Urban design, ideology, and power: use of the central square in Tirana during one century of political transformations

Dorina Pojani

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, PO Box 5030, 2600 GA Delft, The Netherlands

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Urban design, ideology, and power: use of the central square in Tirana during one century of political transformations

Dorina Pojani∗

Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Department of Urbanism, Delft University of Technology, PO Box 5030, 2600 GA Delft, The Netherlands

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This article recounts the history of urban design in the centre of Tirana, the capital of Albania, during five political periods (Ottoman Empire, Italian domination, communist regime, post-communist anarchy, and Western-style planning). Starting in the 1910s, successive governments have imposed their urban design visions for a grand city centre and tried to erase the built heritage of their predecessors, thus creating an eclectic space. In the post-communist era, the city government has made attempts to develop a new grand vision for its use but has met with failure. The author argues that the reasons for this outcome lay in the contemporary nature of the state, as well as the nature of development in a market economy.

Keywords: city centres; public space; monumentality; totalitarianism; Tirana; Albania

Introduction

By European standards, Tirana is a relatively young city. When it became the capital of Albania in 1920, it was a small town of 17,000 inhabitants. Today, it is a metropolis of nearly one million inhabitants. Within a century, Tirana has experienced the rise and demise of the Ottoman Empire, fascism, and communism, and (since 1990) the rise of consumerism. This article is about the transformation of its centre, which has been remade several times to mirror the transformations that occurred in Albanian politics and society.1

Following Albania’s independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, subsequent totalitarian governments, each bringing a new ideology and a new set of rules, imposed their grand urban design visions on Tirana’s central square and main boulevard and tried to erase the heritage of their predecessors. Each totalitarian regime succeeded in leaving its mark, but the grand visions of the new democratic regime have been largely unaccomplished. The result is an eclectic and unfinished space that comprises an assortment of layers, styles, and iconographies from different eras, and a perpetual flow of traffic.

In the last decade, the city government has made attempts to develop a new grand vision for the use of the city centre. However, these visions, based on an engrained tradition of central planning by an all-powerful government and a potent nostalgia about the past role of the centre, have met with failure. This failure is the outcome of the contemporary nature of the state, as well as the nature of spatial arrangements in a market economy. None of the post-communist governments has been able to exercise definitive control and affirm its power by bringing

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a workable vision and resources to readapt the centre to fulfil an attractive role in the new context in which it must function. A pluralistic élite, which replaced the monolithic powers of the past eras, is inept at crafting a new collective meaning, to which contemporary society can anchor its identity in flux.

While the centre fits the needs of totalitarian regimes, it is out of place with the logic and the use of centrally located space in a market economy. Now, urban uses of space are dominated by inhabitants uninterested in political demonstrations and parades, which require purposely built large plazas and wide avenues. Private developers have taken over the role of the state in creating public life outside the city’s central square. In the time-honoured tradition of many Southern European cities, the defining character of these new communal spaces is a combination of strolling, consumerism, intimacy, and so-called ‘third places’ (cafés, bars, clubs, and the like) accommodated in narrow streets, back alleys, and refurbished courtyards. By contrast, the centre is a sterile space.

The urban planning and design of the centre of Tirana can be divided into three periods: Italian ‘protectorate’ (1920s–1945), communist police state (1945–1990), and pluralistic market economy (1990 to the present). While the current academic literature on the design of the centre is limited, debates on this issue abound in the media, particularly in newspapers, TV, and the Internet. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles, as well as a few design reports, written between 2002 and 2012 by Albanian and foreign architects, designers, journalists, and political analysts, were identified and pieced together to reconstruct the public discourse related to Tirana’s centre (Table 1).

The centre of Tirana

**Italian efforts to Westernize the centre**

In 1912, Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire after five centuries of domination, during which it had absorbed Ottoman culture. Eight years later, Tirana, which was a small town with 17,000 inhabitants and an area of 3 square kilometres, became its capital. Several commentators described it as little more than ‘a big village’.

The town centre consisted of a lively bazaar of two or three hectares that dated from the 1700s, in which most stores were clustered. A description is provided by an Italian geographer in 1941, who notes that the bazaar had changed little since Ottoman times:

> the bazaar, which makes up the heart of the city, is one of a kind… A maze of streets and paths, flanked by plain cottages, often single-storey, with a shop opening on the street and a backroom serving as storage and workshop. Tiny shops next to each other, in two rows on every street, over the entire quarter.

Landmarks in the centre included a very small mosque and a clock tower, which were built in 1789 and 1830, respectively. The residential neighbourhoods that surrounded the centre, especially in the east and northeast, were created piecemeal in a typical Muslim vernacular style. The main roads radiated from the bazaar all the way out of town.

The regime of the newly independent state wished to transform the town into a Western European capital based on professional concepts and plans. Austrian consultants, who were hired in 1923, prepared a plan to widen and straighten urban roads and ‘rationalize’ the
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design of the city. This approach was typical in South-eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean between 1900 and World War II. In conjunction with nation-building projects, in opposition to the ‘oriental others’, urban projects, including comprehensive plans for the radical remodelling of the city, embellishment projects, and garden suburb designs, were drawn up for all major cities in the region. Urban aesthetic ideas (rationalistic configuration, functional

Figure 1. From top: (a) plan of Tirana in 1921; (b) aerial view of the first nucleus; and (c) bazaar. Photos courtesy of the National Planning Archive.
organization, and visual harmony) were adopted as a vehicle to consolidate new national identities, establish novel, nationally relevant urban forms, make art available to the urban masses, and regulate the citizenry. The past was considered undesirable. Generally, classicist design, with its strong streak of modernity, proved the most powerful instrument to reshape cities and overtly serve nationalistic and modernizing objectives. At the same time, capitals in Western Europe, North America, and Australia too saw a resurgence of interest in monumental styles used to imprint different types of authority and forge national identities (i.e. the Washington Mall in Washington, DC, Canberra’s plan, or the BBC’s building in London).

This type of capital had also been the dream of the Albanian intelligentsia in the late nineteenth century, who had organized the National Awakening movement against the Ottoman yoke. A leader of the movement described his vision:

[for the capital] we had better build a new city in the middle of Albania, on a healthy and beautiful site. This city, which we can call Skanderbegas, will be arranged in a most pleasant manner with wide and straight streets, with fine houses, with squares, and everything necessary... So this city will be unbound by the bad vices of old cities...

In 1926, an army official, Ahmet Zog, took power and proclaimed himself the King of Albania. His objective was to westernize Albanian society. A (non-practising) Muslim, he married a Catholic Hungarian princess in order to strengthen ties with christian Europe. In conjunction with his political efforts, he wanted to create a Western European capital city, which would reinforce the transformation. In order to implement his vision, Zog hired two renowned Roman architects for the redesign of the city centre, Armando Brasini and Florestano Di Fausto. Di Fausto had already worked overseas, in Libya, and had gained a reputation for creative versatility, circumvention of fascist imperialism, passion for the building traditions and anthropological costumes of other peoples, and hybrid architecture. The Italian government helped with funds in order to extend its influence in the Western Balkans. Through a ‘Friendship Treaty’ and the debt contracted to implement the design, Albania effectively became an Italian protectorate.

The Italian designs did not consist merely of a traslatio of pre-existing structures into a new urban context. In an autarchic vein, they rearranged buildings and space to reflect a different vision of society and political power. This line of thinking shaped many colonial cities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, creating hybrid identities across the world (British-Indian and French-Algerian). Colonial centres were laid out in large-scale, bombastic urban design schemes and public monuments. These were explicitly designed for prominent displays of national prestige and glory – for example, the Haussmannization process of Paris – and to demonstrate the racial superiority and modernity of colonizers, in contrast to the ‘primitive’ landscapes created by natives. (However, in some cases, as in French-controlled Casablanca, the colonies were used as a testing ground for innovative building practices, which were meant to be introduced to the imperial centre, if successful.)

In Tirana, unconcerned about the prominent Oriental character of the city, Brasini envisioned a baroque central isle, inspired by the St Peter piazza in Rome. He hoped to thus launch the capital into the European scene. His concept included a complex of six two-storey buildings for the ministries placed around an oval plaza with a sunken garden in the middle (to optically increase the height of the ministries). This complex, named Skanderbeg Square, after the fifteenth-century Albanian hero, was built later but its shape was modified from oval to
hexagonal. A straight, wide, monumental boulevard (called Viale del Impero, inspired by the Roman cardo maximus concept), lined with other government buildings of the emerging capital, was planned to extend from the ministry plaza in the south direction.\textsuperscript{20} It was meant to symbolically separate the Eastern nucleus and the Western peripheries and exalt the symbols of power. Although criticized by the local press at the time as being alien to the city,\textsuperscript{21} the grand boulevard was eventually constructed but only a few of the proposed buildings along it were completed (Figure 2). According to some accounts, construction and coordination works of Italian firms in Tirana were carried out amid a climate of hostility and sabotage.\textsuperscript{22} A French architect, who visited Tirana at that time, made a remark that has become well known: ‘I have seen cities without boulevards, but I never saw a boulevard without a city!’\textsuperscript{23}

When Italy occupied Albania at the beginning of World War II, Zog fled the country, and the Italian government declared that Albania was part of the Italian empire. Then, the Mussolini government aimed to fully carry out the national and corporate policies that were cornerstones of fascist architecture and urban planning.

Figure 2. Aerial view of the boulevard (top) and the ministry plaza (bottom). Photos courtesy of the National Planning Archive and Istituto Luce.
As many autocratic leaders did before him, Mussolini saw architecture not only as a governing tool but, due to its potency and capacity for suggestion, also as an education medium and an accomplice in the process of totalitarianization of society. In terms of architectural archetype, fascism adopted avant-garde rationalism, with the intention to liberate people from bonds to a traditional past, while at the same time forging a bond between people and the regime. Rationalist architecture had to have clear and understandable modern forms, but at the same time be able to resuscitate national pride and a sense of belonging (as opposed to internationalist socialist architecture), and constitute a reassuring icon against the anguish accompanying modernism. Hence the frequent use of porticoes, arches, and colonnades. Within Italy, Mussolini subjected the historic centre of the Eternal City to spectacular demolitions with the purpose of tearing away the nineteenth-century urban tissue associated with the liberal monarchy. Marcello Piacentini, the fascist architect par excellence, was nicknamed The Disemboweler. Fascist architecture was declared to be the legitimate heir of ancient Roman architecture – assumed to be the carrier of universal values – and entitled to exercise an artistic primacy over all other nations. Italian colonial architects and planners operating overseas, who wanted to build the image of fascist culture, tried in different ways to assert this centralized, integrated model while entering into a dialogue with local, ‘picturesque’ traditions.

In Albania, master planning, implying total control of urban projects, was the most commonly used tool of the Italian government. A new master plan was prepared by two Florentine architects, Gherardo Bosio and Fernando Poggi, who had also been posted in the Italian colonies in East Africa. Bosio’s architecture had a reputation for its awareness of local folklore and attention to the landscape within the ambit of the civilizing role of Italy in overseas colonies. Poggi’s prior work reflected the fundamental features of the Florentine culture of the epoch, characterized by a fusion of minimalism and a search for national identity in architecture. The National Construction Archives of Albania contain more than 20,000 drawings from that era.

Under this plan, a rigorous, functionalist approach prevailed. The architecture and urban design were clearly affected by dictatorship, as demonstrated by an obsession with sheer size, symmetry, and durable building materials and the employment of literal iconography for floor plans, elevations, or façade decorations. The boulevard was extended symmetrically on the other side (north) of the central plaza to connect the centre to a new train station, cutting through the complex but fragile structure of the Ottoman town. The avenues leading to the centre were further broadened for the purpose of serving pompous military parades. The placement of new social, cultural, and administrative facilities along the boulevard, as elements of conquest and dominion, was done in accordance with the shape of the fascist fasces lictoriae (Figure 3). A prominent Italian architect, Vittorio Morpurgo-Ballio, designed a few buildings including the central bank in Skanderbeg Square and a large plaza (Piazza Littorio) at the southern end of the main boulevard. This plaza housed the Casa del Fascio, the headquarters of the fascist government. A luxury hotel was also built along the boulevard. The rationalist austerity of these structures was meant to convey the colonizers’ virtue, in addition to their greatness. By 1944, despite the war, the Italians completed a substantial portion of their plans for Tiranë, which by then had become a city of 60,000 inhabitants. The Italian viceroy, Francesco Jacomoni di San Savino, commented in his memoirs that ‘[in 1936] thanks to our contribution, the former village had disappeared. Tiranë had indeed become a livable capital city’. In the late 1930s, an Italian geographer noted,
while preserving much of the old town, i.e. from the Turkish era, in 1939 Tirana has radically transformed some of its quarters, has spread out and modernized more than any other Albanian city... These transformations... have caused significant losses in the characteristic aspects of old Tirana; these losses have been compensated by a bit more order and hygiene, if not real aesthetic advantages.36

However, an Austrian traveller noted that life in Tirana went on much as it had done before the war, despite the Italian interventions in the centre.

Low houses remain unchanged since Turkish times, bazaars and half-decayed booths of artisans, there is a continued smell of donkey manure and rancid mutton fat, and where hens and pigs refuse to be disturbed by any mere pedestrian... Everywhere people wear national costume. The old traditional patriarchal way of life has been destroyed but a new one suited to prevailing Albanian circumstances has not yet been discovered.37

**The centre as the showpiece of the communist government**

After the war, Albania was taken over by an exceptionally repressive and isolationist communist regime, led by a local dictator, Enver Hoxha.38 It directed every facet of life and left indelible marks on Tirana’s urban fabric. As in other totalitarian states during the Cold War, the built environment was set to dominate, or suffocate, the masses, like dictatorship itself.39 Like other communist leaders and cult dictators,40 Hoxha set an agenda of grandeur and social engineering.

Although Albania remained independent, Stalin’s Soviet Union constituted Hoxha’s primary model. In that model, a high degree of ideological significance was attached to urban design by the leaders, and minimal deviating from aesthetic codes was allowed.41 Architects created...
‘palaces for the everyday man’ – isolated points of opulence in a wrecked country. Therefore, public space was designed to accommodate such rituals. Mystical areas were created for emotionally intense liturgies exalting and glorifying the regime, complete with parades, songs, flags, and fireworks that engaged all the senses. Idolatry, for example, the mummified corpse of Lenin in the Red Square, was used as a device to press the public into submissiveness. At the same time, a surgical scalpel was applied with brutal efficiency to the main city centres, particularly Moscow’s, in order to annihilate the artefacts of the pre-Soviet world. Religious buildings were a main target of the demolition fury. Vigorous political propaganda surrounded demolition and construction.

Eastern European communist countries, which, like Albania, were not formally Soviet satellites, showed similar signs of monomania. Major construction works often occurred in tandem with major demolitions of buildings from the pre-communist period. In the early 1980s, Romania’s Ceausescu razed almost the entire historic district in Bucharest and replaced it with an 1100-room People’s House, and he destroyed large swathes to make way for huge boulevards that evoked Haussmann’s Paris. In Yugoslavia, Tito used the occasion presented by Skopje’s destructive earthquake in 1963 to create a new city, a sort of European Chandigarh or Brasilia, which was to become the spatial expression of a solidary socialist society. The new ideal city was designed by avant-gardist Kenzo Tange, who won a spectacularized competition against other high-calibre designers.

In a 1948 speech, Albania’s Hoxha stated in regard to Tirana that a clean, well-lit, low, and verdant city must be created:

Tirana’s planning issues are of uttermost importance, for Tirana, as capital of Albania, must be of example to the other cities. Tirana must become the most beloved city of the people… Tirana must be one of the cleanest cities… Tirana must have bright lights… Everything built must abide by the principles of our people’s regime. Buildings must be horizontal, not vertical: architects must respect our folk styles… Attention must be paid to group administrative buildings in the center, in apposite places where they can serve and beautify the city. The streets of the capital must be wider, and maximal efforts must be made to create parks and gardens… The whole city must resemble a garden, with shadow trees and fruit trees… To achieve these goals we need devoted architects and engineers who will take [urban renewal] upon their honor.

The redesign of the capital’s centre was to be the pièce de résistance of the government. In a country with very limited resources, this major undertaking required countless sacrifices on the part of the population. Specific plans for the centre were drawn in 1963 and 1974, dismissing former plans as ‘bourgeois’. Consistent with communist planning approaches in other Eastern European countries, authorities wished to clear away as much of the past as costs permitted, in order to expulse capitalist remains. A prevailing principle was that, unlike Western city centres but similar to other communist centres, Tirana’s core should not include commercial activities. The centre had to appear monumental and solemn. According to a leading urban design textbook of the time, it must represent the ‘rebirth and powerfulness’ of the new Albanian state and serve the purpose of the ‘political edification’ of the population.

The practice of religion was outlawed and many religious buildings were bulldozed, or converted to other uses. The Orthodox Cathedral was torn down. The demolition wave also eliminated non-religious historic and ethnic references in the centre, including the City Hall, the
traditional bazaar, and an old landmark café. However, an exception was the small mosque, which was preserved as a museum. Also, the clock tower, the bank, the complex of ministries, and the large Piazza Littorio ensemble (which by then housed the Polytechnic University and the Art Academy) escaped demolition.

In 1960, the bazaar was replaced with an austere, multi-functional Palace of Culture, a typical feature of Eastern European cities denoting the communist belief in science and education, for which Khrushchev laid the first brick. During the 1970s, a massive National History Museum (replacing the old City Hall), and a monolithic hotel (replacing the Cathedral) were built next to the Palace of Culture. At 15 storeys, the hotel was the tallest building in Tirana for the next few decades. Along the main boulevard, in the direction of the Piazza Littorio, the National Art Gallery, the Palace of Party Congresses, the Party Central Committee seat, the Presidency seat, and the dictator’s museum (shaped as a pyramid and designed by Hoxha’s daughter and son-in-law, both architects), were built in the 1980s. The newer stretch of the boulevard on the other side was mostly lined with low- to mid-rise residential buildings (Figure 4).

Most of these buildings bore the typical rigidity of Soviet architecture. Some had a bare functionalist style. As one well-respected architect assigned to work on the high-rise hotel later recalled in his memoir, this was due partly to the architects’ lack of exposure to international currents:

> Year 1972 . . . [T]he design for the big hotel in the center of Tirana was sensationally announced . . . [Our design team] openly admitted a major shortcoming: We, the architects, had never seen a real tourist hotel. We took it up at the Directorate, at the Ministry. [A Politburo member] backed us up, and the Minister . . . , an avowed hater of architects, cornered, said: ‘Fine, they can go to Yugoslavia, but the trip budget will be minimal.’ . . . [Later], due to my being ‘influenced by foreign architecture’, I was sent to ‘work with the people’, demoted to site supervisor . . .

However, Eastern European communist architecture and urban design was not unilaterally oppressive. Sections of the Communist Bloc included porosities or even channels of communication with the decried and fascinating Western world behind the barriers. The Congrès International de architects moderne’s theories were widely adapted in the socialist realm. In some cases, for example, in Bratislava, monumentalism was interpreted by local ideologues as a conveyor of national emancipation from a long-time peripheral status. In the centre of Tirana, too, a few of the later buildings showed a search for an autonomous language. On Skanderbeg Square their placement was perimetral, encompassing a vast and portentous expanse in the middle, mainly bare except for a small central fountain. A last intervention before the fall of the regime in 1990 was the erection of a mega-sculpture of the dictator on a raised platform, purposefully higher than the nearby equestrian sculpture of the historical national hero Skanderbeg, which had been placed in the plaza in the 1960s.

The impersonal quality and size of the space thus created, reminiscent of de Chirico’s disquieting paintings, suited the government’s taste for kitsch parades and manifestations. The centre and the boulevard were heavily used by citizens for daily promenades because there were few alternative entertainment options. The sunken garden in front of the ministries was particularly attractive to families with small children. The centre was free of vehicular traffic because private car ownership was prohibited in Albania.
Figure 4. From top: (a) 1960s model for the centre, with the Palace of Culture on top; (b) centre in the 1980s – the Palace of Culture on the left and the platform for Hoxha’s statue on the right; (c) centre in the 1980s – view of the National Museum on the left and the Palace of Culture on the right; (d) May Day parade along the boulevard. Photos courtesy of the National Planning Archive and National Library.
Notwithstanding stringent population movement controls, the capital’s population and geography grew substantially during communism, due to natural growth and industrialization. At the end of the 1980s, its urbanized area covered 12 square kilometres and its population had increased to almost 300,000.

The move to a market economy: marginalization and shift of the city centre

In 1991, Albania began a transition from a dictatorship to a democracy and from a centralized, planned economy to a largely unregulated, free-market economy. This transition was marked by political chaos, economic polarization, and delegitimization of the law. As economic and institutional systems dissolved in rural areas, the capital experienced massive in-migration. The political and economic transformations resulted in dynamic and chaotic development patterns, substantial formal and informal construction, densification and intensification of land uses, neglect of public space, and high demand for consumer goods, including private cars.57 Within two decades, Tirana more than doubled in population and surface area, to more than 850,000 inhabitants and 56 square kilometres. Controls over new development were minimal. A high volume of mid-rise apartment construction for the middle class filled the central areas of the city. Whole towns were constructed in the periphery without permits, mainly for migrants from the rural areas.

In response to the absence of any available space for the myriad new small businesses (stores, restaurants, and offices) in the early 1990s, free-standing kiosks were built informally in the central square and along the boulevard and river. They were laid out haphazardly, following an entrenched tradition of oriental bazaars. As the owners’ profits improved and the fear of action from the authorities evaporated, many kiosks were converted into small but ‘permanent’ cement structures ranging up to a few storeys. Although kiosks injected vitality in the centre, their appearance was negatively perceived by most of the public (Figure 5).

In 2002 to 2003, the City of Tirana initiated a ‘Clean and Green’ public programme, during which a large majority of kiosks were removed and the public spaces that they occupied were restored to their prior state. While the kiosk owners had promised to lead the city into anarchy if their kiosks were taken away, in reality the implementation of the programme was relatively smooth. Most businesses in kiosks simply relocated into legitimate buildings, which were by then more readily available. These small businesses, and others that followed, did much to revitalize formerly dormant areas.

The originator of the ‘Clean and Green’ programme was a charismatic new mayor and former artist, Edi Rama, elected in 2000. A flamboyant politician, Rama directed other successful urban renewal programmes. The most remarkable was ‘A Return to Identity’, which earned international fame. Under the programme, dull Stalinist buildings along the main streets were painted in bright, playful multicolour pastels. His projects contained a pedagogical aspect in the sense that they aimed to transform the relationship of city dwellers to their surroundings. Change in the built environment was translated into a political capital for Rama, who was twice re-elected. He received acclaim in the international media,58 as well as two prestigious international awards: the United Nations Poverty Eradication Award and the World Mayor Award. One of Rama’s famous statements was that ‘being the Mayor of Tirana is the highest form of conceptual art’.59 He described his relationship with Tirana and his urban planning staff as visceral:
I have always had a few people as point of reference. Now it’s these architects. My project is them. And, to be frank, maybe it’s also to fulfill my own ego, to be identified with something big in the eyes of everybody. I know that this obsession I have to make a big work, this identification with this city – I know it makes problems for me with my family, my friends. But for me Tirana is a mirror, an affirmation, a confirmation of my vision, or call it will, or my person. This is something that comes from far away, like a destiny.60

Rama’s interventions into urban design are by no means unique among political leaders in democracies. For example, Mitterrand viewed his *Grands Travaux* in Paris (e.g. the Louvre Pyramid and *La Défense*) as an essential part of his strategy to make the city the undisputed capital of modern Europe. His proclivity for pure geometric forms defined the character of these iconic landmarks.61 In 1981, Mitterand stated, ‘A civilization is judged by its architectural achievements. Will we be able to inscribe in space and sculpt in matter our cultural project? I’ll put all my energy into it’. During his administration, the ‘government fiat’ and the ‘president’s construction sites’ were the object of violent public battles, with local elected officials ironically noting that ‘the President might as well be nominated Mayor of Paris too’.62

Out of concern that the empty centre might end up flooded with ordinary apartment buildings as in the rest of the city, the City of Tirana put a moratorium on construction in the centre until an agreement was reached over further development. The centre, comprising Skanderbeg Square and the areas immediately next to it, as well as the boulevard, were assigned a protected landmark status (though publicly owned).63 Local authorities believed that the centre had to be a special, monumental place, charged with symbolism, rather than a business- and consumer-orientated activity space. Passing comments from visiting foreign architects and academics on the need to protect the built heritage in the centre fuelled this notion.64
The creation of the Bllok

While politicians planned for the centre, Tirana’s reviving business activity, heavily fuelled by remittances, targeted the nearby Bllok, which had been the gated residence area of the communist politburo. It had narrow roads in a grid pattern, mature trees, gardens, low old buildings, and a charming atmosphere. Developers gradually demolished most of the existing villas and built 10- to 12-storey mixed-use buildings at high densities (height limits applied). Cafés, restaurants, bars, and clubs with outdoor seating occupied the ground floors and remaining green areas. This redevelopment process, carried out entirely by the private sector, turned the Bllok into a vibrant, ‘hip’ entertainment district with plenty of shopping, eating, and music venues, packed with pedestrian activity until late at night. While the area was intensely developed, it retained an interesting mixture of heights, designs, and green spaces (Figure 6).65

Dreams to revive the centre: what to do about a dead centre in a lively city?

While the Bllok evolved into a playground, the centre froze in time. In the 2000s, it looked essentially the same as in the 1980s, encircled by government building and faceless cultural
centres. Commercial activities were virtually absent. No landscaping or weather protection features were provided, which are especially important during Tirana’s very hot summer months. (A few evergreen trees growing in Brasini’s sunken garden were cut down to render the ministry complex more visible.) At the same time, the circular road in the centre was flooded with cars. Traffic came from all directions, due to the fact that Skanderbeg Square is the converging point of all the city’s radial axes. Also the very wide boulevard became an eight-lane traffic barrier that divided the city. As a consequence, the centre and the boulevard entirely lost their appeal as a local destination, though occasionally they were used for political meetings.

Concerned about the fading importance of the centre, the City government issued calls for international competitions in 2004 and 2008 to redevelop and redesign the space. The entire length of the boulevard was included in the scope of the first competition, which resulted in a ‘master plan’. The second competition was limited to Skanderbeg Square, leading to a detailed site plan. Funding for the first competition was provided by the German and Dutch governments via the German Organization for Technical Cooperation (GTZ). The second competition was financed through a grant from the government of Kuwait, which was particularly interested in the renovation of the mosque and the clock tower. These plans kindled fierce debates among stakeholders and the public.

In many ways, these debates echoed the dominant discourses in other post-socialist cities, which are still grappling with place identity. Often, they are subjected to external processes of identity formation, which cast them as ‘Eastern other’. Meanwhile, the internal discourses of post-communist place identity reemphasize the ‘Europeanness’ of these localities through past links with Western Europe (e.g., looking back to a pre-communist Golden Age and revising history); a rejection of associations with the East and the socialist past (e.g., destruction of socialist-era statues, reconstruction of what has been destroyed by communist urbicide, or highlighting of anti-communist resistance); and internationalization or Westernization of their city’s identity (e.g., employing major international architects or building high-profile flagship projects). These strategies closely follow the experience of Western cities, which have drawn selectively on their pasts to create urban imagining of the present and the future.

The Mayor of Tirana’s call for the 2008 competition revealed a desire to restore the square to its former greatness, and his conclusion that neutral outsiders were needed to provide a view not marred by the past:

[through this space] has paraded the history of fascism, communism, and democracy. A space where manifestations beyond comparison were organized ... [Is this space] a chaotic [traffic] junction or a plaza where we all can meet? Is it a square where ghosts and edifices of the past hold reign or where new architectural volumes can be erected that may lend a new dimension to the echoes of history? ... These are some of the questions, as yet unanswered, concerning this square where the history of the Albanian state ... was written. In order to find the answers, we need assistance from those that look at Skanderbeg Square from the outside, whose eyes have not been bloodied by the history we have lived through and are ... free of prejudices ...

The competitions were proposed as a tool to bring Tirana closer to an ideal European city. The Mayor, as well as professionals, romanticized the Italian architecture of the interwar and World War II period, which provided Tirana with a European legacy. Meanwhile, the national history museum, the socialist hotel, and the Palace of Culture built during communism and the developments in the early post-communist transition were vilified. Also, Tirana’s pre-communist,
oriental past was rejected. Prior to Rama’s appointment, Tirana was commonly referred to derogatorily as ‘Kandahar’ – a symbol of oriental backwardness. Some commentators argued that the emphasis on the European traits of Tirana was necessary to attract foreign investors, who had until then perceived it as an undesirable place for business.

The competitions attracted attention within Albania and abroad, and took place with much fanfare and media coverage. Proposals were received from international celebrity architects, including Daniel Libeskind of New York and Winy Maas of the Netherlands. Juries were composed of renowned European architects and academics and were chaired by the Albanian Prime Minister. These events were reported with major enthusiasm by the press. However, the public was not involved in the selection process.

Architecture Studio (AS) of Paris won the first competition, and Brussels-based 51N4E won the second competition. Both presented typical examples of designer interventions (Figure 7). AS proposed the conversion of the centre into a pedestrian zone. Part of the open area in Skanderbeg Square would be taken up by two new low-rise, transparent buildings in front of the National Museum, which would enclose a U-shaped plaza and figuratively divide the city into two parts: the old, communist northern side and the new, democratic southern side. The plaza itself would be decorated with fountains and palm trees arranged in a formal manner. A commercial centre would be built behind the Palace of Culture to revive the historic marketplace tradition truncated earlier. An orthodox cathedral and a mosque would be built adjacent to the centre. A new tram line would stretch the length of the boulevard. Ten 25-storey towers

Figure 7. AS’s plan (left) and 51N4E’s plan (right). Images courtesy of the City of Tirana.
(skyscrapers by local standards) would fill the few remaining empty lots immediately outside
Skanderbeg Square, which would symbolically watch over the centre. A high-rise tower
would also be built in the courtyard of the National Museum. Behind the mosque and clock
tower complex, an L-shaped, glass high-rise would semi-enclose and reflect the two landmarks,
restoring the historic effect obliterated by an earlier 16-storey apartment building constructed in
the background. The designers argued that high-rises were necessary from a compositional
perspective, claiming, ‘We needed to make a big square. So [the towers] are [sic] as a frame.
Here is not a Manhattan. What we propose is just a frame’.78

Similarly, 51N4E’s approach was to create an enclosed plaza. A flat pyramid would cover
the surface of the square to symbolically place the users at a higher level in relation to the adjoin-
ing communist-era buildings. Numerous water fountains with fluid shapes would be
embedded on the pyramid faces. The designers explained that the hollow plaza would contrast
with the city surrounding it, which they viewed as untidy and frenetic.

A very simple and clear gesture will have a very strong impact. The city is not defined by its edges
sprawling outwards, but by its core . . . The city giving way, like if it holds its breadth for a moment.
The square as a space where the bustle and the chaos stops . . . The [green] belt functions like an
antechamber to the main square: negotiating between the congestion of the city and the openness
of the square . . . The square will [provide] mental and physical space for its citizens.

The purpose of the proposed plan extended beyond aesthetics and accommodation of daily
activities, as noted by one of the foreign jury members: ‘[t]he competition asked for the squaring
of the circle: it called for the symbolic manifestation of the new, democratic Albania . . . [A]
spirit of empathic catharsis . . . underlies [this project]’.82

While an upscale shopping mall was proposed for the site where the dictator’s statue stood,
51N4E was against the inclusion of small-scale commercial activities in the square. It took
the position that ‘filling the square with bars and restaurants, in an attempt to make a square on
a human scale, would be the wrong answer to the right question. All of Tirana is already about
consumption: consuming the square as well would be a political failure’. This position
reflects the opinion of one portion of the professional community, which was that ‘temples
that can go down in history’ were needed. A comment by a Kosovar architect illustrates
that perspective:

Tirana is ugly because it lacks identity . . . [Its] buildings lack symbolism . . . Empedocles wrote that
Agrigentinos built homes and temples as if they were immortal, and ate as if every day was their
last. Our cities too are full of assorted eateries . . . which give the impression that Albanians are
resolved to make up for the era of food rationing . . . but nowhere have I seen temples that
can go down in history!85

The first plan was approved, with a 30-year-long implementation plan reminiscent of the com-
munist era. The legal status of the second plan remained unclear. Both plans relied on substantial
private investment. The orthodox cathedral foreseen by the first plan was built, while a major
international design competition (with the participation of iconic firms including Zaha Hadid
and BIG) was held for the mosque, and construction has started. International competitions
were held for 3 of the 10 skyscrapers as well, and the construction of two is under way. The
reconstruction of Skanderbeg Square began in 2010, while no construction has begun on the tram line.
Skanderbeg Square magnified and dissected

The press and political players became consumed by the debate about the plans. Acrimonious debates followed among professionals and the general public. Some commentators lauded the competition processes *per se*, as capable of mobilizing local dynamics and setting the basis for a fertile dialogue on the city’s future. However, the scale of the debate was out of proportion with the issues under consideration, while other pressing issues about the city’s infrastructure were ignored. Much of the siding in the debate was determined by political party affiliation or allegiance. Moreover, analysts attached bewildering symbolic significance to the various site design details.

Despite the intense rivalry and mutual animosity between Mayor Edi Rama (political left wing) and Prime Minister Sali Berisha (political right wing), they clearly agreed on one point: Tirana’s centre was the most important space in the entire country and its redevelopment would have major implications for the identity of the Albanian people as a whole. Their offices were in neighbouring buildings in the centre.

All sides focused the rhetoric on ‘Europeanness’, even when dealing with minute design details. The mayor stated that Tirana would have one of the most beautiful centres in Europe thanks to these plans, and the Albanian Architects Association applauded the perceived break with tradition. Some architecture professionals were content that the AS plan preserved the Italian boulevard axis, while 51N4E was criticized for interrupting this ‘city spine’ when placing buildings in Skanderbeg Square. Some of the criticism was directed at the strong emphasis on beautification, reducing the city from a complex social phenomenon into an abstract image condensed in the centre. In a secular culture, the proposal to add new, showy religious buildings near the centre was rejected by various political commentators mainly because of no recent precedents in European centres. The financial support of Islamic Kuwait was viewed with suspicion by others. The shallow pyramid proposed by 51N4E was denounced as a symbol of totalitarianism reminiscent of Hoxha’s museum, and even death. A proposal by the Prime Minister to hold street markets for souvenirs in the remodelled square was ridiculed as anachronistic. Even the idea of amorphous water pools texturing the surface of the plaza produced negative associations, as it was a reminder to some of the potholes in deteriorating parts of the city. Some professionals and interest groups raised their voice against the lack of transparency and participation surrounding the process of selecting the winners. One of the jury members of the first competition later recalled in an interview that the decision was political.

The proposed conversion of the centre into a pedestrian zone posed critical challenges requiring public acquisition of privately owned land. Vehicular traffic would have to be rerouted into a small ring road around Skanderbeg Square. A short, north-eastern stretch of the ring road was incomplete and private buildings stood in the right of way. Land owners were not cooperative and the central government was antagonistic, refusing to release a fund for their compensation. Moreover, around 2010, the ruins from an old castle were discovered underneath the existing south-eastern segment of the ring road, thereby necessitating its realignment. That section was converted into a narrow pedestrian street, in order to expose the archaeological site (Figure 8). This complex situation led to criticism in terms of traffic circulation.

However, it was the 10 skyscrapers proposed in the first plan that provoked some of the strongest disagreements. This might have been expected, due to the fact that there are no
precedents of newly created, glossy and imposing Central Business Districts in post-communist Eastern Europe. Rather, this approach resembles contemporary mega-structuralism in China (e.g. Pudong in Shanghai), which has signed a departure from the Mao-era architecture around Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The first three Tirana towers were branded with names such as ‘Eye of Tirana’ (inspired by the tower’s night-time glow), ‘Tirana International Development’ (TID), and ‘Forever Green’, which evoked trends and progress. Mayor Rama said, ‘Popes put up obelisks. These towers will be our obelisks. They are acupunctural!’ Some well-known professionals endorsed their construction, bringing forth similar artistic and ideological arguments: ‘[high towers] will help create an interesting skyline, which has been lost due to recent developments … Without a vertical skyline, no capital city identity can be formed’. 

Detractors viewed the skyscrapers as a literal, aggressive invasion in a mid-rise city, as the following comments by two architects, the first Albanian and the second Kosovar, illustrate:

[I] had never seen an architectural model that looked so much like Japanese anime. A mold with ten giants, half monsters and half robots, with heads full of pointy angles, which stomp over the city in military formation and smash with their humongous feet all smaller buildings in their way. 
By planting itself where Enver Hoxha once stood, and by surpassing the height of the tallest building he built, a skyscraper will not liberate the Albanian society from the memory of the dictator’s personality cult.\textsuperscript{101}

One renowned political analyst dubbed one of the towers, Eye of Tirana, a ‘Cyclops of Tirana’, reminiscent of the communist era:

The construction of this [Cyclops]… brings to mind communist era memories: while the people lived in misery, to glorify itself and its leader the regime built in the center power ‘landmarks’ like this, which cost a fortune … meanwhile, alas, destroying historic Tirana … They want to have [ten] such Cyclops. Do we really need that many commercial centers … to siphon money off the Albanians?\textsuperscript{102}

A controversy related to TID’s design demonstrated that while Albania strives to underplay its muslim and communist pasts, these images persist in foreign visions.\textsuperscript{103} The initial façade designed by 51N4E included shading devices inspired by the Maghreb moucharabieh and the modernist brise-soleil. The local client found the façade ‘too Muslim’ and ‘too Communist’ and required its redesign.\textsuperscript{104}

Some political analysts attributed the ideas behind these plans to the mayor’s personal ego and his ‘suffering from the “l’état, c’est moi” syndrome’, like his predecessors.\textsuperscript{105} Others assigned his motives to financial interests more than to art, ego, or ideology.\textsuperscript{106} They saw the plans as a way for the mayor to line his pockets and fund his electoral campaigns with money from developers.\textsuperscript{107} From 2010 through 2011, the reconstruction of the square proceeded intermittently. One major hindrance was the incessant interference of, and creation of obstacles by, the central government (in political opposition with the mayor). Backed by the Institute for Heritage Protection, it requested various modifications of the site details, and, as mentioned earlier, refused to issue compensation funds.\textsuperscript{108} During the works, the centre was in disarray, the traffic – forced to temporarily circumvent the centre – was chaotic, and pollution levels were high. The City government was perceived as procrastinating. Partly due to this failed project, Rama’s image was tarnished and his popularity waned. In 2011, he lost his mayoral re-election campaign in a controversial battle.

Immediately after taking office, the new mayor, Lulzim Basha, supported by the Prime Minister, suspended the works in the centre. His planning department hastily prepared a new, unpretentious site plan, which was executed within a few months. One noted journalist highlighted this approach of scrapping the plans of an opponent as typical of the powerful in Tirana: ‘[Basha’s treatment of Skanderbeg Square] parallels his behavior towards the office he inherited. His first gesture was to remodel it … He believes he will shake away the frustrating thoughts of stolen votes by reversing his predecessors’ deeds’.\textsuperscript{109} The new plan simply enlarged the sunken garden between the ministries to fill the empty area in front of the Palace of Culture and narrowed the vehicular rights-of-way. Car circulation was allowed back in the centre. The square regained its role as an oval traffic roundabout with a grass centre. The area where the dictator’s statue stood became a small park with fruit trees (Figure 9).

Many were disappointed by this solution, which they saw as a final renunciation of the idea of a grand city centre. Woeful eulogies were written by high-level politicians, architects, and journalists.\textsuperscript{110} The nostalgia-driven search for identity and the desire to revive the past are understandable in places and times of insecurity, rapid change, and memory loss when communities
and traditions are shattered and fragmented. Many contemporary cities have made an effort to create urban landscapes that draw on memories in an attempt to authenticate themselves as sites and to authenticate the identities of those who visit them by placing them within a stabilizing and familiar past. However, a few other political analysts reluctantly admitted the futility of prior redesign exercises searching for a contemporary image. They noted that the centre had long lost its relevance as a meeting point in the city fabric. They also pointed out that, with the conversion of Skanderbeg Square into a traffic circle, Tirana was left with no spaces of citizenry for protest, debate, and celebration. They blamed Rama’s passion for ‘starchitectural gestures’ and developers’ bad faith for this outcome.

In 2011, Mayor Basha promised that this solution was also temporary, and a new plan would come soon. The plan is still awaited. In June 2013, in a reversal of roles after losing the 2011 local elections, Edi Rama was elected Prime Minister.

Conclusion
Like many centrally located public spaces, the centre of Tirana has served as a means of expressing political visions and ideologies. In the space of a century, it was transformed from an Ottoman market and prayer space to a scenographic colonial display, which included laic administrative buildings; to a monumental communist parade ground; to a post-communist anarchic
marketplace; and finally to a traffic roundabout surrounded by public office buildings, a bank, a large hotel, and a museum, but no human-scale spaces. These identities were imported from abroad (e.g. by hiring foreign designers or copying foreign styles), or were the result of transformational forces from abroad, such as military invasions or so-called cultural imperialism. The final outcome is poignant considering the intensive planning efforts and vigorous debates surrounding the development of this space, which implicated all levels of government, the private sector, the media elite, and ordinary citizens.

Italian era plans for the centre required this space to be highly symbolic but still left the bazaar in place. Communist plans excluded market forces from all places. The new democratic-era plans ignored the market, which had come to dominate the society and its use of space. At the same time, the role of the government was diminished. Top-down planning, without top-down control and resources, was divorced from reality. The idea of a monumental central plaza with commerce set apart elsewhere was sure to fail. Without state compulsion there was no desire to visit a centre with no commercial, aesthetic, or recreational attractions. Under a pluralistic regime with no single vision and no tradition of compromise or cooperation between rival parties, plans failed also due to the division of power in the political system (between the mayor and the prime minister). A major dispute revolved around the proposed densification of the centre (disguised in modernizing garb), which was seen as a vehicle to financially benefit certain groups, to the exclusion or detriment of others. The long-term nature of the new plans left them exposed to political winds, which could change with each election.

Tirana’s road pattern is such that all urban traffic converges in the centre. The construction of a small ring road circumscribing the centre to realign vehicular traffic required high levels of political goodwill, which the mayor was unable to gather. This was very unfortunate because the conversion of the centre into a pedestrian zone would have delivered tangible benefits to the city residents, in terms of air quality and liveability, regardless of the specific design details. This outcome also reflects the inability to deliver new designs in crucial spheres without wider changes in the urban structure (e.g. traffic management), which, however, may be difficult to achieve and/or may be strongly resisted by the public.

Its development frozen, the centre was doomed to see its hub value vanish. While planners and politicians battled over the land uses and site design details of the centre, the Bllok (and other unplanned areas) flourished according to the market intuition of private developers, with little formal planning involved. In line with the nature of development in a market economy – which is shaped and led by the private sector – this area thrived in terms of attraction and economic vitality, while its heavily and ineffectively controlled counterpart languished. The chaos of the unplanned development in Tirana demonstrates that planning is needed while the failure of the central square plans demonstrates that planning must be grounded in reality.

Notes on contributor

Dorina Pojani is a postdoctoral fellow in the Spatial Planning and Strategy group of Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands. She previously taught urban planning in Albania.

Notes

2. The research was undertaken in the National Library of Albania and the publishers’ online archives, where available.
5. Robinson, *Albania’s Road to Freedom*.
6. Aliaj, Lulo, and Myftiu, *Tirana, the Challenge of Urban Development*.
10. After the Albanian national hero, Skanderbeg, a 15th-century Albanian lord who organized a resistance movement against the Ottoman expansion [author’s note].
11. Frashëri, *Shqipëria Çka Qenë, Çësh të dhe Çdo të Bëhet*.
12. Among his achievements were the abolition of polygamy and the outlawing of muslim women’s veil.
19. Capolino “Tirana, a Capital City Transformed by the Italians.” At the time, Italy too had abandoned futurism and was experiencing a return to the Novecento Italiano in architecture and the arts – see Sampò, “Perspectives on Modern Movement’s Architectural Heritage of the Early XX Century in Western Balkans.”
22. Giacomelli and Vokshi, *Architetti e Ingegneri Italiani in Albania*.
27. Giacomelli and Vokshi, *Architetti e Ingegneri Italiani in Albania*.
30. Capolino, “Tirana, a Capital City Transformed by the Italians.”
31. Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*.
32. Sampò, “Perspectives on Modern Movement’s Architectural Heritage of the Early XX Century in Western Balkans.”
33. Giacomelli and Vokshi, *Architetti e Ingegneri Italiani in Albania*.
34. Menghini, Pashako, and Stigliano, *Architettura Moderna Italiana per le Città d’Albania*.
35. Quoted in Lekbello 2012.
38. Hoxha’s communist allies were in turn, Yugoslavia (1950s), the Soviet Union (1960s), and China (1970s). Eventually, he cut relations with them due to their introduction of more liberal policies, and by the 1980s Albania became fully isolated.
39. Abensour, “De la Complicidad.”
41. van der Wusten, “Dictators and their Capital Cities.”
42. McKernan, “Politics and Architecture.”
43. Ibid.
44. Hobsbawm, “Foreword.”
45. Arent 1958.
46. Colton, *Moscow*.
47. Miller Lane 1968; Aman, *Architecture and Ideology in Eastern Europe during the Stalin Era*; Crowley and Reid, *Socialist Spaces*.
49. Tolic, *Dopo il Terremoto*.
50. Hoxha, “Nga Fjala e Mbajtur në Komisionin e Ngritur për Çështjen e Urbanizmit të Qytetit të Tiranës dhe të Qyteteve të Tjera të Vendit, 19 shkurt 1948.”
51. Faja, *Urbanistika*.
52. Sivignon, “Tirana et l’Urbanisation de l’Albanie.”
55. Popescu, “Introductory Argument.”
57. Pojani, “Tirana. City Profile.”
60. Quoted in Kramer 2005.
61. Sudjic, *The Edifice Complex*.
63. However, a low-rise luxury hotel and two high-rise office towers in the southern stretch of the boulevard were speculatively built in the 1990s and early 2000s, respectively. Along the more residential northern stretch, too, some new construction filled gaps between buildings.
64. Lila 2008a and 2008b.
65. Apart from the Bllok, no new, distinct centres appeared.
66. Velo 2004. While the “dead center” phenomenon is not unique to Tirana (i.e. North American CBDs are often described as “urban deserts” that shut down after business hours), in this case it was created by specific government policies, or lack thereof, rather than citizens’ election to abandon this space.
67. On the occasion, the Emir of Kuwait became an honorary citizen of Tirana.
68. Young and Kaczmarek, “The Socialist Past and Postsocialist Urban Identity in Central and Eastern Europe”; Temelova 2007; Manoliu and Fartatescu, “Dream or Nightmare”; Marcuse, “Reflections on Berlin”; Gittus, “Berlin as a Conduit for the Creation of German National Identity at the End of the Twentieth Century.” However, some cities are acknowledging their totalitarian heritage, as demonstrated by the growth of “communist heritage tourism” (or, “red tourism” in China); various forms of nostalgia for that period are emerging.
69. The issue of post-communist demolitions mirrors the on-going discourse in Tirana surrounding current plans to tear down the dictator’s museum, Piramida, which is shaped as a pyramid. In proposing the demolition, the Prime Minister (ill-advisedly) claimed that the building had been meant as the dictator’s mausoleum (containing his embalmed body). Piramida is in fact a major landmark and its function has changed several times since the fall of communism. Press articles by design professionals and political analysts opposing the demolition were summarized in a book – see Klosi and Lame 2011, also Lame 2011.
70. Quoted in 51N4E 2011.
72. An irony, given that the fascist heritage is not considered the most valuable in Italy.
73. Triantis, “Urban Change and the Production of Space”; see also Dervishi 2010.
75. Triantis, “Urban Change and the Production of Space.”
77. AS 2004.
78. Tisnado, one of the project designers, quoted in Durmishi, “Competing Urban Visions for the Capital of Albania.”
79. Base: 160 × 160 m; height at apex: 2.25 m.
80. Reported in Fevziu 2010.
81. 51N4E 2008.
82. Ruby, cited 51N4E 2011.
83. Fevziu 2010.
84. 51N4E 2008.
86. Triantis, “Urban Change and the Production of Space”; Velo 2004; Velo 2012.
87. Rama 2010; BalkanWeb 2010.
88. Rama 2011.
91. See Faja 2008 and 2010.
95. Sopoti 2004; Tafaj 2010; Bozdo 2010.
96. Zenghelis, quoted in Durmishi, “Competing Urban Visions for the Capital of Albania.”
97. See comments of the urban planning advisor to the Prime Minister, cited in Shqip, April 11, 2010.
103. Hall, “Representations of Place.”
104. Bineri, “‘Negative’ Cultural Heritage.”
108. Xhaferri 2010; Stefani 2010; Bogdani 2010; Vata 2010; Shqip, April 11, 2010.
110. Lame 2010 and 2011; Mullaj 2011; Ypi 2011.
111. Dickinson, “Memories for Sale.”
113. Panorama, August 5, 2011.

Bibliography


