfect deal-sealer of "revived" heritage that stood above political contestation and the dictatorial past. Although the EU had no part in the transformation of the Piramida itself, the Rama government made sure to associate this "gem"[80] in the crown of the urban Renaissance projects with the EU on its inauguration day.[81] The Piramida hosted the Berlin Process Summit 2023, with Rama and Veliaj inaugurating the building at the summit's conclusion, resembling as an extension in the presence of the aesthetics of the summit. The pictures of the summit and the Piramida's inauguration inundated the Albanian media throughout the day, with European flags embellishing the background of the inauguration speeches, making it hard for the average citizen to discern one event from the other (see the aesthetics on RTV Klan 2023). In fact, Mayor Veliaj engaged with the flags directly at one point in his speech, pointing at them to indicate how Hoxha considered them to represent "the Anglo-American danger for Albania" (RTV Klan 2023, sec. 2:25), intentionally conflating the choreography of inauguration with the conclusion of the summit.

This use of the summit for symbolic legitimization extended beyond aesthetics, with the governance tropes of urban revival cultivated by PM Rama and Mayor Veliaj throughout the renovation of the building being redeployed anew and consolidated for posterity in the inauguration speeches. "After many lives lived, today the Piramida starts a new life," claimed Veliaj, while explaining that the day also marked the birthday of dictator Hoxha, and "he would be rolling in his grave" to see it now celebrated with all these foreign flags lined up at the entrance

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[79] Albania has been consistently Euro-enthusiast throughout the years Albania has participated in the Eurobarometer survey, with trust in the European Union above both the Union and Balkan average.

[80] Both Rama and Veliaj use the metaphor of "gems" to refer to their urban revival projects.

[81] The government had a soft opening for the building right before elections in May 2023 to boost their electoral campaign, but the official inauguration took place on the evening of the closing of the Berlin Process Sumit in October 2023. The summit and inauguration day, October 16, coincided with the birthday of Dictator Hoxha, a detail that Veliaj emphasized in his inauguration speech.

of his Piramida (RTV Klan 2023). He then walked the audience through the dark exoticism of the building's origin as a potential mausoleum and then museum for dictator Hoxha. "He behaved like a pharaoh, who deserved a pyramid of course," says Veliaj, invoking the origin trope of the "pyramid of the pharaoh" nickname from the 1990s student movement—a trope the Socialists relocate from the monopoly of the Democratic party. "Even the Pyongyang of the North Korea of Europe can change" he added, appealing to the imagination of foreign tourists and media after having described the skyrocketing of tourism in Albania. The architect Winy Maas, after flattering PM Rama for his vision, praised the decision "not to destroy" or to "completely restore" the building, but "to overcome the past" and fill the building with young people, like in the 1990s. Invited to speak because of the Dutch architectural firm that completed the project, Dutch PM Mark Rutte took this occasion to express his enthusiasm about the transformed building as well as the new College of Europe Tirana campus launch on the same day. Youth from all over Europe could now study in Tirana with the Piramida having completed its exorcism of Hoxha and its transfer to the youth of Albania and Europe. The inauguration concluded with a LED light performance on the new building, along with epic music marking its passing into a new life.

Conclusions

While preservation was a political decision in the preservation-destruction debate of contestation during transition, in the case of the Piramida the Rama government faced this tension by stigmatizing contestation and its destructive impulse while choosing to transcend both dictatorship and transition by transforming the site. Preservation was a position vis-à-vis the *contestation* of the transition period and *transformation* was a position vis-à-vis the power-symbolism of the dictatorship. This double positioning vis-à-vis transition through *preservation* and vis-à-vis the dictatorship through *transformation* was framed as the Piramida's transcendence of both these political and politicized periods into a post-political site that neither embodied power nor could be contested after the political layers were shed. As Giesen (2005) argues, transcendence serves to constitute a new ordinary (a coding center for youth in the case of Albania) through its juxtaposition to an extraordinary (Dictator Hoxha in the case of Albania).

The *post-political* in Albania (and the wider post-communist space), particularly with urban Renaissance, followed *the anti-political* (transition, neoliberalism, the fall of the state),[82] the anti-political having been a response to the deep, ever-present, *thick political* (communism, dictatorship). This political dialectic was important for the transcendent nature of the process of transformation, which manifested itself fully in the transformed Piramida. The transformed Piramida stood as a response to the fall of previous symbolic orders, inscribed in political metaphors, and to the building of a new one transcending its predecessors. The post-political Zeitgest of the Rama government was nonetheless deeply political, with art, spectacle, the EU, and the foreign architect, serving as legitimation techniques for an authoritative agenda on the built environment of Tirana. But as I show in the next chapter, the battle against the demolition of the National Theater showed the limits of urban Renaissance's depoliticization strategy.

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[82] 'Anti-politics' and its association with neoliberalism (Stoker 2006), was also exacerbated by the "defeat" and fall of the communist block (Hay 2007).

Appendix: Photographs

Figure 11: Museum Enver Hoxha, Post of Albania, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 12: The Piramida before transformation. Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 13: The Piramida after transformation 2023: BBB2021, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons

CHAPTER 6 – The Demolition of the National Theater: Place, transition, and modernization

On May 17, 2020, following two years and three months of resistance, with artists, activists, and citizens occupying the building in protest during its final nine months, the National Theater of Albania was demolished. The Rama government had made plans for the demolition of the building during its first mandate in power (*Panorama* 2016a), but the demolition saga, more than two years of contestation, and plans and projects for a new "rebirthed" theater only emerged once Rama and the Socialist Party had secured the Mayorship of Tirana and later its Council, leaving almost no checks on their plans to transform the city singlehandedly. What started as a mobilization of artists and their unions later turned into a citizens' movement to protect the theater against what activists and a few independent media outlets called (and documented) as state capture and autocracy with the unfolding government plans to build a new theater through a public-private partnership (PPP). The new theater project by Danish architect Bjarke Ingels was unveiled in 2018, without public competition. With the building still under active occupation, the government used the excuse of the pandemic state of emergency to carry out the demolition (Europa Nostra 2020a).

The battle against the demolition of the National Theater unveiled a wide network of clientelist structures and practices that the Rama Government had cultivated throughout its urban revival plans and a country-wide construction frenzy. The government had initially planned to build the new theater through a PPP, but was met with wide public resistance, fueling distrust of the government even after it dropped the PPP and promised to build the new theater through the state budget (Nikolli 2020). Active investigative journalism around clientelism and state capture (see for instance Çela and Erebara 2018; Çaushaj 2019)[83] unfolded throughout more than two years of resistance, around and beyond the project of the new theater. Throughout this battle, Albanians were introduced to the extent of state capture, and to the construction, procurement, and contracting empire cultivated by the Rama Government. While state capture and clientelism have been the governing modus operandi in the emerging autocracies of the Western Balkans

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[83] Reporter. al and Exit.al independent online media in Tirana extensively engaged in investigative journalism to bring to public attention convoluted conversations and facts on procurement, money laundering, clientelism, etc.

(Vachudova 2019; Richter and Wunsch 2020), their ubiquity in Albania also seems to do a disservice to the complex story of the demolition of the National Theater. More than "causes" of demolition, clientelism and state capture emerge as necessary but not sufficient conditions to explain the governmental focus on the National Theater as a space for reform and rebuilding. One remains puzzled as to why other spaces in Tirana were preserved and reconstructed while located on similar lucrative land in central Tirana, while the National Theater was particularly targeted for demolition.[84]

In this chapter, I want to present another necessary condition—perhaps equally insufficient, perhaps co-sufficient—for the demolition of the National Theater that relates to the modernization discourse of the Rama government. In this chapter, I use the concept of *place* to capture the demolition of the National Theater of Albania as an action directed towards both a building and the central art institution inherited from the communist state and shielded during early transition, only to be challenged by the Rama government throughout late transition. The concept of place, particularly as developed by geographers (Mitchell 2003; Rose-Redwood et al. 2022),[85] allows for the capture of meanings, relations, narratives and symbols inscribed in materiality, and their ongoing ascription and negotiation through time and action. This approach to place as a particular type of social and political entity allows for the coding and decoding of political decisions on the preservation/demolition spectrum as approaches to this complex web of meaning, relations, narratives and symbols that places represent and by which they are constituted. The National Theater of Albania, as opposed to the Mosaic and to some extent the Piramida, was an inhabited place, an institution that engendered particular forms of meaning, artistic relations, affective investments and disinvestments, and had a thick political history of contestation, appropriation, disavowal, retention, and demolition. In this chapter, demolition thus means both the demolition of a building and of a particular type of institution and an institution-artists relational link that it inherited and cultivated through resistance, along with the emerging political need of the Rama government to will the central art institution anew. Furthermore, demolition emerges as a challenge

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[84] One could think of buildings that could have been potentially targeted through an exclusive rent-seeking logic, like the National Gallery of Arts, the Hotel Dajti, etc., which are being reconstructed instead. An exclusive rent-seeking logic can not differentiate between these cases.
[85] See also Forest, Johnson, and Razeq (2024) for the disciplinary evolution of the concept.

to the various pasts inscribed in a place, as they are articulated and encoded to be "demolished". Demolition then is an act of *displacing* and then *replacing*.

In this chapter, I argue that the Rama government under a banner of "rebirth of the theater" and a "radical reform of the arts and culture" through the demolition of the National Theater *disavowed* the central art institution as it was inherited from communism and shielded throughout transition. Demolition confronted the communist dictatorship, the early transition, and the late transition in different ways. Through a "genealogy of place" tracing space, building, restructuring, cultural sector reforms, laws, regulations, and discursive traces that accompanied soft and tectonic changes, I discover that Rama disavowed the centrality of art production through the central art institution, as well as the institution-artist link that the communist regime had engendered along with the initial shielding of this relationship in early transition. Instead, Rama embraced a more independent art scene along with the logic of restructuring from the early transition which had not been taken to its logical conclusion in the central art institutions, in the National Theater(s) in particular. In addition, Rama embraced and re-deployed his own turn towards neoliberal cultural sector reforms as Minister of Culture and then Mayor in the late 1990s and early 2000, coupled with an intent to demolish the building ever since. Eventually, the Rama government hoped to rebuild the central art institution metaphorically, materially, and relationally, once it managed to de-center it as the locus of art production.

Differently from the Mosaic and the Piramida, where the aim of preservation and transformation presented the government with the need to mix and match between disavowal and appropriation, the demolition of the National Theater demanded a heavy discursive and material investment in disavowal. Rama disavowed what he articulated and constituted as the "transitional artist" on the one hand, and the building of the theater on the other. Spatial disavowal passed through four mechanisms: 1) stigmatization, 2) securitization; 3) de-heritagization; and 4) the instrumentalization of the EU's (dis)involvement. Although the decision to demolish the theater was channeled through strategies of depoliticization as rational, technically warranted, and necessary, disavowal was in fact a willful political decision. The will to destroy was an original political will—articulated and cultivated through mechanisms of disguising the political as technical—and not a mere response to circumstances.

Methodology

For this chapter and its *genealogy of place* I have relied primarily on archival research and press and media thematic analysis. For the analysis of the transitional period in particular, I rely on extensive archival research conducted during fieldwork at the Albanian Central State Archive. I traced all articles about the contemporary battle for the theater in the online database of the printed newspaper PressReader (*Panorama* and *Gazeta Shqiptare*) from 2010 to 2021 to extract a comprehensive chronology of events, speeches, declarations, and subtle developments within the art scene related to the National Theater. This became a database of 2349 newspaper entries of which around 1600 were relevant to my analysis.[86] I supplemented the print editions stored in PressReader with the online editions of Albanian newspapers, especially the online-only investigative journalism at *Reporter.al* and *Exit.al*. I compiled a chronology of events and statements and coded them by theme and event. This double coding evolved iteratively (Byrne 2022) as I read through statements, reports, and events and connected pieces of information that had not been connected before. On statements, speech, and social media posts from high government officials (primarily from Prime Minister Rama and Tirana Mayor Veliaj) I conducted an ordinary language discourse analysis (Schaffer 2014) that I situate within the thematic analysis. Multiple reiterations of reading through themes, events, and the theme-event continuum produced hierarchies of themes that I analyze in this chapter.

In addition, I have collected all relevant laws from the Albanian Official Bulletin in order to do a first reading of each law/reform and its evolution. I also collected assessment reports about the building but relied more generously on secondary sources for issues such as "architectural value", urban analysis, and other types of expert knowledge out of my domain of research. Because this was a highly controversial issue with information from official sources sometimes intentionally obscured or distorted information, I cross-checked my information through various sources.

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[86] PressReader considers any entry and lists for view every news article, including snippets of news that are not full articles, but rather short news entries.

A complex heritage palimpsest

The building of the National Theater of Albania was symbolically and functionally embedded into the major eras of Albania's recent history, primarily through palimpsesting—edited and re-edited to move from one political order to the next after each critical juncture. Like an urban palimpsest (Huyssen 2003; Copley 2019), the theater retained symbolic traces from its layered past (Daly 2023) in either building or function. While it served as a multi-functional recreational and cultural center during the fascist invasion and protectorate of Albania since 1939, it turned into an infamous court for the show trials in 1945, and the *People's Theater* right after. After the fall of the communist regime, it became the *National Theater* and retained parts of its permanent artistic body, while various elements of its double-wing U-shaped structure were lent to private businesses during transition (see AQSH f.513, v.1998, d.86). The building housed two national theaters when it was demolished.[87] For the nine months prior to demolition, the building was occupied by artists and other citizens, the last layer of its history.

Origins

The core of Tirana as a capital city was conceptualized and built during the rulership of Ahmet Zog, first as head of state and then as self-proclaimed King. King Zog I of Albania was a committed modernizer and Westernizer (Fischer 1984; Elsie [1933]2018; Drizari 1929). After proclaiming Tirana as the permanent capital city of Albania, he envisioned turning the modest predominantly Ottoman-style Tirana (Vokshi 2012b, 15–22; Shkreli 2012), into a modern capital city worthy of his Western European-aspiring state and then kingdom. Zog turned to Fascist Italy for his modernization bid, with Fascist Italy ready to turn its colonial gaze towards Albania—bringing to Tirana some of the renowned architects and urban planners of the time, including Armando Brasini, Florestano Di Fausto, Gherardo Bosio, Giulio Bertè, and Vittorio Ballio Morpurgo (Vokshi 2012b; *Architetti e ingegneri italiani in Albania* 2012; Mëhilli 2017). The core of Tirana's central architecture was designed and built in the 1930s and 1940s, first under Zog's grand modernizing

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[87] The National Theater and the National Experimental Theater "Kujtim Spahivogli" were situated in each of the two wings of the U-shaped building upon demolition. The National Experimental Theater was a later addition to the complex. Originally established as the Theater of Comedy in 2011, it was later renamed the National Experimental Theater "Kujtim Spahivogli" by the Rama Government in an attempt to promote a diverse theatrical art scene where younger artists could be involved with experimental theater.

aspiration, then under the Italian Fascist Protectorate after the April 1939 invasion, and finally once the communists took power after 1944 (see Mëhilli 2017).[88]

The building ensemble of what was last known as the National Theater of Albania[89] was designed by Giulio Bertè in between "futurism and rationalism…the first typical modernist building" of that period in Tirana, according to Rubens Shima (2018). The building material was also innovative, in line with the novel methods used by Italian architects in both style and material in the first half of the 20th century (Pompejano and Macchioni 2021, 139–40; Shima 2018).[90] The U-shape building ensemble, composed of two symmetrical long wings with a gym, a patio, and a pool in the middle, was completed after the Fascist invasion of Albania in 1939 (Shima 2018). Originally known as the Italian-Albanian "Skanderbeg" Circle (*Qarku Italo-Shqiptar "Skenderbeg" – Il Circolo Italo-Albanese "Skanderbeg*"[91]), the building served as a multi-purpose propaganda, recreational, sports, cultural and research center, including a movie-theater "Savoia" (renamed to "Kosova") (Pompejano and Macchioni 2021), a library, and the establishment of the Institute of Albania Studies (Dervishi 2006; Plasari 2018).

Communist regime

The communist regime established after the liberation of Albania in November 1944 layered itself on the fascist-era heritage. According to Mëhilli's (2017, 33) masterful tracing of this continuation, communists "renamed the buildings, draped red flags around the arches and the colonnades, placed red stars on the rooftops, and hung portraits of Stalin on the walls," while retaining "Fascist-era infrastructural studies, blueprints, and the labor of Italian technicians well into the postwar years" (29). Mëhilli calls this trend "Socialism with a Fascist Façade" (23). For Daly (2023) this appropriation and repurposing of the Fascist heritage in Albania was similar to the "adaptive reuse" observed in other cases.

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[88] See in particular the chapter "10 years of war".
[89] As the National Experimental Theater "Kujtim Spahivogli" was a very late addition, and the complex building was traditionally known and referred to as the National Theater building, I will refer to the complex as the building of the National Theater.
[90] Docomomo International (International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement) also expressed appreciation for the building's style and innovation in its letter to PM Rama on April 12, 2018, advocating for the protection of the building (see (*Panorama Online* 2018a).
[91] Also referred to as *Circolo Skenderbeg*, see the Luce archives https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/search/result.html?luoghi=%22Circolo%20Italo-Albanese%20Skanderbeg%20a%20Tirana%22&activeFilter=luoghi

The building of the *Circolo Skenderbeg* had a similar fate of appropriation and repurposing, with the triumphant communists inaugurating their rulership with the 1945 Treason Trial (The Special Court for War Criminals and Enemies of the People) held at Cinema "Kosova", later to become the People's Theater. As Rober Elsie (2015, 15) argues, the trial was "one of the most spectacular events of the early period of the Albanian communist regime that marked the beginning of an unprecedented reign of terror." After the Treason Trial, in May 1945, the Professional Theater of the State (*Teatri Profesionist i Shtetit*) would be founded, and then the People's Theatre (*Teatri Popullor*),[92] while part of the building would be left to the newly established League of Writers and Artists for their club (Plasari 2018).[93]

Unlike the Piramida, the Mosaic, Vaçe's songs, or the new museums/installations (Bunk'Art1 & 2 and the House of Leaves), the National Theater of Albania was not communist heritage, but a communist palimpsest. As a communist palimpsest—inherited from the Fascist Protectorate—it was re-ascribed to a new symbolic order during communism, initially used for the infamous treason show trials that symbolically 'exorcised' the building, and later became the permanent People's Theater of Albania.

Early Transition

Early transition also palimpsested itself on the People's Theater but due to the proactive shielding efforts of the Ministry of Culture the early transition "failed" to radically reform the central art institution. The People's Theater retained its building and function almost intact, while changing its name to the National Theater. I argue in this section that the early 1990s did not fundamentally alter the mode of artistic production within the National Theater, although budgetary cuts and layoffs affected the decline of the volume of artistic production. This early transition shielding of the central art institution from radical restructuring would be later disavowed by Edi Rama as Minister of Culture fresh in office in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when he initially proposed the demolition of the building, along with embracing the restructuring logic of early transition and

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[92] See AQSH f.490, v.1947, d.7. The building last known as the National Theater was also referred to during early communism as the People's Theater of Drama to distinguish it from the Theater of Opera and Ballet (TOB).
[93] According to a chronology published by Panorama citing Kastriot Cipi (Nikolli 2018a), in the 1950s a plethora of cultural institutions would be founded within the complex's two wings, from the Albanian Philharmonic (later the Theater of Opera and Ballet), to Tirana's Estrada, College of Actors (later High Institute, then Academy of Arts) and in the 1960s, the State Conservatory of Tirana. All these institutions were reported to have later moved to new homes while the People's Theater continued to be situated in the building.

the mode of individualized and independent artistic labour that the National Theater was initially spared from.

The National Theater building lived most of its life under communism as the People's Theater. During communism, central artistic production was organized through artistic guilds that gathered artistic labour around the central art institutions. The art institution was essentially an artistic "home" for its artists, one that collectively gathered artistic labour, coordinated art production, and filtered art through various rounds of reviews within the collective of artists and then with the presence of regime officials to guarantee quality and ideological conformity.[94] Early transition layered itself on this dynamic, and overall structurally resisted this existential institution-artist link engendered during communism, redirecting the "evaluation" and value-derivation of art and artistic labor from the art institutions where professional art was housed, mentored, and cultivated[95] towards the market (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.48).[96] "As a theater director, I remember the dark day when the organigram from the Prime Minister arrived, [listing] this many artists, this much staff […]," Mirush Kabashi told me, as he recalled one of the most difficult moments in his career while laying off more than half of his colleagues in the early 1990s (Interview February 14, 2022, Tirana, Albania). In fact, by the end of 1992, the Ministry of Culture was committed to shielding the theater from major restructuring in art production, while having to signal at the same time a commitment to reform, with cuts in the labor force being the most immediate measures. The ministry reported at the time that almost 1/3 of cultural employees were terminated in an attempt to signal implementation of the economic reform that would free the cultural sector from "the incapable and parasitic forces […] lazy, amortized, and who still want to vegetate within these institutions" (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.23).

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[94] Artists' fates of recognition, empowerment, stardom, but also falls from grace, repression, and persecution were often reliant on the collective nature of artistic work engendered within the art institution. This was particularly true for cinema, theater, the festival of songs (see for instance Tochka 2016 on music production), and even visual arts (see Isto 2018).

[95] Think of the art institutions during communism as the main pillars that gathered artists into guilds: the People's Theater, Kinostudio, the Gallery of Arts, The Theater of Opera and Ballet.

[96] See for instance Minister Anagnosti lamenting the difficulty of this transition of artistic labor from the coordination and support of the state towards evaluation through the market. Creative work, lamented the minister, is categorized as easy work, but it should instead be categorized as hard work and rewarded accordingly (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.48, 1-3)

Although keen on signaling his commitment to democracy and the market economy through reforms, Minister of Culture and artist Anagnosti effectively managed to shield the central cultural institution, the National Theater(s) in particular, from major restructuring, retaining both their space and their operational logics, despite layoffs and budgetary cuts. In 1992, the minister was worried about the immediate exposure of the cultural sector to market dynamics, concerned about the value translation and competitiveness of artistic labor under the new conditions of capitalism (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.48). In his pledge to the Council of Ministers for subsidizing the cultural sector in 1992, Minister Anagnosti listed performing arts such as cinematography and theater, institutions such as the National Theater, the Theater of Opera and Ballet, as well as libraries and museums, as particularly disadvantaged under the new market conditions and advocated for shielding and subsides (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.83).[97] In addition, the ministry retained state ownership of central (now national) art and cultural institutions, listing them as not-to-be-privatized in the so-called privatization platform (AQSH f.513, v.1992, d.45). But the inherited model of the central art institution and its organic connection with a permanent artistic labour force would soon to be challenged by a new Minister of Culture Rama, fresh in office after Albania's 1997 state collapse.

The first battle for demolition: disavowing yet embracing transition

In this section, I argue that Minister of Culture Rama at the dawn of the second decade of transition, embraced the reforming impetus of the early 1990s, but disavowed the shielding of the central cultural institution, a dualism that manifested in his intention to demolish the National Theater as a *place*. In practice, Minister Rama disavowed the shielding of the central cultural institution and the preservation of its inherited permanent bond with their artists, moving towards a radical reform of public sector reduction and a model of the patron-facilitator state (Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989) in the arts and culture. At the same time, Rama embraced transition and the restructuring ethics of the early 1990s.

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[97] Visual arts and the music sector did not nominally make it to the minister's list, arguably because these arts produced works that could be more immediately 'sold' and 'bought' under the new market conditons, requiring less of a concerted effort and financing compared to movie or theater productions. *Kinostudio*, the movie production institution from the communist period, would experience restructuring in the 1990s and more radical transformations and space loss in the 2000s once the Socialist government was in power. See Demo's (2022) analysis for an overview of the Kinostudio case.

In contrast to common conceptions that the wild wave of neoliberal reforms belongs exclusively to the early 1990s and to the anti-communist Democratic Party of Albania, the Socialist Government worked hard to institutionalize the neoliberal state in the early 2000s, with the continued and concerted efforts of international partners and organizations committed to this endeavour (Kajsiu 2013; 2016).[98] While distributing blame for 1997 is a difficult job, international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) disavowed responsibility for any effects that their policy advice may have had on the emergence of the pyramid schemes that led to the 1997 state collapse and civil unrest in Albania. Responsibility was exclusively attributed to domestic factors, Albanians' "unfamiliarity with financial markets" (Ghodsee and Orenstein 2021, 47) and the public sector and its sins, in particular (Kajsiu 2013, 1016–18). Cultivating Albanians' familiarity with markets and deregulating and shrinking a mischievous public sector were then in order. The early 2000s would be characterized by the continued and concerted efforts of international partners with the Albanian government to institutionalize and legitimize the neoliberal state (Kajsiu 2016). The second decade of transition emerged as the "proper" institutionalization of what was left unfinished in the 1990s, with a Socialist Government fully committed to reforms.

The early 2000s were characterized by a reform impetus in the cultural sector and the arts, with Minister of Culture Rama pushing for further deregulation. According to Chartrand & McCaughey (1989), democratic states follow various models of governing the cultural sector and the arts, with those like the US tending more towards a hands-off *facilitator state* model, while others like France tending towards an *architect state* model, more involved and present in cultivating a public sector for the arts. While the facilitator is a classic liberal state that funds the art through foregone-taxes, foundations, etc., and the architect state typically funds the art through the Ministry of Culture and places art within its social welfare purview, an in-between model is the *patron state* which sets up art councils to professionally assess art for funding while not getting involved itself—the so-called *arm's length principle* (the UK being a typical case). Finally, the *engineer state* is encountered in non-democratic regimes, one which owns the means of artistic production and ideologically channels art production. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the

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[98] See Kajsiu's brilliant analysis on discursively centralizing the state and public sector as "the problem" and subsequently the locus of deregulating policy interventions in the early 2000, prompted by the approach on corruption of the World Bank, USAID, the Council of Europe, and the European Union.

Council of Europe, for instance, was pushing Albania to move from the legacy of the engineer state and a de facto architect state towards the patron state characterized by the arms-length principle, contributing to a smaller public sector. This move towards the patron state would be more in line with the institutionalization of the reform ethics and impetus of the 1990s, which had not been taken to its logical conclusion in the central art institution.

Minister Rama was up for the task. "To accept to become Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports Affairs in the Albania of end of April '98," claimed Rama in a Council of Europe (CoE) (2000) report on Albania's cultural policy, "meant to face a structure and infrastructure of cultural and sports institutions which were held alive by an indescribable miracle of nature," continuing to cite their small budget allocation and committing himself to comprehensive reform (6). Composed of two sections, one for input from Albanian authorities and another for the commentary and recommendations of a policy analyst, the policy analyst commented that "the Minister's foreword leaves no doubt about being a fervent reformer and moderniser" (53). In retrospect, it seems like Rama took these words to heart.

Months earlier Minister Rama had crafted the law "For the Theater" (Law 8578/2000) in which he introduced the first structural separation of theater artists from their direct relationship with the theater as their home institution. The law introduced the term "theatrical companies" (Section III/17) which would be the new entities organizing and contracting artists, while the national theater(s) institutions would be legally converted to "centers" (Section IV). Centers would not discriminate between private and public theatrical companies (Section IV/40). "The first decade of transition showed and taught us the costs of postponing a reform", claimed Rama in Parliament defending the law, adding that the reform would stop "parasitism, [and] vegetation among theatrical bodies" (RTV Klan 2019). Artists went on strike and later on hunger strike, with the law passing with some modifications that still retained the core structure of separation described above.

The CoE (2000) reporter that praised Rama as a reformer and modernizer also praised the new law, arguing that the Albanian cultural policy had to aim towards the so-called 'arm's length' principle (68), having argued before that Albania operated between the 'architect' and 'engineer' models of the government's involvement in the arts (54). It is important to note that the law "For

the Theater" was mimicking provisions from the laws that would lead to the radical transformation and the eventual dismantling of the Kinostudio and film production. The CoE Country Report praised the law "On cinematography" from 1997 for bringing cinematography "in a competitive system to adapt to the free market economy" (Council of Europe 2000, 35) and was thus praising Rama's impetus to apply the same logic to the theater. It was the early 1990s, then, that had failed to properly move the state from a role as engineer of the arts and culture, into a role as a patron, shielding institutions instead as an architect state, with the theater being a particularly stubborn case of such a model.

Cultural policy that aimed at atomizing artistic labour and detaching it from the art institutions went hand-in-hand with Rama's ambition to "modernize" the art scene and re-envision the spatial and aesthetic properties of the art institution. Under this reforming and modernization impetus an image of the National Theater building as old, wrecked, irreparable, and housing lazy and stubborn artists emerged. Minister of Culture Rama in 1998 and then Mayor of Tirana Rama in 2002 took issue with the building and eyed its demolition. In 1998 Rama closed the theater citing risk of fire and collapse, and took steps to limit the prerogatives of the National Theater to control its income from tickets and space rental (see AQSH f.513, v.1998, d.7; Alliance for the Protection of the Theater 2018; RTV Klan [1998]2020a). After negotiations with Minister Rama recurrently failed (RTV Klan [1998]2020a), artists turned to the newly appointed Prime Minister Majko for help, who halted plans for the theater's demolition and secured commitment from Greece for a reconstruction fund (*Gazeta Shqip* 2020).[99] In 2002, Mayor Rama clashed again with artists on his intentions to build a new theater embedded into high-rise towers (Alliance for the Protection of the National 2018). Mobilizing MPs and (again) Prime Minister Majko's efforts avoided demolition, and also set aside a fund for reconstruction, according to former PM Majko (*Gazeta Shqip* 2020).

The mobilizing theater artists and their successful efforts to preserve the building proved at the time that the materialization of Rama's aesthetic vision for Tirana and the "modernization"

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[99] The Italian government also allocated funds for cultural projects, including an allocation for a new theater hall that would be built on the space between the two wings of the U-shaped theater building, and not replace the old structure. In fact, one of the points of the project-proposal (point 4, p.10) argues that this new hall had to respect the complex on which it was being positioned as an addition (see AQSH f.513, v.1999, d.151).

of Albania's cultural and art scene[100] could not be accomplished without dealing with the National Theater as a place, a building, and a particular milieu of social, labour, artistic, and institutional relationships. The National Theater(s) were among the last standing art institutions "housing" artists and preserving the bond they had inherited from the previous regime and retained through the *architect model* of state intervention in the arts during transition. Kinostudio and the Gallery of Arts for instance, were no longer "houses" for either art production or the channeling of the arts for their respective genres (Demo 2022; Lulaj and Mazzi 2022). In fact, the Socialist Government revealed in 2018 a plan to transform the National Gallery of Arts into the National Museum of Fine Arts to both acknowledge and constitute the transformation of its function and long-lost role as the hub for the contemporary visual arts (Law 27/2018).[101]

Although the labour movement was weak in Albania during transition—in part due to labour settings embedded into the communist state through professional unions—theater artists had their own unions, and a tradition of mobilization engendered in and around their status and the repeated threats to demolish the building. It came as no surprise that the syndicate movement would lead the resistance from the early days of 2018 when new proposed amendments to the law for the arts and culture and the plans for demolition of the building were being discussed. The coupling of these two issues was intuitively clear to syndicates and their leaders, with union leader Kastriot Çipi for instance insisted on the joint articulation of these issues, presenting the legacy of the demolition battle as an affront to the bond of artists with their artistic home and an attack on the art scene (Çipi 2018). The initial phase of the protest in 2018 saw artists and unions strongly articulate this connection (Nikolli 2018b),[102] while the later stages of the protest—once the resistance against the demolition became citizen-wide—saw the articulation of clientelism and state capture as central themes for a citizen-wide mobilization.

The last battle for demolition: disavowing *place*

In this section, I argue that the demolition of the National Theater brought an end to the post-communist transition of the central art institution. Under the banner of a radical reform of the arts

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[100] For an overview of this aesthetic vision see Rama's (2011) book "Kurban" [Sacrifice] which concludes his Mayorship of Tirana and precedes his 2013 Government and urban revival slogan.
[101] See also the draft changes to Law 10352/2010 and the rationale report accompanying such changes at the Electronic Register of Public Notification and Consultation https://konsultimipublik.gov.al/Konsultime/Detaje/84.
[102] See the snippets from Ndrenika, Fuga, Derhemi, and Kabashi.

and culture and the modernization and rebirth of the National Theater, the Rama government engaged in a process of multiple disavowals: disavowing the transitional artist and the transitional central art institution, along with the mode of artistic labour and art production shielded throughout transition. The demolition of the National Theater emerges in my analysis as a site of radical reformation, meant to transform place as space and institution, along with the particular artistic relationships it had engendered, cultivated, and preserved. While the demolition of the building and the disavowal of the transitional artist were pursued simultaneously as a means to the radical reformation of the arts and culture, I identify particular mechanisms of disavowal. Regarding the *transitional artists*, I trace the emergence of this category through PM Rama's articulation and constitution of two competing categories of artists that he venerated in contrast with the stigmatized category of the transitional artist: the elite artist of the communist era that was part of the 'golden' days of the theater on the one hand, and the young Western-educated contemporary artist embracing the international art scene and its diverse forms of art production on the other. Regarding *the building of the National Theater*, Rama's disavowal passed through four mechanisms: 1) stigmatization, 2) securitization; 3) de-heritagization; and 4) instrumentalization of the EU's (dis)involvement.

Stage I: Reform of the arts and cultural sector

In 2013, the Rama Government began its governing mandate promising a *radical reform* of the arts and culture. In August, right before taking office, PM Rama had claimed that the changes ahead of the country were "comparable only to 1992" (Ora News 2013a). A few months later in October, PM Rama gathered successful Albanian artists from the diaspora and asked for their help in transforming the art sector in Albania. He told them that he wished he was one of them and was among them, but was instead standing before them as "the Prime Minister of a small country" asking for their help (Rilindje 2013). As part of his radical transformation of Albania and the new developmental model, he also announced a radical reform of "the system of arts and culture," promising more "quality art and less provincial self-satisfaction" (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2013). The dichotomy between "quality art" and "provincial self-satisfaction" was the beginning of delimiting a distinction between the contemporary, Western-educated Albanian artists abroad who had "made it" in the West and other foreign artists welcomed into the Albanian emerging art scene on the one

hand, and Albanian local artists, primarily educated and cultivated within Albania, on the other.[103] "Quality art" was ascribed to the Western-validated artists, while "provincial self-satisfaction" was a term reserved for Albanian local artists. The dichotomy between "quality art" and "provincial self-satisfaction" was also meant to delimit the *reformers* on the one hand and the ones who needed to be *reformed* on the other, with the Western-educated and famous artists from abroad being gathered in that inaugural October 2013 conference to help the Rama government reform, modernize, and bring the arts and culture of Albania into contemporaneity.

Since 1998, Rama had been of the same mind about the need for a reformed arts and cultural sector, but fifteen years in power in various capacities as Minister of Culture, Mayor of Tirana, and leader of the Socialist Party had changed his mind about the best way to achieve it. While back in 1998 when he was helping to institutionalize the neoliberal state, he leaned towards a patron state that followed an arms'-length principle with neoliberal facilitator tendencies,[104] in 2013 he embraced the architect state model that centralized both management and funding of the cultural sector through the Ministry of Culture while further disempowering the art institution as the center of art production. While the "problem" of reforming the central art institution inherited from the communist period and shielded through transition remained the same, the architect state model seemed more efficient in achieving that goal the second time around, once Rama had no real power-obstructers to his government and governance (with the Mayorship of Tirana won by Socialist Veliaj in 2015).

The changes that followed, especially those to the law and later ministerial decisions on temporary contracts, shifted the role of the government in the cultural sector by centralizing both decision-making and funding with the Ministry of Culture. The promised reform would start with changes to the 2010 law "On Art and Culture",[105] the appointment of two returnee artists from

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[103] Rama's speech at the conference and his pledge for help was a typical orientalising trope of the local art scene and local artists in Albania. His modernizing bid consistently used orientalist tropes.

[104] As Eglė Rindzevičiūtė (2021) argues, Chartrand & McCaughey's categories are good ideal type models, but the picture was more blurred especially in Eastern Europe after patchy reforms and the atypical mixtures of reforms and legacy of the cultural sector that these countries inherited.

[105] Between Rama's early 2000s bid for sectoral reform and his return to power as Prime Minister in 2013, the central government had stepped away from his radical reform plans towards the cultural sector in general and the art institution in particular, embedded into a patron-facilitator type of state. The infamous 2000 law "For the Theater" was replaced by the 2006 law "For Scenic Art" and subsequently by the 2010 law "On Art and Culture" which established national centers for funding the arts and assessing art projects. Both these laws re-established the direct

abroad as directors to the Theater of Opera and Ballet (Ilir Kerni) and the National Art Gallery (Artan Shabani), and the opening of a competition for the new director of the National Theater that promised to select based on merit. The 2014 amendments to the law abolished the National Center for the Arts and Culture, centralizing project assessment and funding distribution with the ministry (Law 25/2014).[106] The independent art scene that had been emerging in Albania was consolidated with these new changes while accessing projects, competitions, and funding directly through the Ministry of Culture. In a few years, the independent art scene that had started organizing around the Forum of Independent Art Scene became very critical of centralization, assessing that the new changes had promoted clientelism, lack of meritocracy, and political meddling with the art scene. They advocated for the reintroduction of the National Center for the Arts and Culture, the autonomy of the central art institution, and opening the cultural sphere to alternative financing (Nikolli 2018d), pushing for elements of the patron and facilitator states in the art scene.

The category of the lazy, inactive, vegetative, and "preying on the state" local transitional artist started to re-emerge: an artist placed within the last "chaotic" decades of the withering of the central art institution and its fall from grace, an artist potentially responsible for this demise and in need of the reforming state's intervention. Contracts and meritocracy were proposed as the solution to such faults of transition and could now be implemented with the help of the new reform-minded theater directors. The ministerial power centralization came with further pressure to decouple the traditional link between artists and the art institution, changing labour relations, allegiances, and traditional belonging. Ministerial decisions changed the nature of contracts within the art institutions, transforming all collective "permanent" contracts into temporary individual contracts, channeling this decision within the "start of the reform of the art institution" (Nikolli 2014e; *Shqiptarja.com* 2014b). Both Minister of Culture Kumbaro and the newly appointed directors of the National Theater and the National Theater of Opera and Ballet defended the new spirit of change, arguing that this shift would guarantee meritocracy and stop the transition-long practice of artists being permanent employees of the theater, paid even when not performing, preying on the state (Kumbaro 2018). The successful Albanian artists abroad were also quoted as supporting

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connection of artists to their home art institutions with theatrical companies not making an appearance since Rama's 2000 law "On the Theater". Things were about to change again in 2013, once Rama became Prime Minister.

[106] An independent art scene that had been already emerging in Albania was consolidated with these new changes, accessing projects and competitions directly through the Ministry of Culture.

this turn to meritocracy, with world renowned tenor Saimir Pirgu equating the move with the promotion of meritocracy and artistic quality, and as a decade-long needed reform (Nikolli 2014d). The new National Theater director Hervin Çuli argued that "efficient actors" had nothing to worry about. He promised that this practice would bring young performers into the theater, especially those from abroad, opening the theater to the new generation of artists (Mile 2014). The core permanent artistic troupe of the theater(s) was practically dissolved,[107] with artists now contracting their artistic labour to the theater(s) on temporary contracts.

Merely severing the link between the transitional artists and the art institution did not seem to have constituted a radical reform for the Socialist Renaissance government, who in 2016 started articulating the need for the "rebirth" of the theater. The government began building elsewhere a new artistic center "ArTurbina" and during its inauguration in September 2016 the Minister of Culture clearly spelled out that the old National Theater building "could barely stand" with the Prime Minister adding that "it is time to rebuild the National Theater" and "for the dream of a modern theater to become reality" (*Panorama* 2016a). The proposal of the government to temporarily shift the theater to the new ArTurbina space was approached suspiciously, as the new space was considered not dignified for a central art institution, while some artists feared this would facilitate the demolition of the existing building (Mile 2018b). The "National Theater" as an institution would officially relocate to ArTurbina, with some artists joining the move and others refusing to relocate. The resisting artists gathered around the now-closed building of the National Theater and from the summer of 2019 occupied the building where they developed a space for both the arts and resistance (see Isto 2023) that would come to be referred to as an "agora" (Dedaj 2019), invoking a democratic space.

Stage II: Modernizing the art scene and the art institution

The language of rebirth, differently from mere reform, casts *place*—space, building, institution, and artistic relations—as the unit for intervention. The demolition of the National Theater demanded a heavy discursive and material investment in disavowal. As the proposal for demolition and the government plans to deploy clientelist practices in the construction of the new building triggered more than two years of resistance, the government was faced with a double need to

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[107] Few exceptions were made for very old artists transitioning to retirement, etc.

disavow the building and the artists associated with its protection. Rama's disavowal of the building passed through stigmatization, securitization, de-heritagization, and instrumentalization of the EU. In addition, because of the need to further disavow the resisting artists, the government actively articulated a distinction between the elite artists of the communist period and the sub-optimal artists of transition, minoritizing and particularizing the second. As it expressed and successfully constituted this distinction, the government actively worked to engender approval for the new theater project among those it considered to be the iconic generation of the artistic elite from the communist period.

Constituting, particularizing, and stigmatizing the resisting transitional artist

In February 2018, the coupling of a threat of eviction and displacement of the National Theater to the new ArTurbina art center with a new set of proposed amendments to the law "On Art and Culture" mobilized artists. Proposals for further changes to the Law "On Art and Culture"— already changed in 2014 when it centralized power to the Ministry and the Ministry cut the umbilical cord that had connected artists to the art institution—alarmed artists (Mile 2018b). Artists felt the threat of dispossession and further disenfranchisement and feared further centralization towards the Ministry of Culture, "the killing of cultural pluralism," a return to authoritarian modes of governance, and further undignified life for the artists, who had already been reduced to precarious contract laborers (Nikolli 2018b). They referred to the National Theater as their "home", brought back the memory of previous resistance to demolition in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and recalled the generations that preceded them—some of the artists leading the protest, like Robert Ndrenika and Mirush Kabashi, were already retired artists. The mobilizing artists emphasized the déjà vu moment of demolition and reform that was met with resistance by the artistic community, invoking the previous iconic generation of artists as their predecessors (Nikolli 2018b). The building, then, had to be protected as a tribute to all the generations of theater artists, a promise kept in their honor, by the transitional artists that had inherited it as their artistic home.

In the month to follow, the government would target the older "iconic" artists in particular and successfully demobilize them, while isolating the transitional artists as the epitome of resistance against reform and modernization. While Minister of Culture Kumbaro and Mayor of

Tirana Veliaj actively targeted resistance leaders (see Nikolli 2018e),[108] coopting and converting the older iconic artists was the most valuable discursive currency. In the summer of 2019, as the movement for the protection of the theater occupied the building, Rama started a Facebook campaign[109] on his official page posting quotes[110] of support, from living and deceased iconic artists, for a new National Theater building (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2019). In parallel, resisting artists complained of pressure and intimidation, with some being targeted in the media with "skeletons" from their past (*Shqiptarja.com* 2018).[111] PM Rama used these discursive strategies to constitute the artists of transition as not the dignified heir of the iconic artists of the communist period. In addition, the resisting artist was particularized and minoritized. Once the building was occupied, Rama followed up with a discourse that a fringe group was holding the National Theater hostage (News24 Albania 2019) while his government held the mandate of the majority of Albanians. The resisting artists emerged in this discourse as a stubborn minority generation resisting the iconic old on the one hand and the modern contemporary emerging artists on the other, all in favor of a modern new theater. The iconic artist was thus constituted as a supporter of a new modern theater, while the transitional artists were targeted as defenders of a relic building representative of their anachronistic artistic personas. Indeed, some of the older living artists were successfully demobilized, with Robert Ndrenika in particular becoming an epitome of demobilization, turned from active resisters in the early days of protests into an active supporter of the new theater project.[112]

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[108] The demobilization of the initial leaders of the protest, Derhemi, Trebicka and Basha in June 2018 was the most notorious instance.

[109] See for instance Rama's (2019) post on Reshat Arbana:
https://www.facebook.com/ediramaal/posts/10156883490141523/#?aed.

[110] Artists had expressed concerns about the National Theater building in the past, advocating for a new building either out of genuine belief and desire to have a new theater, lack of information, or mere deception, given the ever-developing saga of the National Theater. Most importantly, the question of new vs old theater was a complex one, given that throughout resistance the debate had multiple facets on how and where to build a new theater, if or not to preserve the old one, if or not to give the public land to private developers, whether the new project should be granted to a foreign architect without public competition, etc. For instance, in the case of Mihal Luarasi, the iconic communist-era director, his colleagues and son mobilized to refute Rama's claims about Luarasi's stances on the theater.

[111] See for instance the story of Budina and Cipi, two resistance leaders, being accused of theft and mismanagement of funds.

[112] Ndrenika would start actively supporting the plans for a new theater and was one of the first signatories of petitions to the President of the Republic to support (not to veto) the government-sponsored laws that would permit demolition and the new construction. See for instance Panorama's (2018c) report about the letter supporting artists sent to President Meta.

Finally, the spatial separation of the artistic community into artists that moved to the new ArTurbina space along with the official institution of the National Theater, and artists that refused to move and remained in and around the National Theater to resist its demolition provided a productive discursive trope for the government. This spatial separation of artists was instrumentalized by the government as denoting two camps, one against demolition (resisting artists) and the other favoring the construction of the new building (supporting artists). While the government would emphasize this distinction as mutually exclusive, as an either 'with us' or 'against us' community, positions within the community were often more nuanced, with some artists claiming that their desire for a new building did not mean a willingness to destroy the old (see for instance Ema Andrea's position in *Panorama Online* 2020). In addition, refusing to move to the new space meant boycotting one's job, thus defining ArTurbina's artists as supporters of the government's plans was a generous reading. In fact, resistance was a proactive move that came with costs, while transferring to ArTurbina was the default institutional relocation. Most importantly, the question of new vs old theater was a complex one, making the dichotomization of an *old* vs a *new* building deceptive.

Disavowing the National Theater building

The National Theater building became a particular type of political site throughout its last battle for demolition/protection. In this section I trace the government's disavowal on the one hand and resistance appropriation on the other. Tracing both strategies in concert is particularly important for three main reasons. First, it points at *dissonance* as a foundational basis for heritage contestation, necessary yet not sufficient for mobilization. Second, it demonstrates how contestation and resistance are active works of political articulation, which in the case of contested heritage demanded the activation of parallel and competing assessment systems that ascribe value where the government removes it. Finally, this parallel tracing of government actions on the one hand and the resistance on the other demonstrates that the government steps I identify here were indeed *disavowal*—as a quality of a contingent political will—and not simply rational, natural, necessary decisions warranted by circumstances or mandated by state institutions. The will to destroy was an original political will—articulated and cultivated through mechanisms of disguising the political as technical—and not a mere response to circumstances. In this section I identify four main strategies of disavowal: stigmatization, securitization, de-heritagization, and the

instrumentalization of the EU. These strategies were both discursive and legal-administrative and were deployed as strategies of depoliticization to present a particular, contingent, political will as an objective, rational, situation-warranted decision.

The terrain for disavowal was initially set through stigmatization and securitization, situated in discourse and the instrumentalization of state institutes assessing the robustness and sustainability of the building. PM Rama, Minister of Culture Kumbaro, and Mayor Veliaj repeatedly tried to ascribe the building within the Fascist protectorate imagination, not simply as an act of symbolic association but primarily as an act of questioning its importance and sustainability in time. The choice of vocabulary was a delicate political act in a capital fundamentally shaped by Fascist architecture, with the PM's office itself being a product of that era. The last part of the central Tirana boulevard—the buildings around Mother Teresa Square in particular—were built as important fascist institutions, including the Academy of Arts building (*Sede dell'Opera Dopolavoro Albanese*) and the central corpus of the Polytechnic University of Tirana (*La Casa del Fascio*) (Vokshi 2012a; Renzi 2012), all buildings still standing and not under governmental threat of demolition. The government then subsumed the Fascist association to one based on quality and the secondary importance of the building, consistently accompanying references to the Fascist period with qualifiers of "dopolavoro[113] of the army" (Kumbaro 2018), the "sawdust and matches of fascist Italy" (Veliaj in Opinion TV Klan 2018), "the remains of straw and matches of fascist Milan" (Veliaj in *Exit.al* 2020), and the "bastard child" of an architect that never recognized the work as his (Rama in RTV Klan 2020b). Fascism was invoked to *stigmatize*, but its symbolic association was qualified to *securitize* instead. The building was not simply fascist, but fascist and of secondary importance, fascist and not made to last, fascist and cheap, fascist and irrelevant.

The complex heritage of the building was quickly owned by protesters and the wider public and recast for its protection. At the onset of the protest, artists were particularly committed to promoting the theater as the birthplace of a wide range of cultural institutions in Albania, such as the opera and ballet, the state philharmonic, the estrada, the circus, and the conservatory *(see*

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[113] *Dopolavoro* (officially Opera Dopolavoro) refers to the place designated for workers and the army's free time, leisure and recreational space. In Vokshi (2012a, 85–86) the Opera Dopolavoro is instead the former Academy of Arts of Albania, today the University of Arts.

Gazeta Shqiptare reports from Nikolli 2018b; 2018a). With the involvement of art historians, architects and other intellectuals, they unearthed the complex legacy of the building and challenged the government on their claims, reframing the complex layers of history as the reason for protecting the building. Architects, art critics, historians, and the Forum for the Protection of Cultural Heritage demonstrated that the theater building had been far more important to the fascist protectorate's cultural and imperial project, and to the pre-, during, and post-war Albanian cultural elite, than previously known (see Biçoku 2018; *Panorama* 2018; Plasari 2018). If the government had wanted a ideological and symbolic battle with fascism the theater was emerging as a better site than they had originally anticipated, but as a PM of a post-political age Rama was not interested in destroying the theater as a political or ideological act. In fact, retrospectively, it seems that the communists had carefully chosen their site for the treason trials. The treason trials seem to have been the communists' act of exorcizing fascism before reappropriating the theater for their own building of the new socialist human through another ideology-mandated cultural project. This discursive failure to capitalize on this new information in the government's speech-acts demonstrates that *securitization* was the reasoning behind stigmatizing the building. The government quickly moved into administrative measures to further securitize it.

The instrumentalization of state institutions to materially disavow the national theater started in 2018 and would continue until its demolition, with decisions from both central and municipal government relying on reports compiled by state inspectors and inspectorates. After the start of the protests and the presentation of the new theater project, the Minister of Culture reported to the Parliament Commission on Education and Means of Public Information that the theater building had been inspected by the Institute of Cultural Monuments and the Institute of Construction and assessed as severely damaged and in violation of technical standards, relying on their expertise to conclude that the building had structural issues that no intervention could satisfactorily address (Mile 2018c). The Institute of Construction was quickly mobilized in 2018 along with a Working Group that the Ministry of Culture set up to evaluate the development of the "zone" of the National Theater (Ministry of Culture of Albania, Order 315/2018). They reached further conclusions on the irreversibility of damage to the building, the lack of contemporary standards of security, on the use of cheap and unsustainable material, etc. (Institute of Construction, Act Expertise 75/1, March 23, 2018; Ministry of Culture of Albania, Memo 3427/1, May 16, 2018). Both reports, compiled after the government had announced plans for demolition and presented

the new project,[114] appeared to be after-the-fact legitimizers rather than a basis for decision-making. This language in the report, already in use by Prime Minister Rama, Minister Kumbaro, and Mayor Veliaj, became the technical basis of the government discourse on the value and undesirability of the building.

In response to this practice, suspicious of the government and its methods, and following arguments from experts in the media, the protesters now organized around the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater mobilized to gather competing evidence about the value of the building, its architecture, sustainability, and material composition. Two main civil society entities set the foundation for competing expertise from the very start of resistance: the Society of Albanian Architects and the Forum for Cultural Heritage, both of which engaged as official entities and through their experts (see their public statements at *Gazeta Shqiptare* 2018a; *Panorama* 2018). Independent experts were also active in the media, bringing competing documents to public attention, challenging the assessment of official reports (see Biçoku 2018; Shima 2018; Raça 2018), providing competing cost assessments of restoration, and designing alternative projects that would incorporate the existing building (see for instance the April 2018 project reported in Nikolli 2018c). The theater rooms and later the square adjunct to it would become a forum for discussion and parallel assessment that the newly formed Alliance for the Protection of the Theater (commonly referred to as the Alliance) used in letters, articles, declarations, and reports,[115] and later, in legal pursuit that sued the institutions and experts that signed onto the report presented by state institutions (*Panorama* 2020b; *Gazeta Shqiptare* 2020). This parallel expertise amplified the lack of trust in state institutions and the government, and also recast degradation and neglect as a pro-active policy choice to not preserve, rather than as an independent cause or evidence to support demolition.

From the outset, another point of contestation within the disavowal-retention battle was heritage and de-heritagization inscribed in law, with the government's mapping and remapping practices emerging as instruments of power. The official reports compiled by state institutions and

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[114] The demolition was protested since February 8, 2018, with the new project presented by PM Rama and Danish architect Bjarke Ingels on March 12. The two reports assessing the situation were compiled on March 28 and May 16, 2018. The same 2018 report was recycled in 2020 by the Institute of Construction and the Municipality of Tirana to legitimize their decisions.

[115] See for instance the Alliance in the Parliament Commission for Education and Means of Information hearing, reported by Panorama (Mile 2018a).

cited in government decisions claimed that the National Theater had never been an official cultural monument categorized through law. PM Rama repeatedly articulated this point (see RTV Klan 2020b). It thus seemed odd that the Ministry of Culture had engaged the Institute of Cultural Monuments to assess the state of an object that fell outside of its purview. Public intellectuals, architects and urbanists gathered along with the Alliance to provide competing expertise to the government, went to great lengths to prove the protected status of the theater, and argued that the government had taken active steps to remove the theater from the central monumental ensemble of Tirana. They claimed that its initial monumental status was ordained through the Decision of the Council of Ministers 180/2000 (DCM 180/2000) that proclaimed the center of Tirana and an expansive array of buildings, including the National Theater, as part of the "Cultural Monument Ensemble". They cited further steps that aimed at removing this official status, such as DCM 325/2017, while some disagreed on the validity of status removal by simply re-mapping the protected area (see Merxhani in *Panorama* 2020a).

With the theater left in a status conundrum and without the protection of the state, activists materialized their dissonance and heritage contestation through the banner "Monument of culture, protected by the people" (*Monument kulture, mbrohet nga populli*) (*Figure 15*). This phrase was a powerful appropriation and modification of the classical banner of heritage protection by the state in Albania "Monument of culture, protected by the state", now turned into "Monument of culture, protected by the people" as the state became a threat instead of a protecter (see Demo 2023, 12). For Isto (2023) this designation was indicative of the emergence of the National Theater as *counter heritage*, pointing at competing visions and versions of modernization. In fact, "the state" and "the people" emerged as competing entities in heritage interpellation, ordination, and designation, resembling competing authorities in the very constitution of what is and is not heritage. Contested heritage not only emerged as the site of competing interpretations of heritage, or modernization (*dissonance*), but primarily as the site of political competition, materialized in resistance as a political act (*contestation*). "Monument of culture, protected by the people" was not only an act of speech, but a material act, a banner printed out and inscribed on the material site of the theater, proclaiming its status and the authority protecting it (*Figure 15*).

Both heritage dissonance and heritage contestation would be amplified through the articulation of *monumentality* and *heritage* in Europa Nostra's support for the resistance against

demolition. Europa Nostra, the largest civil society consortium advocating for heritage protection in Europe, built on the initial efforts of Docomomo International from April 2018 (*Panorama Online* 2018a), to constitute the National Theater as "heritage in danger" and advocate to the Rama Government for protection (Europa Nostra 2018). In 2020, Europa Nostra included the Theater on its list of the "7 Most Endangered Sites of Heritage in Europe in 2020" (Europa Nostra 2020b). Europa Nostra claimed that the National Theater of Albania was one of the few sites in the history of the "7 Most Endangered Sites of Heritage in Europe" list to be threatened by a government and eventually demolished (Europa Nostra 2020c; Dedaj 2020a).

One of the first decisive argument would come only after the demolition, when the Albanian Supreme Audit Institution (ASAI) conducted an audit to the Institute of Monuments of Culture (IMK). ASAI (Decision 54/2020) argued that DCM 582/2018 had changed the map of the protected area in violation of the law "For Cultural Heritage and Museums". In addition, ASAI (2020, 2) argued in its press release that "the National Council of Restorations (NCR) has changed the assessment of the historical and cultural areas of Tirana and of objects on them, following interest in new constructions in these areas and on these objects" (see also ASAI Decision 54/2020, p. 5). It explicitly concluded that these changes to the designated protected areas reflected the demands of the Municipality of Tirana and were used as a façade to justify their actions, without the proper assessments having taken place (ASAI Decision 54/2020, p. 5). ASAI was thus arguing that the order of expert assessments and political decisions had been inversed, with expert assessments serving as legitimizing tools instead of evidence on which to build executive decision-making.

Instrumentalizing the EU

The Rama government also made use of the tacit approval of the EU for its plans for demolition. The resistance against demolition and the opposition in Albania had initially looked towards the European Commission and the EU Delegation in Tirana for help, a strategy that backfired and was co-opted by the government for its own ends. The government's demolition plans were facilitated by the de facto "freezing" of the judiciary with the ongoing EU- and US-sponsored Justice Reform in Albania, in particular the lack of a functional Constitutional Court. Cognisant of its unbounded powers, the government passed a Special Law setting a special procedure to evaluate, negotiate,

and carry out the urban project of building a new theater (Law 37/2018) followed by a Council of Minister's Decision (DCM 377/2020) to transfer the ownership of the territory of the National Theater to the Municipality of Tirana, which would proceed to carry out the demolition. The Special Law was returned to parliament twice by the President of the Republic on multiple counts of constitutional violations (*Panorama* 2019). Once out of legal recourse, the President forwarded the Special Law, the DCM transferring ownership, and a subsequent Decision of the Municipal Council of Tirana for the demolition of the National Theater (DMC 50/2020) to the Constitutional Court. The Constitutional Court had been absent and nonfunctional for months, unable to adjudicate cases due to its decimation by vetting, resignations, and end of terms, with the Judicial Appointment Council—responsible for appointing new members—suffering its own vacancies due to the Justice Reform (Erebara 2018). The Constitutional Court adjudicated the case only in the summer of 2021, more than a year after the demolition, finding the Special Law and the ownership-transferring DCM 377/2020 unconstitutional (Constitutional Court of Albania, Decision V-29/21), while failing to adjudicate on its prerogatives on DMC 50/2020.[116]

The Special Law gave exclusive rights through a PPP to a company close to power, Fusha sh.p.k., to use public land in exchange for building the new theater. Both the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater and the Democratic Party opposition sent letters to the European Commission (to Commissioner Hahn, High Representative Mogherini, and EU Delegation in Tirana) detailing the overall struggle for the National Theater, the unconstitutional nature of the Special Law, and the potential conflict of the law with the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) (*Gazeta Shqiptare* 2018b). The European Commission sent a bureaucratic letter to the Government of Albania[117] commenting exclusively on SAA's state aid/competition and public procurement provisions, and concluding that no violation of the SAA could be asserted at that

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[116] It is important to note that the Connotational Court adjudicated on the Special Law 37/2018, on the Council of Minister's Decision (DCM 377/2020) to transfer the ownership of the territory of the National Theater to the Municipality of Tirana, and on the Decision of the Municipal Council of Tirana (DMC 50/2020) to demolish the building. It reached a decision on the unconstitutionality of Law 37/2018 and of DCM 377/2020, but not on DMC 50/2020. On DMC 50/2020 judges were split as to the jurisdiction and prerogatives of the Constitutional Court to adjudicate on a Decision of the Municipal Council of Tirana (see page 23 of Decision V-29/21).

[117] The Commission first sent 15 clarifying questions to Albanian authorities about the Special Law, and in September 2018, through the Head of Unit for Albania and BiH in DG Enlargement, followed with an answer. The Alliance would send a subsequent letter to the EU in 2019 detailing the struggle for the theater, and also pointing to the non-functional Constitutional Court (Alliance for the Protection of the Theater 2019).

stage (*Panorama Online* 2018b),[118] but welcoming an amendment of the law to align with "EU public procurement principles and ensure non-discriminatory market access" (*Panorama Online* 2018b). In addition, the EU Ambassador in Albania, Luigi Soreca, repeatedly told members of the Alliance for the Protection of the Theater and the media that the issue was too "politicized" for him to comment on (*TV Klan* 2019). The EU's reaction amounted to tacit approval for the government plans.

The government trumpeted the Commission's response as a win, with PM Rama and Tirana Mayor Veliaj translating the EU response as blessing the government plans, and moved forward to amend the law and open competition for the new theater project.[119] Mayor Veliaj promptly tweeted "Excellent news the letter from EC for the New Theater!" (@erionveliaj, 2018) claiming that "now obstacles had fallen" and accompanied his tweet with a picture from the new reconceptualized national theater project. In an interview with Euronews, PM Rama declared that the EU had reviewed the law and cleared it on a competition condition (Parrock 2019; Van Gerven Oei 2019). The government had promptly used the EU intervention to shift the debate from one of *heritage*— "to destroy or not to destroy"—into one of *competition and procurement*—"how to destroy through a competitive process".

The European Commission would shift course very late in the process, coming up with bolder statements about the need to preserve the theater only in 2020. With the internationalization of the issue of the National Theater of Albania through Europa Nostra's "7 Most Endangered Heritage Sites in Europe," the newly appointed European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth in 2020, Mariya Gabriel (@GabrielMariya 2020), called for dialogue with civil society and experts before irreversible steps were taken, just a few days before the demolition. For the resistance against demolition in Albania, the EU involvement and "stance" on the National Theater had already been set by the Commission's initial reaction and Ambassador Soreca's subsequent statements.

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[118] The letter detailed that there could be potential violations on state aid, depending on provisions that could be only later assessed upon signature of a development contract. On public procurement, it noted that the Special law, in its current form of a closed tender, raised concerns about "the desired objective of the parties to consider opening-up the award of public contracts on the basis of non-discrimination and reciprocity" (complete letter available at Panorama Online 2018b).

[119] The President returned the law to the parliament for a second time after this amendment (Citizens Channel 2018), claiming that the majority of his points were not addressed and that the law remained anti-constitutional as the Court would later confirm.

Finally, the issue of 'politicization' emerged as a valuable discursive trope of both delegitimizing resistance and of disguising government decisions as inherently not political, but as rather politicized through confrontation. This term was first introduced by the Rama Government to criticize the involvement of the Democratic opposition in support of the resistance for the protection of the theater (see for instance Report TV 2020). A derogatory term meant to capture political antagonism, "politicization" as a charge artificially dislocated the center of political confrontation from the place of the National Theater and citizens' resistance into partisan politics, while also stigmatizing the last. In addition, it disguised the government's contingent decisions on disavowal and demolition as inherently apolitical, with politicization being a quality ascribed to contestation, especially that of the parliamentarian opposition.[120] Used by the EU Ambassador as an argument to avoid taking a stance, "politicization" consolidated as a negative quality that resistance brought to otherwise uncontested governmental decisions.

Conclusions

The demolition of the National Theater of Albania emerges in this chapter as a political act of *displacing* and then *replacing* the central art institution as a place. I argued that the Rama government, aspiring to the rebirth of the theater and a radical reform of the arts and culture, disavowed the central art institution inherited from transition in favor of rebuilding it from scratch, along with practices, relations, and an art production suitable for the contemporary art scene. The National Theater that Rama found in 2013 emerged in official speech as a relic of a different time and place, shielded through transition and left to coddle a useless transitional artist, in need of rebirth. The National Theater then was demolished along with its layered representation of an institutional inheritance that stood in the way of Rama's imagination of the artistic space as more atomized, independent, competitive, young and transgressive, project-reliant, Western-inspired and aspiring, financially dependent on centralized government streams of funding but at the same time detached from the central art institution as the center of art production. This political approach to the National Theater as a place was disguised as apolitical, wrapped up in a discourse of modernization, necessity, and inevitability.

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[120] Activists and commentaries started referring to the DP as the parliamentary opposition, while retaining the wider term of 'opposition' for the resistance movement to protect the theater.

Appendix: Photographs

Figure 14: The National Theater before demolition: JoraK, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Figure 15: *"Monument of culture, protected by the people"* (*Monument kulture, mbrohet nga populli*): Xheni Myrtaj, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Conclusion: Politics, contestation, and aesthetics

Like Rama, previous rulers of Albania each had their modernization campaigns that manifested in the built landscape of the country's urban spaces. Like Rama, they also made stark decisions on building, retaining, destroying, or transforming heritage given the major critical junctures Albania went through in less than a century, from the Ottoman Empire to state-building efforts during a kingdom committed to modernization and Westernization (Zog's Kingdom), to a fascist protectorate during the second world war, to a communist dictatorship committed to another modernization project through socialism on its way to building the new human and a communist utopia, to a transition from communism committed to Westernization though the market economy and democracy. None of these political eras simply continued as seamless transitions from one order to the next—they were instead their own versions of 'ends of history', the ultimate hegemonic order, needing to challenge the orders that had preceded right before. Challenging these previous political orders also meant dealing with their symbolic orders, inscribed in the built heritage to venerate those orders as timeless. At times reordering the symbolic space meant demolition, at others retention or transformation (Mëhilli 2017), cleansing it of the overt symbolism from the fallen order.

These different orders of modernity, from King Zog's Westernization to Hoxha's communist modernization, to post-communist democracy and capitalism, to Rama's post-transition urban Renaissance produced their own stigmatized non-modern backward objects of emancipation. Inscribed in bodies, mentalities, affection networks and social bonds, symbolic milieus, traditions and mores, elites, languages and dialects, landscapes, buildings, institutions and places, and the state stood the objects of these grand emancipatory transformations. King Zog's modernization projects focused on Ottoman traditions and the capital city as milieus of backwardness in need of Westernization. Communist modernization focused on the body, the subject, the "backward mentalities", landscapes, soundscapes, symbolscapes, and soulscapes, as it saw like a state, heard like a state, and ordered like a state the production of the new human (Tochka 2016; Bejko 2021; Lelaj 2015). Backwardness was situated in pre-communist forms of labour-production, class relations, gender, race, traditions, mentalities, art and cultural production

engendered through the dominant orders that preceded socialist revolutions (Hoxha 1982). Post-communist transition focused on the communist past as a space that had left Albania (again) separated from Europe and underdeveloped because of this severed civilizational belonging to what was imagined, in its very essence, as a community of freedom, democracy, and markets (Tochka 2016; Bejko 2021). Backwardness was a complex object of severed civilizational belonging, to be reinstated as Albania mimicked the West in its totality, as a modern fetish of seductive power, driving a longing for a new type of subjecthood, signaled through a sustaining and cross-partisan commitment to EU integration.

The Rama Government embraced the transitional ethics of modernization, while situating backwardness with the unfinished reform of the country and its people on the one hand, and the divisiveness of memory battles and vengeful transitional elites on the other. It is facing the transitional elites (contestation), I argue, that explains the first order of decisions on contested heritage—to retain or destroy—while the symbolic repertoire of sites is central to the second layer of decisions—to restore, transform, rebuild. Transitional elites emerged as communist-like elites in nature, stuck in perpetually facing communism yet not able to transcend it, learn from it, or radically reform the institutions inherited from it, and also unable to retain the nostalgic and valuable that connects a shared mnemonic community. As the government narrative goes, it was these transitional elites that kept the country in limbo, under-developed, still "out" of Europe—equated with the European Union—and not Westernized enough. Albania was a hostage that was now being freed at "the end of transition" through a Renaissance.

This modernization vision materialized in the discursive trope and governing banner of Renaissance. An immodest term invoking civilizational aspirations, grand urban projects, and a decisive leap forward, Renaissance as a political metaphor also denotes a process of decline and then flourishing, of death and rebirth, of stagnation and revival, a restart that confronts a previous ending. An ending then has to be declared along with a fresh start—a critical juncture that expanded the space of permissibility for the new government to will modern Albania into being. The Socialist Party winning elections in 2013, and Rama becoming Prime Minister for the first time was then not a simple electoral win, replacing one government with another, but a self-proclaimed critical juncture that separated the old from the new, the transitional elite of all parties from the new Socialist elite, transition as an era from post-transition. As the Rama government in

2013 self-proclaimed the end of transition, it claimed a mandate for radical transformation and urban Renaissance along with it.

The "end of transition" was meant to radically transform Albania through the help of an elite group of foreign architects, urban planners, artists, curators, international partners such as the EU and the UN, and Albanian star artists abroad—a group of returnees and affiliated talents that resembled an artistic and civilizational brain gain from the 1990s diaspora, those who had left and made it abroad now coming to modernize those who were left behind. These "protagonists" of Albania's Renaissance—as PM Rama would proclaim them in 2013—were meant to represent the expert and professional base of a new governing ethics that would craft policies based on sound expertise and professional assessment, embedding the very process of political decision-making in expertise. Instead, these respected and authoritative voices emerged in urban projects as resembling European Renaissance-commissioned artist and architects, while the Rama Government resembled a patron prince of the arts and culture of the modern era. The built heritage of Albania was restored, transformed, or demolished and built anew by mobilizing and engaging this network of authoritative and legitimizing voices and visions, as the government disguised its political decisions to preserve or demolish heritage under a veneer of expertise and professional stardom.

The star professionals and partners were most visibly deployed in the symbolic reprocessing of contested heritage, a category of built heritage that in 2013 bore the marks of transitional symbolic and mnemonic public battles that had left them in a state of material limbo. Ripe with symbolic capital and the potential to challenge transitional elites while deploying the government's signature visions of mnemonic reconciliation and radical modernization, these contested sites became primary sites for symbolic reprocessing and signaling the new post-transition order that the government had proclaimed. As the government symbolically confronted the contestation impetus of the transitional elite, it politically ordained contested heritage as either heritage to *preserve* or non-heritage to *destroy*. Foreign professionals and partners were then mobilized in the symbolic reprocessing of sites and the production of categories such as the *iconic*, the *transcendent*, and the *modernized*. As these categories were constituted along with projects to restore (Mosaic "Albania"), to transform (Piramida), or to reconceptualize anew after demolition (National Theater), this symbolic reprocessing with the help of foreign authoritative voices was

meant to neutralize contestation by reorganizing the symbolic space to promote the government's vision at the intersection of reconciliatory memory and radical modernization.

Resistance, collective action, and symbolic dissonance was neither pre-empted nor circumvented, pointing to the limits of grand narratives of modernization deploying themselves ruthlessly, decisively, and authoritatively on the built environment of a country. The demolition of the National Theater in particular pulled the mask from the authoritarian tendencies of the Rama Government and of the Renaissance campaign to transform—even alienate—the very urban tissue of Tirana and other urban centers across the country. To paraphrase Dorina Pllumbi, architect and researcher, such drastic interventions in the built environment of a city belong to neither this century nor democratic regimes (Dedaj 2020b). In fact, during the 27 months of resistance against the demolition of the theater, a picture of an authoritarian, clientelist, oligarchic government unfolded, demonstrating how the urban transformation of Albania had cultivated a network of privileged clients, partners, and construction firms (Lala 2021; Reitano and Amerhauser 2020; Çaushaj 2019), along with a government that had mastered the subjugation and instrumentalization of legal, institutional, and electoral rules in more efficient ways than the chaotic transitional elite could have ever dreamed. Albania was not different from other countries in the Western Balkans that experienced autocratic turns in politics, clientelism, and state capture (Vachudova 2019; Bieber 2020; Richter and Wunsch 2020). At the same time, Albania had a particular turn to the aestheticization of politics, making the country and its Prime Minister too exotic for the Western critique to critique.

These region-wide patterns were enshrined in Albania as a troubling "aestheticization of politics" (as in Jay 1992; Mitchell 2003) that an eccentric artist Prime Minister had mastered and deployed as innocuous and Westernizing. Through his transformatory pilot project as the Mayor of Tirana and throughout his first mandate as Prime Minister, Edi Rama emerged as a sweetheart of the Western press and an exotic posterchild of the modernizing artist with a country for his canvas—a country for a full-scale installation and exhibitionary politics to unfold. Against this prevalent Western exoticization of Rama, dissenting voices emerged in Albania that were increasingly critical of the autocratic tendencies of his aesthetic politics manifested in urban politics and the politics of contemporary art. Works such as *Broken Narrative: The Politics of Contemporary Art in Albania* (Lulaj and Mazzi 2022), *The Fall of the Future: Art, Corruption and*

the end of the Albanian Transition (van Gerven Oei 2023),[121] *"It's Very Exciting to Talk about Artist-run Countries": Edi Rama, the COD, and the Problematics of Celebrating the Artist-Politician* (Isto 2016), or *At the Theater* (Demo 2023)[122] dissected the pathologies of the government's dominant narratives about art, progress, the West, the contemporary art scene, the star architects of urban revival, and the broken promises of both transition and the production of new authoritarian orders in its wake. In my reading of these works, and as they emerge in concert, one of the primary sins of the aesthetic turn in Albanian politics during the Rama era was the attempted foreclosing of political and ideological critique along with the means for collective action. On the one hand, the Socialist artist PM Rama pre-empted the ideological base of his own party by admiring, emulating, and aligning with the Blair-inspired "third wave" of Socialism, making the embarking on neoliberal politics seamless and disguised as apolitical (see the compelling critique of van Gerven Oei 2023, as well as Lulaj and Mazzi 2022). On the other hand, politics was subsumed to the realisation of Rama's aesthetic vision (see also Novas Ferradás and Pllumbi 2021), with politics emerging as an instrument in the hands of an eccentric artist, rather than art emerging as an instrument in the hands of a politician.

Not only did principles of beauty and aesthetically pleasing visuals overshadow questions of ethics, justice, and ideologically mandated policy choices, but also a numbing sense of spectacle and sensory experiences permeated politics in its attempt to foreclose mobilization and ideological critique. Spectacles, also ubiquitous in the Renaissance of contested heritage, seemed a fitting tool in the aesthetic toolbox of the artist-politician and the political artist insofar as it targeted senses and affective predispositions as primary sites for intervention. In a prophetic passage from 1992, almost tailor-made for the PM Rama of the future, Martin Jay wrote on the perils of aestheticized politics: "What makes this version of aestheticized politics so objectionable is its reduction of an active public to the passive 'masses,' which is then turned into pliable material for the triumph of the artist/politician's will" (Jay 1992, 45). This primacy of an artistic will to power manifested primarily in the built environment of post-communist Albania, emerging as an artists/architect/politician's will to power in the three-dimensional space of the city and the lived realities of its inhabitants.

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[121] Alb: *Rënia e së ardhmes: Arti, korrupsioni dhe fundi i tranzicionit shqiptar.*
[122] Alb: *Te Teatri.*

My analysis of the Rama Government's approach to contested heritage joins this milieu of critical voices and examines contested heritage as a specific site of the manifestation of the aestheticization of politics and its critique. I see contested heritage as a *seductive* category for authoritative and authoritarian interventions and for elite grand governing visions, as heritage becomes a primary space for production of dominant orders about the Past, the Present, or the Future, all with the capital letters of government-mandated unitary and singular visions. Contested heritage is then not a problem to solve in and of itself, but rather emerges as a problem of consensus-obsessed post-political societies that stigmatize antagonism (see Mouffe 2005; 2013). Instead, contested heritage may emerge as spaces of plurality and emancipation, targeted by authoritarian elite and government visions precisely because of the plurality and multitude of values, visions, and subaltern memories inscribed in them through time, along with the marks of previous elite projects.

For an artist-politician, contested heritage emerges as a space of limbo, seductive because of its indecisiveness, an alluring place to ordain as something ordered, soothed of the contradictions and contestations inscribed in it. Politically, categories of iconicity, transcendence, and modernization emerge along with aestheticized and super-imposed categories of the beautiful and pleasant and idealized and unified visions of a Past and a Future. Strategies of depoliticization in my analysis emerge along with a stigmatization of the political as antagonistic, of antagonism and contestation as "politicized", of the plurality of a society artificially compressed and disguised into the super-imposition of government-mandated unitary visions of time and space. Ultimately, I argue that aesthetic super-imposition is politically as dangerous—maybe even more dangerous because of our limited ability to engage with it politically—as ideological super-imposition. Shall we master aesthetic tools to critique aesthetic politics? I do not provide an answer but echo efforts to open up this question for investigation.

In fact, for the critical voices that have emerged in Albania, the means of resistance to such political orders can be found only in the streets, occupation movements, and civil disobedience. In Lulaj and Mazzi's (2022) analysis, the order that Rama has established emerges as a tripartite authoritarian political-artistic-criminal governance of sorts, with street mobilization as the only

antidote.[123] They refer to the 2018 student protests in Albania as a ray of hope, when students initially mobilized against increased tuition fees, a protest that evolved into a wider demonstration against Rama's political establishment. For Kajsiu (2018), the 2018 protests marked the end of transition and transitional politics, but not quite the end of the neoliberal regime that the elites of the 1990s—some originating from the student movement—had built and consolidated in Albania. They nevertheless cracked the legitimacy of that order with their efforts to preserve one of the last remaining—although threatened—public institutions: the public university. The 1990s remained a powerful invocation during the resistance against the demolition of the National Theater, as the traits of authoritarianism and clientelism were painted in more vivid colors by an artist Prime Minister. Demo (2023) along with other commentators throughout the resistance against the demolition of the National Theater, presented such resistance, and especially the occupation, as a new chapter in Albania's civic consciousness of protest movements and anti-authoritarian mobilization.

As Rama proclaimed his critical juncture of 1992-like radical transformations, the resistance movement also invoked this moment to legitimize resistance against an emerging authoritarianism. It is important to point out how the 1990s were invoked by both the government to self-ascribe a mandate to will into being the Albania of the post-transition period, and by the resistance movement to invoke the sentiment of student resistance of the early 1990s against the communist regime in Albania to describe their own mobilization against another authoritarian regime. This competing invocation of the 1990s limited the ability of the government to discursively co-opt this moment as a mandate for unbounded political will. The 1990s were also a moment of resistance to the dictatorship. The 1990s plural invocation served to preserve its significance as an extraordinary moment of tectonic shifts deployable to both serve power and resist it.

An epilogue for further research

The aestheticization of politics and its deployment on contested heritage brings to the fore the question of gaze and imagined gazes as the heritage of Albania is aestheticized for consumption. As Albania under the Rama government has made "peace" with its dictatorial past for the sake of

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[123] For a longer review of their work, see my review essay in ArtMargins, Lleshaj (2022).

the future, a new exotic landscape of bunkers and curatorial politics of installation has emerged (see Gashi 2022), tokenized for local Albanians as much as for an emerging tourist industry that promotes and engenders a neoliberal consumption of mnemonic landscapes (see Isto 2017). Urban revival at the intersection of memory and modernization is also pivoting towards an imagined tourist subject, gazing at the rebirth of Albania as a modern country. As if this Western-assumed gaze cannot observe a disordered, unprepared, unmodernized, "wild", "ugly" Albania (Pllumbi 2021), the country pivots to its imagined aesthetic modern preferences for the opened space of bunkers and dictatorial violence, the transformed modern Piramida, the restored iconic Mosaic, the brand-new Danish-conceptualized National Theater.[124] These spaces were ordered and estheticized for the preferences of this assumed gaze of a still-venerated Westerner looking down on and inside the backward, not fully modern and modern-wanna-be Albanian—a self-Orientalizing trope essential to the Rama government's modernizing project. As the transformation of a city pivots to an emerging tourism industry, and an assumed aesthetic preference, Tirana increasingly resembles a touristic exhibitionary space where the exhibit imperative—a type of Bennettian exhibitionary complex (Bennett 2017)—prevails over local concerns of alienation and placemaking.

During the Rama government's third mandate, a new type of urban aesthetic with *national* flavors has begun to emerge, one that is not discussed in this dissertation because it is neither contested nor heritage, but relevant for the aestheticization of politics. The semiotic repertoire of the term *Rilindje* in Albanian is being fully exhausted for spatial manifestation: the European Renaissance meets the romantic National Revival. The nation materializes in buildings with the help of the long-standing government architectural partner, the Dutch architectural firm from Piramida's rebirth, MVRDV. Very close to the Piramida stands Downtown One, described on its project page as "a 140-metre-tall mixed-use tower in Tirana that will become Albania's tallest building." "The most striking element," says the pitch, "is its relief of cantilevered houses and offices, which form a pixelated 'map' of Albania, each representing a town or city, turning this building into an icon in the heart of Tirana" (MVRDV 2016). On the side of Tirana's central Skenderbeg square, a few meters from the restored Mosaic, another building will stand materializing the head of Albania's national hero, Skenderbeg. The building will be dubbed

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[124] The new National Theater is yet to be built, as I write this dissertation.

Tirana's Rock and according to MVRDV, it "will be among the world's largest buildings that doubles as a figurative sculpture" and another "iconic landmark at Skanderbeg Square" (MVRDV 2022). A fascinating quote from MVRDV's founding partner Winy Maas is included in the project description: "It brings new meaning to existing elements of Albanian architecture. As Albania begins its negotiations to join the EU, projects such as this one are part of the European Project—it stresses Albania's history, character, and presence in a unified Europe of many states" (MVRDV 2022). As Albania's EU journey passes through this constitution of a sense of national identity in new urban projects, the journey of a modernized city from the memory of a dictatorship to a national-assertive EU future comes full circle, as Renaissance meets National Revival—both denoted in the Albanian term, *Rilindje*. Tirana stands utterly transformed at the end of transition, between modernization and alienation, resembling a public exhibition of a nation's nightmares and dreams materialized in space.

The category of nostalgia, then, becomes a complicated social and political sentiment in the rapidly ever-transforming post-communist Albania. The longing for the communist period, enmeshed in a bipolar conundrum of trauma on the one hand and an easier, predictable life on the other is neither equally distributed among Albanians nor had it been fully processed politically as the Rama Government came to power in 2013. The construction frenzy and radical transformation of the built environment of Albania transformed the lived environment of Albanians, engendering a longing for the familiar attached to relics of the past *as familiar*. Albanian attitudes towards the built environment they inherited from communism was also affected by the rapid transformation of the rest of their urban environment, reformatting their sentimental and affective attachments to communist heritage (see Iacono and Këlliçi 2015). This longing tempered resistance against the preservation of contested heritage, as spatial alienation amplified a general longing for the familiar. Rapid transformation then may have softened the contestation against the Rama government's preservatory impulse towards communist contested heritage as much as the political investment into a unifying and reconciliatory memory contract on the past.

Implications and limitations

Proposing to approach contested heritage as a space of plurality, instead of a problem/issue/site for societies to "deal with" or "manage" the past, confronts the core of the post-political *Zeitgest* of our conflict-averse, consensus-obsessed, antagonism-stigmatizing era (Mouffe 2005; 2013). Not

only does contested heritage stand as a sovereign material and symbolic manifestation of societal and political battles, but it also primarily embodies in its very contentious existence the plurality of potentially irreconcilable political approaches, affective structures, mnemonic and aspirational visions, pasts and futures that fail to be authoritatively turned into a Past and a Future with capital letters. When an authoritarian power emerges, interested in ordering the plural concepts of the past and the future into unitary dominant visions of the Past and Future, it targets this heritage in order to inscribe these orders in them and through them. This way of conceptualizing contested heritage shifts the locus of the "problem" from the dissonance of heritage—as the site where traditional heritage studies seem to locate "the dealing with"—into the *realm of politics* and of the hegemonic discourses trying to order society and its consonance authoritatively. It is authoritarian consonance that I propose to scrutinize, instead of heritage dissonance.

In addition, emphasizing the term *contested heritage*, instead of dissonant or difficult heritage, further locates the study of contested heritage within the realm of the political and of political science. It also helps in understanding the primacy of political battles and inter-elite competition on the fate of heritage (retain or destroy), a dimension that in the case of Albania seems to precede the layer of symbolic reprocessing which emerges as a productive site of politics once sites are ordained as heritage to preserve or remains to destroy. The term *contested heritage* forefronts contestation and contentiousness as a quality of the political space, and approaches politics, its practices, and its actors, instead of the incongruences of meaning-making and symbolic processing that is part of contestation and channeled through moments of contestation. In line with my proposal to approach contested heritage as a space of plurality, the choice to emphasize contestation instead of dissonance, difficulty, or ambiguity, shifts its conceptualization from negatively associated connotations of these objects, into spaces of legitimate political processing, negotiation, or conflict.

Furthermore, locating the analysis of contested heritage in the realm of political contestation, along with emancipating contestation and antagonism as natural categories of "the political", also means approaching sites of contestation as material, symbolic, affective, and political *whole spaces*, complete in their ambiguous, dissonant selves, testimonies of pluralities of orders that fail to become hegemonic. Designating a contested site as in limbo, damaged, or ugly, is constituting it as a space for intervention. It is this very constitution as a half space in between,

as an indecisive ambiguous space, as an ugly space, as a space described through derogatory aesthetic categories that I propose to analyze as the seduction of contested heritage. It is these practices of constitution that I want to interrogate as sites of power, and as indicators that an ordering vision is about to be materialized in what is being constituted as in need of intervention, as in need of resolution, as in need of order.

The monumental seduction (Huyssen 2003) of contested heritage—presented in this dissertation as the particular allure that spaces of plurality and contestation exercise on political power invested in deploying dominant narratives through the built environment—is especially relevant for scholars studying the effects of political power, especially in authoritarian-turning politics, on heritage and monuments. This specification is important for two primary reasons. First, it situates my findings and analysis in non-democratic political settings, in the case of Albania into the politics of competitive authoritarianism, or hybrid regimes. Competitive authoritarianism regimes, as per Levitsky and Way (2010), are their own type of polity and regime category for good reason, as their political nature and manifestation is not satisfactorily described and accounted for through variations of other forms of regimes. The particular melange of openings and constraints that this type of regime presents for governing elites, and especially governing leaders, points to important specificities of the conditions of possibility for a prime minister like Rama and a government like the Rama Government to decide on contested heritage so authoritatively. At the same time, it also shows how contestation by previous elites or public civic resistance remains important, with such leaders not being able to entirely circumvent resistance to their politics, despite the deployment of institutional, legal, and extra-legal mechanisms that facilitate the materialization of their grand visions. Similarly, the need for the government to situate and deploy political choices through various strategies of depoliticization and legitimation points to the specific melange of permissibility and constraints that competitive authoritarianism presents governing elites and leaders with. The range of possibilities and constraints, and governmental maneuvers within them, may manifest in different patterns under other forms of regimes, as governments and other elites choose to approach contested heritage, or approach it at all as a space for intervention.

Second, the analysis of contested heritage as a space of seduction for emerging hegemonic discourses applies to the study of intervention on heritage from a *position of power*, especially

governmental power, and hegemonic discourses or discourses aiming for dominant positions. Approaching heritage from a *position of disempowerment* and subjugation, on a quest for emancipation, or to contest dominant social and political structures is a particular type of political problem, which I analyze in chapter 3. The heritage that disempowered groups may try to approach, and which is seductive to them, is well-ordained heritage, dominant and dominating, constituted as heritage and powerful because of that position of authority. In fact, chapter 3 of this dissertation points to these dynamics of emancipation and the push from subaltern accounts about the past trying to become intelligible by positioning themselves against dominant celebratory attitudes towards heritage. This approach of contesting what is dominant differs from an approach of dominating what is contested, as the latter is an approach of subjugating plural accounts of the past towards a dominantly constituted Past. Bringing both these perspectives on contestation from a place of disempowerment and domination to a place of power better specifies the analytical categories at play and further exemplifies the rich political insights that contested heritage presents for the study of politics.

The diversity of my chapters also points to the importance of sited analysis as both different and complementary to the study of cases. Cases are bounded units of analysis, independent and sovereign in their "findings" and contributions to the analysis. Sites instead provide the opportunity to trace parts of the argument and provide pieces of puzzles to an overall argument (Riofrancos 2021). Sites can be cases, but may also represent similar units of a single process manifesting itself, with different or complementary results. In this dissertation contested and contesting heritage emerge through my chapters as connected units of analysis, manifesting different yet interdependent processes of approaching contested heritage during the Rama Government's decade long-term(s) in power. Categories of the iconic, the transcendent, or the old in need of modernization emerge in concert as different spaces marked for retention and demolition, as parts of the past are selectively preserved while others are discarded on their way to radical reformation. The sites I trace are different projects of a same urban revival mandate, yet they affect one another and are far from co-dependent by design as part of the same narrative constellation of the Renaissance metaphor. For instance, the network of memory museums and installations serves as narrative-building sites, important to both the emergence of the iconic and the transcendent, and to the closing of a chapter of the past that gives way to further radical transformations meant for the future, present in both the Piramida and the National Theater

projects. Sites emerge as layers in approaching contested heritage as the government deployed dominant narratives on the built environment and ordained what was worth preserving and what should be discarded to make way for the future.

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