

Published first at the International Academic Institute Journal

Vol. x, No. x, 2017, pp. xx-xx

The Missing Right: Classic Liberal Principles and Territorial Governance in Post-Communist Albania (1992–2024)

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Abstract

This paper examines the trajectory of territorial governance in post-communist Albania (1992–2024) through the lens of political ideology. Drawing on political philosophy, it identifies three liberal principles—limited government, decentralization, and citizen empowerment—as normative filters for assessing whether a functional right-wing alternative has emerged. These principles are situated within a broader ideological spectrum: classical conservatism (Filmer, Hobbes) and Marxist/neo-Marxist thought (Marx, Engels, Mouffe) represent opposing boundaries, while liberal traditions (Locke, Smith, Mill, Friedman, Rawls, Habermas, Nozick) articulate the normative foundations of modern democracies. Applied to four governing phases—I: state collapse under the Democratic Party (1992–1997), II: pragmatic centralism under the Socialist Party (1997–2005), III: clientelist neoliberalism under the Democratic Party (2005–2013), and IV: the “Third Way” degenerating into absolute statism under the Socialist Party (2013–2024)—this framework reveals a persistent failure to institutionalize liberal governance. Despite rhetorical commitments, both left and right relied on paternalism, clientelism, and hyper-

centralization. Albania's trajectory thus illustrates ideology without ideological practice, where the absence of a functional liberal right—the “missing right”—has left territorial governance dominated by statist pragmatism, undermining democratic accountability and sustainable development.

Keywords: Albania; territorial governance; ideology; classic liberal principles; centralization; clientelism; missing right

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Problem

The fall of the monist regime in 1991 marked the beginning of a long and unstable transition toward liberal democracy and a market economy (Meksi, 1997; Biberaj, 2000). The collapse of the totalitarian system created profound social and economic imbalances, which were strongly reflected in urbanization and territorial governance. After 1990, urban development took the form of a duality: a minimal formal sector and a massive informal sector, fueled by individual initiative outside any legal framework (Misja & Misja, 2004; Faja, 2008). Between 1991 and 2005, over 230,000 unauthorized constructions transformed the peripheries of cities (IHS Alumni et al., 1998). Instead of a minimal liberal state, the transition produced what Lami (2010) calls “governed chaos,” where successive governments sought to restore order but maintained a paternalistic logic (Fuga, 2019).

1.2 Central Paradox and Research Question

The Albanian political spectrum has been symbolically divided between the “red” Socialists and the “blue” Democrats (Fuga, 2003). Although bearing opposing labels, their practices in territorial governance have converged toward a common model: hyper-legislation, paternalism toward local authorities, and the marginalization of citizens. This convergence appears to be more of a structural feature than a coincidence.

From this arises the central question: why, in a pluralist system, has territorial governance in Albania ended up centralized, without producing a liberal-conservative alternative?

1.3 Thesis, Hypothesis, and Contribution of the Study

The thesis of this paper is that the illusion of ideological competition conceals the profound absence of a functional right-wing. Albania has not experienced a real left-right clash, but rather

two variants of the same statist culture: a "red statism" and a "blue statism." Neither force has embraced the liberal principles of limited government and decentralization (Civici, 2013).

The hypothesis is that whenever territorial reforms affect major political and economic interests, governments control them from the center, regardless of their declared ideology. This effect is particularly evident with the Democrats, who often contradict their stated philosophy of a small state.

The contribution of the study is twofold: theoretically, it proposes the concept of "asymmetric ideological failure" in post-communist transitions, showing that the absence of a functional right-wing leaves the political spectrum unbalanced; empirically, it offers a periodization of four governing phases (1992–1997, 1997–2005, 2005–2013, 2013–2024) and tests the thesis of the "missing right" in territorial governance.

1.4 Methodology

The study follows a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018), considering post-communist Albania as an example of a transition where the left-right divide has not materialized in territorial governance. The methodology is based on two pillars:

a) **Theoretical Framework** – Based on political philosophy, six ideological traditions are analyzed: classical conservatism (Filmer, Hobbes), classical liberalism (Locke, Smith, Mill, Spencer), classical Marxism (Marx, Engels), 20th-century liberalism (Hayek, Friedman, Mises), egalitarian liberalism (Rawls, Habermas), and neo-Marxism (Mouffe). From this spectrum, three liberal principles are filtered—limited government, decentralization, and citizen empowerment—which serve as normative standards and analytical filters for the Albanian case.

b) **Empirical Framework** – This relies on primary sources (party programs, laws on local governance and territorial planning, reports from the Supreme State Audit), secondary sources (academic literature on Albania and Eastern Europe: e.g., Civici, 2013; Fuga, 2019; Lami, 2010; Xhepa, 2010; Shutina, 2022; Fukuyama, 2004; Grzymala-Busse, 2007), and international reports (World Bank, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; EU documents).

The analysis covers four phases:

- **Phase I:** 1992–1997 (Democratic Party)
- **Phase II:** 1997–2005 (Socialist Party)
- **Phase III:** 2005–2013 (Democratic Party)
- **Phase IV:** 2013–2024 (Socialist Party)

Each phase is analyzed according to the three liberal principles and compared with the declared ideology of the governing party. To ensure analytical balance, sections 3–6 are maintained in a unified structure (ideological introduction, limited government, decentralization, citizen empowerment, and conclusion), giving each phase equal weight in the comparison. The cross-phase comparison is used to test the hypothesis of convergence toward centralization and the absence of a functional right-wing.

Limitations – The study relies on a qualitative analysis of documents and literature, without using quantitative data or interviews. Furthermore, the lack of complete public data for the 2021–2024 period limits transparency and reinforces the argument about the weakening of citizen empowerment.

2. Theoretical Framework: Measuring the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

2.1 Ideology in Post-Communist Politics

Since its first use by Destutt de Tracy (1796/1987) as the "science of ideas," the concept of ideology has acquired a political charge, describing the ways in which ideas justify power. In modern literature, it is seen as a "conceptual map" or "political grammar" that structures competition and the boundaries of debate (Freeden, 1996; Heywood, 2017; Bobbio, 1996).

In the classic divide, the left is associated with equality and state intervention, while the right is associated with order, private property, and limited government (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2019). After the Cold War, authors like Bell (1960) and Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed the "end of ideology," predicting the triumph of liberal democracy. However, studies on post-communist transitions have shown that ideology remains crucial for structuring parties and institutional stability (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Innes, 2014).

The Albanian case is illustrative. Parties adopted Western labels, but their practices were driven by pragmatism and rent-seeking. Lami (2010, 2013) highlights the lack of ideological consistency, while Fuga (2019) shows that European integration did not eliminate authoritarian logic. This gap between rhetoric and practice is the object of this study, which analyzes it through three liberal principles: limited government, decentralization, and citizen empowerment.

2.2 Ideological Framework and the Liberal Filter

The analytical principles of this study derive from a process of philosophical filtering among the main traditions of Western political thought. They represent the core of liberalism as the guiding

philosophy of modern democracies, positioned between classical conservatism and Marxism/neo-Marxism.

- **Classical Conservatism** (Filmer, 1680/1991; Hobbes, 1651/1996) defended absolute authority as a guarantee of order. This approach, which sacrifices freedom for security, was reflected in Albania through the paternalistic logic of transition governments (Lami, 2010; Fuga, 2003, 2019).
- **Marxism and Neo-Marxism** (Marx & Engels, 1848/2002; Mouffe, 2005) conceive of the state as a transformative instrument through total intervention or agonistic conflict. In Albania, this was seen in reforms justified as "modernization" but which concentrated authority (Shutina, 2022).
- **Classical Liberalism** (Locke, 1689/2005; Smith, 1776/2005; Spencer, 1851/1995; Mill, 1859/1991) affirmed the limited state, individual rights, and the rule of law. In Albania, the transition failed to create a minimal liberal state, ending instead in clientelism and inefficiency (Civici, 2013; Xhepa, 2010).
- **20th-Century Liberalism** (Friedman, 1962/2005; Mises, 1949/1998) deepened the commitment to free markets and deregulation. In Eastern Europe, including Albania, this model often remained rhetorical (Berisha, Cotella, & Solly, 2021).
- **Egalitarian Liberalism** (Rawls, 1971/1999; Habermas, 1996/1998) emphasized equality of opportunity and deliberative democracy. In Albania, public consultation processes were often reduced to formalities (Fuga, 2012; Hysi, Kotherja & Xhepa, 2024).
- **Libertarianism** (Nozick, 1974/2013) sought an extreme minimization of the state. The rhetoric of the "small state" was often used but without practical consistency (Civici, 2013).

From this filtering process, three key principles emerge:

1. **Limited Government** – rejects conservative absolutism and Marxist expansionism, relying on classical and 20th-century liberalism.
2. **Decentralization** – opposes the Hobbesian Leviathan and central planning, affirming the distribution of power (Tocqueville, 1835/2005; Dahl & Tufte, 1973/2019; Ostrom, 1990).
3. **Citizen Empowerment** – combines individual rights (Locke, Smith), equality of opportunity (Rawls), and deliberative participation (Habermas).

2.3 Synthesis of the Framework

These three principles provide the normative standard for evaluating the four Albanian administrations after 1992. The problem lies not only in the lack of theoretical and practical recognition of these principles but, above all, in the failure of their concrete implementation. The framework allows for measuring whether territorial policies have strengthened or weakened the foundations of the liberal-democratic order. The gap between rhetoric and practice is not accidental but structural.

The Albanian transition did not produce an authentic right-wing but reproduced variants of clientelistic statism. This explains why ideological competition in Albania has remained more of a façade than a substance.

3. The Ideology of "Liberation" and the Practice of State Chaos (1992–1997)

Ideological Introduction

The first phase of the transition was defined by the historic task of the Democratic Party to dismantle a 46-year totalitarian legacy. It came to power on a wave of anti-communist enthusiasm but without a clear liberal-conservative project. Anti-communism became the operative ideology, while knowledge of free-market governance and liberal institutions was largely imported from the World Bank and the IMF (Meksi, 1997; Biberaj, 2000). In this sense, the new Albanian democracy was built on a right-wing ideological vacuum, where the "right" existed as an opposition to the communist past but not as a programmatic liberal alternative.

Limited Government

In practice, the state was not "limited" but often absent. The administrative collapse created an institutional void (Biberaj, 2000) that led to the explosion of informal construction—over 230,000 unauthorized buildings by 2005 (Aliaj, 2008). The government failed to create a functional legal framework; instead, it produced reactive and contradictory hyper-legislation (IHS Alumni et al., 1998). The Law on Property Restitution and Compensation (Law No. 7652/1992) was incomplete and unenforceable, creating legal uncertainty (World Bank, 2007b, 2012). This failure signaled a low state capacity, typical of transitions with institutional gaps (Fukuyama, 2004). Instead of a free market with clear rules, Albania experienced a state close to anarchy.

Decentralization

Historic steps were taken with the first local elections and the creation of a two-tiered local government system (Law No. 7572/1992). But this remained a decentralization without substance. Local units lacked fiscal resources, technical capacity, and real autonomy (World Bank, 2004; Gjura, 2015). Local power existed on paper, while administrative cultures inherited from communism reproduced de facto centralization (Fuga, 2012). Without a clear ideology of subsidiarity, decentralization functioned as a façade.

Citizen Empowerment

Liberation from totalitarianism did not bring real empowerment. The lack of property titles and administrative arbitrariness left citizens vulnerable (World Bank, 2012). Public participation, although mentioned in legislation (Law No. 7693/1993), remained a fiction. Citizens turned to informal and clientelistic networks to secure land or legalize constructions (Aliaj, 2008), laying the foundations for a clientelistic culture that would permeate the coming decades (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). A significant portion of the population, especially returned migrants, used remittances to finance informal construction, creating a model based on the grey economy and outside any institutional control. This deepened the gap between citizens and the state, causing public institutions to be perceived as obstacles.

Conclusion

This phase did not produce a small liberal state, but a state devoid of capacity. Albania experienced a chaos managed by informal networks rather than by institutions. This failure was not an ideological betrayal but the result of an anti-communist movement without a constructive philosophy, which relied on international assistance and limited knowledge. It was precisely this ideological and practical vacuum that created the terrain upon which subsequent governments justified the need for a strong and interventionist state, paving the way for the pragmatic and clientelistic statism that would follow.

4. The Ideology of "Progressive Socialism" and the Practice of Pragmatic Centralism (1997–2005)

Ideological Introduction

After the state collapse of 1997, the Socialist Party inherited not only institutional chaos but also the dilemmas of its own political identity. Emerging from the bosom of the Party of Labour,

which had ruled for 46 years, this reformed force remained discursively tied to the culture of centralizing political and economic power. The new Socialists were no longer the Stalinists of the pre-1990 era, but they did not embrace liberal principles either; instead, they preferred to maintain central control, using rhetoric tailored for the West. Receiving international aid was vital for political survival, so the government avoided clashing with Western democracies and used the language of reform as a façade of legitimacy. The platform declared as "Progressive Liberalism" (SP, 1996) was designed to signal a departure from communism and an alignment with modern European social democracy, but in practice, it translated into a form of pragmatic centralism, where the real control of resources remained in the hands of the central government (Civici, 2013).

Limited Government

Instead of a limited state, its role expanded significantly. The period was characterized by intense legislative activity aimed at regulating the territory through new hyper-legislation (Imami et al., 2008; World Bank, 2007a). New institutions were created, and the state apparatus was expanded in an attempt to restore order. However, as Grzymala-Busse (2007) argues, the proliferation of institutions in countries with low capacity leads to bureaucratic overlap, inefficiency, and corruption. In Albania, this produced a more present but clientelistic state that was neither limited nor more effective.

Decentralization

A key reform was Law No. 8652/2000, which defined the organization of local government and was considered a historic step, driven by pressure from the European Union. On paper, the law transferred a wide range of competencies to local government. In practice, however, the reform was undermined by a lack of fiscal autonomy. As the World Bank (2004) and Laska (2021) note, local units were given responsibilities without sufficient financial resources, creating systems typical of "unfunded mandates." Furthermore, territorial planning remained centralized: the National Territorial Planning Council (KRRTRSH) retained final authority over local plans (Toska, 2020). In this way, decentralization functioned more as a legal illusion, while real control remained in Tirana.

Citizen Empowerment

New laws formally integrated requirements for public participation in line with EU standards. But consultation processes were often bureaucratic formalities, devoid of real influence (Imami

et al., 2008). The Socialist government adopted a model of what Börzel and van Hüllen (2014) define as "façade compliance": democratic procedures served to satisfy international partners but were emptied of their function to maintain elite control. As Fuga (2012) notes, decision-making remained in the hands of political and technical elites in Tirana, while citizens experienced a more present but not more accountable state.

Conclusion

The declared ideology of "Progressive Liberalism" served as a language of international legitimacy, but in practice, it consolidated a pragmatic centralism. The Socialist government built the façade of a multi-level social-democratic state, while at its core, it remained paternalistic and centralized. The result was a form of "managed capitalism," where state intervention controlled resources and decision-making, adapting to minimal standards to secure international support but without creating autonomous local government or empowered citizens.

5. Neoliberal Ideology and the Practice of Clientelistic Control (2005–2013)

Ideological Introduction

The return of the Democratic Party to power in 2005 marked a new moment for the Albanian right. Unlike the 1992–1997 period, when anti-communism was more of a moral stance than a clear platform, the Democrats entered government with an articulated neoliberal program and accumulated experience on how power functioned. They had learned that the flat tax, deregulation, and pro-business rhetoric were symbols of a modern right-wing; but they had also learned that clientelism was the main instrument for maintaining power and for political enrichment.

Limited Government

The "For a New Beginning" program (DP, 2005) embodied the neoliberal vision: a flat tax, support for entrepreneurship, and a less regulatory state, inspired by the "Reaganomics" model (Forbes & Ames, 2015; Friedman, 1962/2005). In territorial governance, this should have translated into deregulation and greater competencies for local government. But in practice, the opposite occurred. ALUIZNI (Agency for Legalization, Urbanization and Integration of Informal Areas/Constructions) was transformed into a central instrument of patronage, especially on the eve of elections, distributing property titles in exchange for political loyalty (Aliaj, 2008). Instead of a "small state," Albania experienced a clientelistic party-state. This phenomenon

aligns with analyses of the use of clientelism in hybrid regimes as a mechanism to ensure political survival (Daphi & Kriesi, 2022). Meanwhile, hyper-legislation and ad-hoc changes to regulations created legal uncertainty for actors outside the power network.

Decentralization

The rhetoric of local empowerment was overturned by central dominance. The KRRTRSH retained final authority over local plans. The 2009 planning law (Law No. 10119/2009) transferred some competencies to local government under international pressure, but this was quickly nullified by a 2010 amendment (Law No. 10258/2010), which returned authority to the council headed by the Prime Minister (Fuga, 2019). This was a typical example of a "façade reform": it satisfied international partners but maintained real control over territorial rents.

Citizen Empowerment

In discourse, the citizen was economically empowered through business freedom; but in reality, their political power remained minimal. Public participation was formal and often ignored (Imami et al., 2008). The selective enforcement of legalization and planning rules created a climate of uncertainty, forcing citizens to rely on political connections rather than the rule of law (World Bank, 2012). As Helmke & Levitsky (2004) emphasize, such uncertainty is not accidental but a deliberate mechanism to preserve informal power structures.

Conclusion

The 2005–2013 period clearly illustrates the ideological hypocrisy of the Albanian right. In the economy, neoliberal policies were applied; but in territorial governance, the state became more interventionist and more clientelistic. Instead of the proclaimed liberalism, a clientelistic capitalism was consolidated, where the state was reconfigured to distribute benefits to the party network. The ideology of the free market served as a façade, while the real practice was control and patronage. This phase turned the thesis of the "missing right" into an undeniable fact, showing that even when the Democrats had ideological knowledge, they chose clientelism over the principles of liberal governance.

6. The "Third Way" Ideology and the Practice of the Absolute State (2013–2024)

Ideological Introduction

After 2013, the Socialist Party came to power proclaiming a radical break from the past. The "For an Albanian Renaissance" program (SP, 2013) positioned itself in the modern tradition of

European "Third Way" social democracy, simultaneously rejecting the "destructive statism" of the past and the "chaotic pseudo-liberalism" of the Democrats. The rhetoric was reinforced by the consultancy of Tony Blair, a global symbol of this model (Wintour, 2013). The promise was to build a competent and interventionist state, capable of directing development through major projects like the "Urban Renaissance." In practice, this period marked the peak of state centralization: the "Third Way" ideology was used as a façade, while governance degenerated into a near-absolute state, where the Prime Minister monopolized power over territory, institutions, and citizens.

Limited Government

Instead of limiting power, Law No. 107/2014 on territorial planning created a centralized architecture where the National Territorial Council (KKT), led by the Prime Minister, assumed absolute competencies. The Prime Minister became the de facto chief planner, excluding other agencies. Through this mechanism, the "Urban Renaissance" program was managed, involving over 2 billion euros in investments often criticized for a lack of transparency and clientelistic use (Top Channel, 2022). This total control reflects what Scheppele (2018) calls "autocratic legalism": the use of law not to limit but to expand power.

Decentralization

The administrative-territorial reform of 2014 (Law No. 115/2014) was the most radical act of re-centralization in post-communist Albania. It reduced the number of local government units from 373 to 61, eliminating 308 communes and replacing elected mayors with appointed administrators. This process ended local democracy in most of the country (Fuga, 2019). Officially, the reform was justified by "increasing efficiency," but the Supreme State Audit (2018) showed an increase in administrative costs, while later studies highlighted negative social consequences (Hysi, Kotherja & Xhepa, 2024). In essence, the reform aimed at electoral manipulation and the consolidation of central control over the territory.

Citizen Empowerment

In this phase, citizen empowerment reached its lowest point since the beginning of the transition. Public consultations were reduced to formal exercises with no impact on decision-making. The elimination of communes disconnected hundreds of thousands of rural citizens from direct representation, increasing the distance between politics and society (Fuga, 2019; Hysi, Kotherja & Xhepa, 2024). In parallel, the e-Albania platform was promoted as a digital innovation, but in

practice, it centralized information and created barriers for vulnerable groups, especially the elderly (Panorama TV, 2024). Instead of empowering citizens, digitalization created new forms of discretionary control.

Conclusion

The gap between the promise of a modern social democracy and the reality of governance became insurmountable. The Renaissance produced a new statist model, where ideological rhetoric served as an instrument of international legitimacy, while in practice, a modern absolute state was consolidated. In this phase, ideology and practice merged into a form antithetical to liberal principles, sealing the triumph of hyper-centralizing pragmatism in Albanian territorial governance.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

7.1 Comparative Synthesis

The analysis of the four phases reveals an uninterrupted trajectory toward state centralization. Table 1 summarizes the declared ideology and the implemented practice, measured against the three liberal principles.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Territorial Governance in Albania (1992–2024)

Governing Phase (Party)	Declared Ideology	Limited Government	Decentralization	Citizen Empowerment	The Real Model
I (DP, 1992–1997)	Libertarian / Minimal State	State collapse / "Hollow" state	Formal / without substance	Anomie / legal uncertainty	Governed chaos
II (SP, 1997–2005)	Progressive Socialism	Bureaucratic expansion / hyper-legislation	"Autonomy without power"	Façade participation	Managed capitalism
III (DP, 2005–2013)	Neoliberal / Pro-business	Clientelistic state / ALUIZNI	Façade reform / re-centralization	Uncertainty / patronage	Clientelistic statism

Governing Phase (Party)	Declared Ideology	Limited Government	Decentralization	Citizen Empowerment	The Real Model
IV (SP, 2013–2024)	"Third Way" / Renaissance	Absolute state / executive expansion	Structural annihilation	Annulled representation	Absolute statism

***Note.** Table prepared by the author, based on data and interpretations drawn from the existing literature, as a comparative synthesis of the four governing phases measured against the three liberal principles.*

The table shows that the initial failure to build a functional liberal state (Phase I) created the ground for a more organized top-down model (Phase II). This model was perfected for clientelistic purposes by the "blue" government (Phase III), which, despite its neoliberal rhetoric, centralized power even further. The process culminated in a hyper-centralist state (Phase IV), where total control became the ideology itself. The most important finding is that the "blue" governments, instead of embodying a liberal right, acted contrary to their declared philosophy, producing the ideological vacuum of the "missing right."

7.2 The Triumph of Pragmatism Over Principles

The convergence toward centralization is not a coincidence but a consequence of a rational choice dictated by the structures of the transition. The fundamental paradox is that the ideology of the right requires relinquishing instruments of control, but survival in a clientelistic system demands precisely their use. Faced with the choice between ideological coherence and holding power, both parties—and especially the right—chose the latter. Thus, programmatic commitments were sacrificed on the altar of a pragmatic statism, which served as a mechanism for distributing rents and maintaining patronage networks.

7.3 Implications

The consequences for Albanian democracy are profound. Political competition in territorial governance has been devoid of ideological substance. Elections have not offered a real choice between two different philosophies—a minimal liberal-conservative state versus an interventionist social-democratic state—but only between clientelistic networks controlling the state apparatus. This vacuum has reduced politics to a transactional race for resources,

undermining democratic representation and fueling citizen cynicism. For the literature on post-communist transitions, the Albanian case shows that a functional left-right spectrum does not automatically arise from electoral pluralism but requires institutions that reward programmatic coherence (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

7.4 Final Conclusion and Avenues for Future Research

The history of Albanian territorial governance is not a clash between "red planning" and "blue planning," but a shared failure to build a model based on principles. It is the story of a "missing right," the absence of which has left the political spectrum unbalanced and has caused centralizing statism to remain the only real option.

Future research could measure the economic and social costs of this model through quantitative analyses, or explore through ethnographic studies the ways in which citizens navigate a system where programmatic choice is an illusion. Such an analysis would further illuminate the pathologies of the Albanian transition, where the colors on the ballot paper changed, but the logic of power remained unchanged, leaving the promise of a real democratic choice still unfulfilled.

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