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A case of far-right mainstreaming beyond electoral performance: far-right memory politics in Albania

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ABSTRACT

How do far-right narratives become mainstream without electorally viable far-right parties? Moving beyond electoral-centered approaches, this article examines how far-right mainstreaming in Albania is driven by the instrumentalization of anti-communist memory politics rather than party success, as seen elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Memory entrepreneurs – particularly institutional actors like the Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes and Consequences (ISKK) and transnational networks such as the Platform of European Memory and Conscience (PEMC) – play a key role in this process. Through anti-communist narratives and activism, they promote a revisionist interpretation of history that delegitimizes Albania's anti-fascist national liberation war while rehabilitating Nazi-fascist collaborators as victims of communism. This reframing erodes democratic norms and normalizes far-right counter-narratives by portraying anti-fascism as an obstacle to democratic consolidation. Simultaneously, it depoliticizes socio-economic inequalities, attributing them to communism rather than neoliberal transformation. Drawing on political and historical sociology and employing a critical realist approach to discourse analysis, this article explores the weaponization of historical memory in contemporary Albania and its broader implications for post-communist transitions, memory politics, and far-right mainstreaming in CEE.

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Introduction

How does far-right mainstreaming occur in the absence of an electorally viable far-right party? Scholarship on far-right politics in CEE has primarily focused on the electoral rise and institutional consolidation of far-right actors – examining party strategies, leadership styles, voter bases, and policy influence. While these studies offer valuable insights, they often overlook cases where far-right discourse becomes embedded in public and political life without a dominant far-right party driving this process. This article addresses this gap by examining the Albanian case, where anti-communist memory politics – rather than electoral performance – operates as the primary mechanism of far-right normalization.

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Albania presents a compelling case in this regard. It is often perceived as an outlier within the CEE region—marked by deep political polarization yet lacking the ideological radicalization typically associated with electorally significant far-right parties (Bieber 2020; Kajsiu 2016a). This absence is frequently attributed to the country's traumatic communist past: an authoritarian regime that combined nationalism with anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, and autarky—paradoxically viewed as both a bulwark against far-right resurgence and a lingering obstacle to democratic consolidation (Kajsiu 2016a).

This article challenges the widespread view that Albania is an exception to the trend of far-right mainstreaming in post-communist Europe. Although Albania lacks electorally successful far-right parties or 'radicalized mainstream' formations such as Fidesz (Federation of Young Democrats – Hungarian Civic Alliance) in Hungary or PiS (Law and Justice) in Poland (Bustikova 2020) – and has experienced a more traumatic socialist legacy and a fragile post-socialist transition – it nonetheless shares critical structural features with its CEE[1] counterparts. These include rapid neoliberal restructuring, persistent contestation over historical memory, the political instrumentalization of the past, and the growing normalization of anti-communist historical revisionism, which frames the post-1989 period as an 'unfinished revolution' (Mark 2011).

Thus, far-right themes – such as nationalist victimhood narratives, defense of capitalism and social hierarchies, and militant anti-communism (Traverso 2019; Saull 2023) – have become increasingly prominent in mainstream Albanian political discourse. By examining Albania within this broader CEE landscape, the article situates its case within a shared post-socialist trajectory of mnemonic politics while foregrounding its atypical, non-electoral pathway to far-right mainstreaming. Crucially, this article contends that the very perception of Albania as lacking far-right radicalization may itself be a consequence of successful far-right normalization. Through memory politics and post-factual historical revisionism, far-right narratives have gained a 'common sense' status, rendering their ideological content invisible by virtue of their ubiquity and presence in mainstream public discourse.

This empirical puzzle prompts broader analytical questions: Is the presence of a strong far-right party a necessary condition for the normalization of far-right discourse? What alternative pathways enable exclusionary or revisionist ideologies to become mainstreamed? And what role do non-party actors—especially memory entrepreneurs, state institutions, and transnational advocacy networks – play in this process?

To answer these questions, the article draws on recent research that highlights the relationship between memory politics and far-right mainstreaming (Kopeček 2008; Stone 2012, Neumayer 2015; 2019; Subotić 2019, Traverso 2019; Valencia-García 2020; Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola 2023; Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2022; Hronešová 2022). It argues that anti-communist memory politics in Albania functions as a discursive and institutional mechanism through which far-right narratives – particularly the rehabilitation of fascist collaborators and the delegitimization of the anti-fascist legacy – gain mainstream traction in the absence of party-based far-right mobilization.

This study employs a processual approach to far-right mainstreaming, combining process-tracing with critical realist discourse analysis (Beach and Pedersen 2019; Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2010). Methodologically, this allows for a layered analysis of how memory entrepreneurs and affiliated institutions – particularly the Institute for the Study of Communist Crimes and Consequences (ISKK) – construct, legitimize, and

disseminate far-right revisionist historical narratives. These narratives are further reinforced through transnational memory activism, especially by networks such as the Platform of European Memory and Conscience (PEMC), which promote the equation of communism with Nazism and reframe post-1989 transitions as the delayed triumph of a 'return to Europe' (Kopeček 2019).

By identifying Albania as an analytically valuable critical case for understanding how far-right discourse can take root in mainstream public narratives through memory politics, this article contributes to research on far-right normalization beyond electoral dynamics. It shows how memory politics and post-factual historical revisionism operate as powerful mechanisms for embedding exclusionary ideologies into both institutional and discursive spheres. The article proceeds as follows: The next section situates Albania within broader debates on far-right mainstreaming in post-communist Europe, outlining both its comparability and divergence from dominant CEE patterns. The conceptual framework then theorizes anti-communist memory politics as a causal mechanism of far-right normalization. The empirical analysis traces the interventions of key actors and institutions in the Albanian case. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications for understanding far-right memory politics, post-factual historical revisionism, and neoliberal consolidation in post-communist societies.

Beyond electoral politics: alternative pathways to far-right mainstreaming in post-communist CEE

Scholarship on far-right mainstreaming in CEE has largely focused on the electoral success of far-right parties, emphasizing socio-economic grievances, cultural backlash, party competition, weak institutionalization, and ethnic cleavages (Bustikova 2020; Minkenberg 2017; Mudde 2019; Pirro 2015). While this literature offers key insights into the institutional rise of far-right actors, it leaves less space for analyzing discursive and societal normalization beyond party politics (Winter and Mondon 2018) – a gap this article addresses through the Albanian case. As Pirro (2023, 102) notes, even the most institutionalized far-right party operates within a broader 'network of networks' that extends far beyond electoral competition. Expanding this perspective, studies have examined memory politics, historical revisionism, and mnemonic governance as key mechanisms in far-right mainstreaming (Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola 2023; Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2022; Lipiński and Szabo 2022; Neumayer 2019, 2023; Subotić 2019).

This article intervenes in this literature by shifting attention from electoral consolidation to what recent studies define as the discursive and societal normalization of far-right ideas (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2021; Valentim 2024; Wodak 2021). To avoid analytical ambiguity, we also distinguish between mainstreaming and normalization. As Brown, Mondon, and Winter (2021, 170) argue, 'mainstreaming' refers to 'the process by which parties/actors, discourses and/or attitudes move from marginal positions on the political spectrum or public sphere to more central ones, shifting what is deemed to be acceptable or legitimate in political, media and public circles and contexts'. Valentim (2024) further elaborates this process by defining normalization as the weakening of normative constraints on radical-right preferences, wherein individuals perceive a reduction in the social costs of expressing far-right or exclusionary ideologies. This is closely aligned with Wodak's (2021) notion of 'shameless normalization', where previously taboo ideas gain

legitimacy and are integrated into mainstream debates through discursive strategies of inversion (victim-perpetrator reversal), denial, and rehabilitation. As such normalization, denotes the final phase of a discursive shift entailing 'deeper transformation of norms of public expression' (Krzyżanowski 2020a, 432), whereby ideas which are at one time unacceptable can become not only acceptable, but actually normal and even common sense through the process of mainstreaming (Brown, Mondon, and Winter 2021). From this perspective, far-right mainstreaming is a contingent and historically embedded process shaped not only by party systems but also by the role of elites, institutions, social relations and media in shifting the boundaries of acceptable discourse. In this framework, far-right normalization is not a consequence of party politics alone, but a broader discursive and structural process shaped by media, civil society, class relations and both state-backed and transnational memory mobilizations (Krzyżanowski 2020b).

This study addresses a critical puzzle within this literature: How has far-right memory politics been mainstreamed in Albania despite the absence of electorally successful far-right parties? In response, it investigates how post-factual anti-communist historical revisionism has reframed Albania's anti-fascist national liberation struggle as a fratricidal or foreign-imposed conflict, rehabilitated Nazi-fascist collaborators as patriotic martyrs, and recast communism as a totalitarian aberration equal to or worse than Nazism. These revisionist narratives have not only reshaped public memory and state narratives but have also depoliticized socio-economic inequalities, legitimizing neoliberal capitalism and ethno-nationalism as hegemonic frameworks of post-socialist identity.

Albania presents a historically distinct yet structurally convergent case in the comparative study of post-communist far-right mainstreaming. Unlike many of its CEE counterparts, Albania lacks an electorally viable far-right party. Its World War II communist-led resistance was not shaped by Soviet intervention but emerged as a homegrown partisan movement – despite initial Yugoslav support – and its postwar state socialist regime developed indigenously (Frashëri 2006), fusing Stalinist authoritarianism with nationalism rather than being externally imposed.

Nevertheless, Albania exhibits dynamics that are increasingly common across the region. Most notably, the country underwent a rapid and crisis-prone neoliberal transformation after 1992, culminating in the 1997 state collapse. This trajectory echoed broader patterns of institutional erosion and social dislocation associated with neoliberal restructuring, despite the comparatively more 'embedded neoliberalism' observed in most of CEE (Bohle and Greskovits 2011). These shared structural transformations – rather than electoral dynamics alone – have contributed to a broader regional trend of de-democratization (Brown 2015), marked by the instrumentalization of transitional justice, the politicization of historical memory, and the rise of post-factual revisionist narratives that delegitimize the socialist past and naturalize contemporary inequalities.

What distinguishes Albania within the post-communist mnemonic landscape is not only the mainstream right's recent radicalization – marked by the intensification of long-standing anti-communist rhetoric – but also the emergence of a bipartisan consensus around 'anti-communist memory' of communist past (Behr et al. 2020). The mainstream right, represented by the Democratic Party (PD), has since the early 1990s portrayed the Socialist Party (PS) as the ideological heir of the communist dictatorship. In recent years, this narrative has deepened, fusing Cold War-era anti-communism with conspiratorial imaginaries that depict the PS as a proxy of global liberal elites such as George Soros. Crucially, unlike much of CEE,

where former left parties lost ground to the right after abandoning redistributive agendas (Snegovaya 2024), Albania's PS – despite remaining in uninterrupted power since 2013—has itself actively contributed to the relativization of the anti-fascist legacy and the symbolic rehabilitation of wartime collaborators. This ideological shift is closely tied to the PS's role in deepening Albania's neoliberal transformation under Edi Rama, a process marked by privatization, austerity, and uneven capital accumulation.

In this context, rather than representing an exception, Albania's case reveals how far-right ideological normalization can proceed through discursive and mnemonic channels in settings marked by prolonged social dislocation and weakened mechanisms of democratic accountability. It thus broadens the scope of far-right research in post-communist Europe by illuminating non-electoral, memory-centered pathways of mainstreaming rooted in the socio-political fallout of neoliberal restructuring.

Post-factual historical revisionism, transnational anti-communist memory activism and the far-right mainstreaming

This study examines how anti-communist memory politics contributes to the normalization of far-right discourse, drawing on insights from Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola (2023, 2022) and Neumayer (2019, 2023). Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola (2023) emphasize the interplay between far-right agency, historically embedded narratives, and structural conditions that enable the political instrumentalization of history. Their framework highlights three key processes: (i) the far-right's construction and mobilization of post-factual historical narratives, (ii) the historical legacies that shape dominant and contested memory discourses, and (iii) the structural conditions that facilitate the mainstreaming of far-right historical revisionism.

Post-factual historical revisionism, as a core far-right strategy, distorts public memory by selectively reinterpreting or erasing past events to align with contemporary political agendas (Couperus, Rensmann, and Tortola 2023; Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2022; Valencia-García 2020). Couperus and Tortola (2019) identify three discursive strategies through which far-right memory entrepreneurs manipulate history: (a) rehabilitating dark pasts, (b) fabricating alternative historical narratives, and (c) evoking and then denying links to fascist legacies. This is evident across CEE in the delegitimization of anti-fascist resistance, the criminalization of the communist past, and the portrayal of neoliberal transformation as a civilizational return to Europe (Kopeček 2019).

Albania is no exception. While a legitimate need for post-communist historical revisionism emerged in response to the Stalinist historiography of the Hoxha regime – which revolved around a cult of personality and suppressed scholarly debates outside the official framework – this impulse was subsequently hijacked by far-right and conservative actors who used it to legitimize fascist collaborators, relativize war crimes, and promote exclusionary nationalism. Yet this discursive shift was neither merely domestic nor incidental. It was facilitated by post-socialist political elites seeking to depoliticize the social crises generated by rapid neoliberal reforms – reframing poverty, inequality, and institutional erosion as legacies of communism rather than consequences of post-1989 transformation. From the late 2000s onward, the rise of transnational anti-communist networks and EU-sponsored memory initiatives – often dominated by conservative and far-

right actors – provided additional ideological resources and institutional legitimacy to entrench this revisionist agenda. As a result, a historically grounded critique of the communist past has been subsumed into a broader mnemonic project that equates communism with Nazism, delegitimizes the anti-fascist legacy, and naturalizes contemporary inequalities – ultimately advancing exclusionary and anti-democratic ends.

This process should be understood not merely as a domestic phenomenon but as embedded within broader regional and transnational dynamics (Sierp and Wüstenberg 2015). Neumayer (2019, 2023) research provides a political sociology framework for understanding the transnational dimensions of anti-communist memory politics. She examines how conservative and far-right networks – operating through institutions like the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and the European Parliament (EP) – seek to institutionalize an anti-totalitarian framework equating communism with Nazism. Organizations such as the PEMC and the U.S.-based Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation play a pivotal role in legitimizing far-right historical revisionism, amplifying far-right memory politics, and consolidating conservative agendas across national and transnational levels.

Anti-communist 'memory entrepreneurs', particularly those embedded in state-sponsored memory institutes across CEE, actively work to establish their narratives as the 'true' history of communism (Dujisin 2021; Neumayer 2019). By conflating history with memory, they construct an autonomous 'anti-communist field' that serves political ends, securing social recognition and legitimacy for far-right interpretations of the past (Dujisin 2021). This process embeds exclusionary and authoritarian ideologies into mainstream discourse, enabling far-right movements to operate beyond formal party structures.

In this article, we adopt the term far-right rather than the more common descriptors radical right or populist right, following the historical sociological approach advanced by Saull (2023); see also Pirro 2023). The term far-right is preferable because it accurately locates these actors on a continuum of right-wing ideological and political formations, emphasizing their structural affinity with conservatism and reactionary projects. Unlike the term radical, which can misleadingly imply an ideological symmetry with the revolutionary tradition of the left or suggest an anti-systemic stance that challenges structural power relations, and populist, which often reduces political content to a communicative style or mobilizational technique, far-right foregrounds a historically grounded ideological and socio-political formation rooted in the counter-revolutionary tradition – including hierarchical visions of social order, ethnic exclusion, and cultural essentialism (Saull 2023; see also Traverso 2019). Crucially, this conceptual lens also allows us to analyze how far-right actors engage in a form of perverse anti-capitalism – a critique not of capitalism's exploitative foundations, but of its globalizing and cosmopolitan dimensions, particularly finance and international institutions. Rather than contesting core capitalist relations such as private property or wage labor, this critique ultimately defends traditional class hierarchies, national capitalist elites, and exclusionary social imaginaries (Saull 2023). This analytical lens is particularly important for understanding the Albanian case, where anti-communist memory politics functions not only to rehabilitate fascist collaborators and delegitimize the anti-fascist tradition, but also to obscure and depoliticize the structural inequalities engendered by the post-socialist neoliberal transition. The concept of the far-right thus captures the ideological work performed by these narratives – specifically, how the glorification of

nationalist victimhood and anti-communism can naturalize contemporary hierarchies while displacing attention from ongoing socio-economic injustices.

Methodologically, the article employs a process-tracing approach in combination with critical realist discourse analysis (Beach and Pedersen 2019). Process tracing is utilized to identify causal mechanisms that link the actions of specific actors (such as memory institutions, politicians, and media figures) with the broader outcome of far-right discourse normalization. The dependent variable is the mainstreaming of far-right memory politics, while the independent variables include transnational anti-communist networks, domestic memory entrepreneurs, and institutional interventions. To examine how these actors and institutions produce, circulate, and normalize far-right narratives, we apply a critical realist discourse analysis (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2010). This method allows us to capture the interplay between structural forces (e.g. neoliberal transformation, transnational mnemonic regimes), discursive practices (e.g. narrative reframing), and agency (e.g. speeches, policy decisions, institutional publications), hence enabling us to examine how transnational anti-communist activism and domestic conditions interact to normalize far-right narratives. Transnational networks provide institutional support, financial resources, and ideological frameworks, which interact with domestic politics to facilitate historical revisionism as a mechanism of far-right mainstreaming. Following critical realism's conception of causation (Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2010), we conceptualize anti-communist memory politics as a causal mechanism whose causal powers become activated within specific historical and social contexts. Rather than treating causation as a regular conjunction of events, this perspective highlights how the interaction between structural conditions and discursive practices generates the normalization of far-right narratives (Wodak 2021). It analyzes how structural (e.g. post-socialist neoliberal transformation), discursive (e.g. revisionist tropes equating communism with Nazism), and agentic forces (e.g. memory entrepreneurs and institutions such as ISKK) interact in specific conjunctures.

To operationalize this framework, we analyze empirical data including public debates and speeches, legislative initiatives, media commentary, commemorative events, and publications by institutions such as the ISKK and affiliated actors. The ISKK's historical interpretations are amplified through public exhibitions, educational curricula, national media coverage, and commemorative events – ensuring wide public exposure despite the institution's particularist stance. These include high-profile speeches by Prime Minister Edi Rama and President Bajram Begaj, which are analyzed in the empirical section as key examples of how revisionist narratives are publicly legitimized at the highest levels of political authority. These sources are examined for their discursive strategies: how they frame the past, attribute responsibility, construct victimhood, and legitimize ideological positions. The processual lens enables tracing these interventions over time and their cumulative effects on public discourse.

Anti-communist memory politics and the normalization of far-right counter-narrative of history in Albania

Kajsiu (2016a) attributes the failure of Albania's far-right parties to two key factors beyond the country's traumatic communist past. First, pre-communist nationalist parties like the PBK (*Partia Balli Kombëtar*, National Front), its 1998 splinter PBKD

(*Partia Balli Kombëtar Demokrat*, Democratic National Front Party), and the monarchist PLL (*Partia Lëvizja e Legalitetit*, Legality Movement) lacked credibility. Many Albanians who grew up under communism associated these groups with Nazi-fascist collaboration and treason, viewing figures like Leka Zogu, the leader of the Legality Movement, as unreliable or unserious. Second, these parties failed to attract Albania's predominantly rural electorate, as they were linked to pre-1944 landowning elites. Many feared their return to power would reverse communist-era land reforms, a concern frequently reinforced by the PS, which accused the PD of seeking to restore these far-right forces. Consequently, the combination of low credibility and weak rural support limited their electoral success (Kajsiu 2016a).

However, this account overlooks two critical developments. First, despite their marginal status—marked by minimal electoral support and limited political influence – the anti-communist ethno-nationalist imaginary promoted by far-right parties has undergone a steady process of normalization. Their revisionist interpretation of Albania's anti-fascist national liberation struggle and the communist past has increasingly become an integral part of mainstream political memory and public discourse (Kasmi 2023). The institutionalized political memory of communist past, as constructed by ISKK, largely reflects the social memory of the successors of Albania's pre-1944 ruling elite—feudal landowners, the bourgeoisie, and other groups politically persecuted under the communist regime (Lleshi 2019). The former head of ISKK, Çelo Hoxha[2] —a former PBKD general secretary and a key 'memory entrepreneur' – exemplifies this shift. Under the leadership of Çelo Hoxha and Agron Tufa – the first director known for his aggressive campaign to equate communist-era violence with genocide and criminalize national liberation war – ISKK became a hub of far-right historical revisionism, recasting the anti-fascist struggle as a fratricidal civil war allegedly orchestrated by Albania's historical enemies, particularly Slavo-Communists. This narrative portrays the communist era as a 'genocidal' and 'terrorist' totalitarian regime (Butka 2015; Hoxha 2014; Tufa et al. 2012), aligning closely with the ideological agenda of parties such as PBK, PBKD, and PLL.

Second, this far-right revisionism has been enabled especially by the changing of post-communist mnemonic landscape in Albania. Today this landscape is marked not only by the mainstream right's recent radicalization – marked by an intensification of long-standing anti-communist rhetoric – but also the emergence of a bipartisan consensus regarding the 'totalitarian' nature of the communist regime. In recent years, Berisha has further escalated the narrative, which depicts the PS as the ideological heir of the communist dictatorship, by framing the PS under Edi Rama's leadership as both the continuation of Albania's totalitarian past and a puppet of foreign globalist interests. In a 2023 Facebook post, Berisha accused the PS of transforming Tirana into 'a vassal of Belgrade', implementing 'a new genocide against Albanians by expelling 937,000 citizens from the country in eight years', and installing 'the first and only narco-state in Europe'. Most notably, he claimed:

> This party, under the leadership of Edi Rama, has installed full-blown monism in Albania by stealing the people's vote. In ten years in power, the Socialist Party has closed the EU's doors to Albania. Rama, with his criminal connections, turned the country into an operational

> epicenter for criminal organizations across the Balkans, Europe, North and South America, and the Middle East. (Berisha 2023, June 12)

This discourse portrays the PS not only as the modern equivalent of Slavic-backed communists but as a transnational threat subordinated to globalist conspiracies, particularly those associated with George Soros. Such claims fuse Cold War-era anti-communism with contemporary right-wing populist and conspiratorial tropes – linking national decline to an externally imposed elite alliance of communists, criminals, and cosmopolitans.

Since 2011, the PS under Edi Rama's leadership has distanced itself from its historical roots, condemned the communist past as totalitarian, and facilitated the symbolic rehabilitation of wartime collaborators. The party's adoption of a Third Way platform – aimed at transcending traditional left – right divisions – has further diluted its historical commitments and contributed to an increasingly ambiguous stance toward the anti-fascist legacy. While both major parties now depict the 1944–1992 period as a regime of fear and repression, their narratives diverge notably with regard to WWII: the PS continues to frame the anti-fascist resistance in positive terms, attributing most postwar injustices to Enver Hoxha's dictatorial leadership, whereas the PD openly embraces the far-right's revisionist position, portraying the conflict as a 'civil war' orchestrated by Slavo-communist forces. However, this shift cannot be reduced to Rama's personal ideological preferences or his efforts to personalize the party by sidelining the old party bureaucracy. Rather, it reflects the structural dynamics of Albania's broader neoliberal reconfiguration. Over the past fifteen years, neoliberal reforms – characterized by privatization, austerity, and the erosion of public institutions – have weakened party loyalty and enabled the rise of a powerful oligarchic elite deeply embedded within the political bureaucracy. This elite, which also controls the country's largest media conglomerates, has both underpinned the PS's electoral dominance and accelerated the depoliticization of governance and public discourse.

In this context, the mainstreaming of far-right tropes through bipartisan historical revisionism functions as a mechanism of depoliticization (Kiely 2016): it displaces public contestation over contemporary socio-economic grievances by projecting crisis onto a moralized narrative of the past. The convergence of memory politics with reactionary neoliberalism – where technocratic governance and market orthodoxy are shielded from democratic scrutiny (Kiely 2016) – has helped normalize exclusionary imaginaries centered on ethno-national victimhood, cultural decline, and the delegitimation of egalitarian ideals. Moreover, this mnemonic turn increasingly operates in a post-factual register, where empirical accountability is subordinated to affective and conspiratorial storytelling.

As a result, institutional memory – state-sanctioned historical narratives rooted in hegemonic anti-communist tropes – increasingly diverges from collective memory, which remains shaped by lived experiences and intergenerational transmission. While official discourse delegitimizes the communist era, popular memory is more nuanced. A 2016 survey by the Institute for Development Research and Alternatives (IDRA) for the OSCE in Tirana found that 42% of Albanians viewed Enver Hoxha's impact on history positively, while 35% saw the communist past as unproblematic, though 62% considered it at least somewhat problematic (IDRA 2016). However, despite these divided perceptions, since at least 2010, both state institutions and civil society mnemonic actors have

intensified anti-communist initiatives, particularly efforts to criminalize the anti-fascist national liberation war and delegitimize the communist past as a whole.

Structural and institutional conditions facilitating the political instrumentalization of history

Post-1989 transformations in CEE created political spaces for 'mnemonic manipulations' (Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Subotić 2019) – the strategic exploitation of collective memory by far-right actors. The collapse of the Berlin Wall symbolized the end of the 'short 20th century' (1914–1989) and reshaped perceptions of communism and revolution (Traverso 2019). Once associated with liberation, these concepts became linked to totalitarianism, while notions like capitalism and individualism, previously seen as symbols of alienation and exploitation, were redefined as the 'natural' pillars of liberal democracy (Traverso 2019).

Although the transition was framed as an opportunity for pluralistic memory, ruling elites weaponized Cold War-era anti-communism to legitimize neoliberal reforms that deepened social inequalities and public disillusionment (Wawrzyniak and Pehe 2024). By selectively highlighting communist-era crimes while downplaying far-right atrocities, this process not only delegitimized anti-fascist traditions but also reinforced nationalist victimhood narratives. The dominant anti-communist discourse presents 1989 as a triumph of liberal democracy, yet it erases the historical role of communism in defeating Nazism (Stone 2012). This selective amnesia distorts historical causality, allowing far-right actors to rehabilitate nationalist and authoritarian movements as legitimate expressions of historical justice.

Memory politics has become central to post-communist struggles over competing visions of the future. With the collapse of communism framed as the failure of all future-oriented political projects, historical narratives became a battleground for defining post-socialist identities (Stone 2012). Anti-communism thus functioned not only as a rejection of a discredited regime but as a means of legitimizing new political orders, often at the expense of historical nuance (Subotić 2019). Acknowledging the violent repression and historical distortions of Albania's Stalinist regime remains essential. Yet, confronting that legacy should not come at the cost of erasing or vilifying the anti-fascist resistance that defeated Nazism, laid the foundation for postwar reconstruction, and provided a unifying source of democratic legitimacy.

For years, post-communist challenges were primarily attributed to the legacy of state socialism. However, as Kopeček (2019) argues, the neoliberal transformations following 1989 played a more decisive role in shaping contemporary politics. Far-right leaders like Orbán and Kaczyński did not emerge from the remnants of the communist elite but from former dissident circles, challenging the notion that far-right normalization stems solely from unresolved communist legacies. Instead, it should be understood as a reaction to the contradictions of neoliberalization, which deepened socio-economic inequalities, dismantled social protections, and fueled political alienation.

As neoliberalism became hegemonic in both economic and social practice (Wawrzyniak and Pehe 2024), anti-communism solidified as the dominant post-1989 ideological framework – both a tool for political legitimacy (Subotić 2019) and a mechanism of exclusion (Ghodsee 2014). In this context, 'a politically generated picture

depicting the whole postwar period in the black-and-white of totalitarian theory' became the paradigmatic lens through which the past was interpreted, serving as 'the main tool in the politics of de-communization' (Kopeček 2008). This historical framing not only justified legal and institutional measures against former communist officials but also functioned as a broader legitimization strategy for neoliberal transformation, framed as a 'return to Europe' (Kopeček 2019).

Within this setting, memory politics is not merely a passive reflection of historical events but an active process driven by state institutions, political elites, and civil society actors. Through education, commemorations, and legal frameworks, they seek to institutionalize selective historical narratives, shaping collective memory to align with contemporary political and ideological objectives (Malinova 2021).

This dynamic is particularly evident in Albania, where anti-communist memory politics does more than delegitimize the past – it actively depoliticizes the structural consequences of neoliberal transformation. By framing communism as the root of contemporary crises, memory entrepreneurs divert attention from economic dislocation, social inequalities, and democratic backsliding, instead channeling public grievances into nationalist and authoritarian narratives. As Ghodsee (2014) highlights, anti-communist discourse in post-socialist states often serves to undermine social welfare policies and alternative economic models, reinforcing neoliberal hegemony.

Post-factual historical narratives of communist past and anti-fascist national liberation War

In Albania, memory entrepreneurs engage in post-factual historical revisionism, constructing an 'alternative history' (Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2022; Valencia-García 2020) that is nationalist, primordialist, racist, sexist, and ethnocentric. This revisionist discourse recasts the communist past as foreign domination, equating the communist regime with Nazi occupation (see Tufa et al. 2012). A key component is the reimagining of the anti-fascist national liberation war as a Yugoslav-backed communist plot to subjugate Albania. This narrative mythologizes a pre-communist past as an era of ethnic homogeneity, social cohesion, and moral integrity – contrasted with the alleged present-day decline, attributed to communism's enduring influence.

A core trope in this revisionism is the stark opposition between a 'pure' ethnonationalist community, led by 'true patriots' from the Western-educated landowning elite, and a Slavo-Bolshevik conspiracy bent on dismantling ethnic Albania. This substitutes the far-right trope of a Jewish 'cabal' (Couperus, Tortola, and Rensmann 2022) with a Slavic-communist plot. Paradoxically, while far-right discourse glorifies Albania's WWII-era rescue of Jews, it downplays the antisemitism of pre-war intellectuals like Gjergj Fishta, whose nationalist rhetoric and anti-Slavic stance overshadow his documented antisemitic and philofascist positions.

This revisionist project systematically rehabilitates collaborationist figures such as Mid'hat Frashëri, Lef Nosi, and Ernest Koliqi, who reconciled nationalism with foreign domination and colonialism in the name of anti-communism (Pula 2008). The landowning *Beys*, who aligned with fascism to maintain their class dominance, and middle-class intellectuals, who celebrated empire and fascism as moral imperatives, are now recast as the true guardians of Western civilization's values. Strikingly, this nationalist

rhetoric mirrors that of *Tomori*, the Albanian Fascist Party's official newspaper in 1940–41 (Pula 2008). For instance, Ernest Koliqi – a linguist and writer educated in Italy who later served as Minister of Education under the fascist regime – asserted that fascist ideology harmonized with Albania's traditional values of clan, family, and property, not by undermining them, but by refining and elevating them. In his view, fascism unified Albania's fragmented national energies, channeling them toward the service of the state (cited in Pula 2008, 589). Yet, figures like Koliqi – once key members of the fascist administration and wartime collaborators who were later tried under the communist regime – have been retrospectively rehabilitated, despite evidence that Koliqi remained active in the anti-communist exile and intermittently appeared in international espionage operations, including collaboration with Tito's Yugoslav intelligence services in efforts to overthrow Hoxha's regime (Tare 2020). Today, they are celebrated as national patriots, recast as victims of communism, or even venerated as martyrs of democracy (Tufa et al. 2012). Their names now adorn schools and public squares, symbolizing the broader revisionist project that seeks to rewrite their historical role.

By reinterpreting history, reclassifying figures, and equating communism with Nazism, this revisionist discourse reshapes collective memory to align with contemporary far-right ideology. It functions as a form of anti-memory – a process that revises, reconfigures, and, at times, outright denies the trauma and violence inherent in fascist ideological commitments (Wodak and Richardson 2013). This process erodes Albania's anti-fascist tradition while rehabilitating nationalist figures from the interwar and WWII periods.

A striking example is the state-led rehabilitation of Mid'hat Frashëri, the wartime leader of the Nazi-collaborationist Balli Kombëtar. Prime Minister Rama's (2018) speech at Frashëri's official repatriation and reburial ceremony exemplifies key revisionist strategies – selective glorification, moral re-evaluation, and substitution of historical accountability with nationalist symbolism (Couperus and Tortola 2019). Rama (2018) reconstructed Frashëri's legacy as that of a noble intellectual, downplaying his collaborationist role and framing him instead as a misunderstood patriot: 'Mit'hat Frashëri gave to Albania whatever he had and whatever he could. He dreamed and worked tirelessly for this country. He made a mistake? Of course he also made a mistake, but he never committed, or incited a crime'. By dismissing Frashëri's documented wartime alliances as a mere lapse, Rama simultaneously recasts historical condemnation as ideological repression:

> Stop judging and prejudging people in absentia. Here there are the remains of a man judged and sentenced in absentia. Not by a court of law, but by the endless and exhausting trial of the history written by the victors to humiliate the defeated. (Rama 2018)

This rhetorical reframing transforms Frashëri from a controversial figure into a symbolic victim of communism, inviting the public to question the legitimacy of anti-fascist memory itself. 'Whoever sees his coffin as a provocation to a history that was written by the victorious', Rama (2018) declared, 'should bow their head and recall how many crimes were committed by those who wrote and forcefully told us the half-truth'. In doing so, he positions the state not only as an agent of historical correction but also as a moral redeemer tasked with 'cleaning the mud' of partisan historiography. 'May Mit'hat Bey rest in peace in the soil of his Albanian motherland', Rama (2018) concluded, 'and may

time further clean the mud that honourable Albanian intellectuals first – and I did whatever we could – started cleaning today'.

Through this narrative, Rama reorients the discourse from accountability for fascist collaboration to the alleged injustices committed by the communist regime, thereby reinforcing a broader revisionist agenda. The symbolic act of state recognition for Frashëri, wrapped in the language of national reconciliation and historical balance, thus serves to normalize far-right memory frames and erode the foundational legitimacy of Albania's anti-fascist tradition.

Historical legacies and transnational mnemonic networks shaping dominant and contested memory discourses

In Albania, the ISKK has emerged as a central institutional actor in the official promotion of anti-communist historical revisionism. Established by law in 2010 and endorsed by the centre-right PD, ISKK was intended to hold the symbolic and legal authority of a state institution, including access to the archives of the former communist secret police. In its structure and declared aims, ISKK closely mirrors similar post-communist memory institutes across CEE – most notably the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR) in the Czech Republic and the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) in Poland – which were created as part of broader efforts by right-wing political forces to reframe regime transitions as incomplete ruptures with communism (Dujisin 2021; Lleshi 2019). These institutions share a foundational mission to construct official historical narratives that portray communism as a totalitarian aberration and promote the moral equivalence of Nazi and communist regimes.

This vision was explicitly articulated by ISKK's first director, Agron Tufa, in a 2019 Parliamentary address outlining the Institute's strategy:

> [I]n addition to long-term projects now entering their eighth year—such as the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Victims of Communist Terror* and the testimonial series *Voices of Memory* along with their supporting archives—ISKK in 2017 launched a new educational project in high schools, which expanded to the university level in 2018. Another long-term initiative materialized in 2018 was the *Virtual Museum of Communism*. Within that year, ISKK produced its first 3D film, *The Virtual Museum of the Tepelena Camp* [described by Tufa as more terrible than the 'Auschwitz'], thereby paving the way for a series of additional films to be developed over the next four years. Meanwhile, ISKK's nearly eight years of experience and the growing expertise of its staff have fostered independent initiatives both within the institute and in broader inter-institutional collaboration. As a result, in 2018 alone, three new projects were launched: the online photo exhibition *Before and After*, video montages, and the integration of educational programs with museum visits. In addition to ongoing urgent projects—such as video documentation of testimonies, archival database creation, and school-based discussions—ISKK in 2018 placed particular emphasis on a strategic communication plan: identifying rapid, engaging, and efficient ways and tools to help the public memorize the drama of communism. (Tufa 2019)

Beyond these cultural-educational initiatives, ISKK actively positioned itself at the intersection of domestic and international memory networks. In 2018 alone, it organized or co-sponsored ten public events across Albania – ranging from collaborative forums with local municipalities to educational initiatives in secondary schools and universities – and participated in twelve additional events hosted by partner institutions. Among its main

collaborators were the House of Leaves Museum (*Muzeu 'Shtëpia e Gjetheve'*), the Institute for Democracy, Media and Communication (IDMC), and the Institute of Lumo Skendo Studies (named after *Lumo Skëndo*, the pseudonym of Mid'hat Frashëri), all of which play influential roles in shaping public narratives about Albania's communist past. ISKK also maintained close working relations with the Authority for the Opening of Secret Police Files, the online archive *Kujto.al*—managed by a right-wing entrepreneur and the leader of the political party *Mundësia*—as well as with associations of former political prisoners in Tirana and throughout the country.

These partnerships reflect ISKK's deep entrenchment in Albania's conservative institutional landscape. Its academic and educational collaborators ranged from the National Library and the Academy of Sciences to a broad network of public and private universities, including the University of Tirana, the University of Elbasan, the European University of Tirana, and Bedër University. Through these collaborations, ISKK has consolidated its status as a nodal actor in Albania's evolving memory regime, exerting significant influence over historical discourse, public education, and the institutionalization of anti-communist narratives.

On the international front, ISKK participated in seven events addressing topics such as the use of secret police files in the digital age, decommunization, and the management of communist-era heritage. A key milestone was ISKK's 2018 admission into the PEMC, a network that advances the EU-endorsed agenda of memorializing communism as a form of totalitarian oppression. This affiliation illustrates ISKK's integration into a transnational mnemonic infrastructure, where post-communist states consolidate anti-communist memory regimes within a broader European normative framework.

ISKK's activities are embedded within a broader transnational field of anti-communist memory politics (Dujisin 2021), which has seen state-sponsored institutions across CEE converge on shared mnemonic templates. This aligns with broader European memory politics, particularly the European Parliament's 2008 resolution on the 'conscience of Europe' and the 2009 Vilnius Declaration, which framed the condemnation of communism as central to democratic consolidation (Ghodsee 2014; Neumayer 2023; Subotić 2019). In response to the EU's emphasis on Holocaust recognition, anti-communist actors advanced a parallel 'Gulag memory' within a totalitarianism framework, equating communism with Nazism to demand its formal condemnation.

Despite the transnationalization of Eastern European memory politics, anti-communist activists primarily found support within conservative circles, struggling to broaden their appeal due to their rigid totalitarian framing (Neumayer 2019). This selective approach not only shaped dominant mnemonic frameworks in post-socialist Europe but also influenced Albania's anti-communist discourse, leading to the relativization – and, in some cases, revision – of the National Liberation War's anti-fascist legacy. As seen in CEE, Albanian memory politics has facilitated the rehabilitation of wartime collaborators by portraying communism as the primary historical threat while downplaying right-wing complicity in fascist atrocities (Iacob 2019).

Albania's adoption of commemorative practices like the European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism aligns it with anti-totalitarian discourse. However, as in CEE, Albanian memory entrepreneurs instrumentalize this framework to erase the wartime crimes of right-wing collaborators. Through ISKK and affiliated platforms, they embed revisionist memory politics into European

decommunization initiatives, legitimizing the legal condemnation of communism and the exoneration of far-right figures.

For instance, Çelo Hoxha (2023), writing for *CommunistCrimes.org*—a platform operated by the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory and closely aligned with post-socialist anti-communist memory politics – frames Albania's anti-fascist resistance as foreign-imposed rather than homegrown. He portrays the Albanian Communist Party (PKSH) as externally orchestrated and inherently illegitimate, claiming:

> Under the influence of ideology imported from Moscow and leadership from the Yugoslav Communist Party, the Albanian Communist Party (ACP) remained foreign to the Albanian population. As a result, partisan units were scarce, isolated in rural areas with limited resources, and survived through pillaging and recruiting criminals. Recruitment of criminals was carried out under the guidance of the highest leadership of the ACP. (Hoxha 2023)

This narrative, which dismisses the popular and transnational dimensions of the Albanian resistance, recasts partisans not as liberation fighters but as social bandits and opportunists. It exemplifies the broader post-Cold War revisionist logic that seeks to criminalize anti-fascist actors and blurring the lines between resistance and repression. Hoxha reinforces this logic by equating wartime survival tactics with postwar collectivization policies, collapsing distinct historical phases into a seamless narrative of totalitarian abuse.

In his book *Krimet e Komunistëve gjatë luftës, 1941–1945* (Crimes of the Communists during the War, 1941–45) (2014), published by ISKK, Hoxha further delegitimizes the National Liberation War by portraying it as a fratricidal civil conflict that hindered the German retreat, rather than a legitimate anti-fascist struggle. He controversially labels 265 resistance leaders and martyrs as war criminals, a move emblematic of the anti-communist paradigm underpinning contemporary decommunization discourse. Such accounts not only relativize Albania's contribution to the global anti-fascist struggle but also serve to naturalize post-1990 neoliberal restructurings by discrediting the revolutionary legitimacy of the socialist project they replaced.

This revisionist agenda pervades ISKK's publications. In the *Fjalori enciklopedik i viktimave të terrorit komunist* (Encyclopedic dictionary of victims of communist terror) (2012), ISKK's then-director Agron Tufa draws extensively on *The Black Book of Communism* and adopts the Cold War totalitarianism paradigm to depict communism as inherently genocidal and morally equivalent to Nazism. He reframes Albania's anti-fascist struggle as a civil war orchestrated by foreign actors – primarily Yugoslav communists – whose primary objective was not to resist the Axis powers but to eliminate nationalist forces and consolidate control. According to this narrative, the so-called PKSH was established 'under the orders, approval, and tutelage of the Yugoslav communists', not as an indigenous political force, but as an instrument to 'implement the plan to annex Kosovo after the Second World War and to exercise political and economic control over Albania through their chosen and obedient subordinate, Enver Hoxha' (Tufa et al. 2012, 11). Hoxha is thus portrayed as a foreign proxy who, upon the communist takeover in 1944, launched a campaign of mass persecution against clergy, intellectuals, landowners, and former resistance fighters – an operation cast as the true objective of the wartime mobilization rather than its aftermath. Tufa's depiction collapses the distinction

between wartime and postwar repression, constructing a seamless narrative of totalitarian abuse that denies the anti-fascist character of the National Liberation War.

In his introduction to the *Encyclopedia*, Tufa describes communist terror as total and occult, embedded in a system of surveillance, propaganda, and ideological control:

> Terror, politically and ideologically conceptualized according to communist doctrine—or what one might call 'terrorology'—spared neither means nor ends. It sowed a profound psychosis of fear and insecurity, from the capital to the most remote provinces and villages of the homeland [. . .] The totalitarian system of communist rule estranged the Albanian people from every memory and tradition of the past [. . .] Across generations, the regime experimented with producing a 'new man'—a being without a past, a tabula rasa—as the first step in manipulating consciousness and transforming individuals into obedient zombies. (Tufa et al. 2012)

This totalizing vision rests on the Cold War dichotomy between liberal freedom and totalitarian subjugation. By attributing to the regime not only mass violence but also an ontological erasure of memory, identity, and agency, Tufa revives an essentialist image of communism as a foreign and pathological force. In doing so, he legitimizes a nationalist counter-narrative in which anti-communist actors – regardless of their wartime collaboration – are recast as patriots, while the anti-fascist struggle is delegitimized as a tool of totalitarian domination.

Tufa also glorifies postwar anti-communist resistance, particularly the Postriba Uprising, as a heroic struggle for national salvation. His rhetoric, steeped in racialized nationalism, essentializes ethnic purity, casting highlanders, anti-communist intellectuals, and clergy as the 'true Albanians' – the 'worthy representatives of the Illyrian race' preserved in the northern Alps (Tufa et al. 2012, 25). In contrast, he depicts communists as a foreign-imposed, plebeian force that introduced terror and moral decay. This ethnocentric and hierarchical framework exemplifies ISKK's broader strategy: using post-factual narratives to criminalize the communist regime while rehabilitating fascist collaborators and reactionary insurgents.

Similarly, Erald Kapri, ex-candidate for the head of ISKK and current member of its scientific council, exemplifies far-right historical revisionism in *Secrets of War* (Instituti i Studimeve Historike "Lumo Skëndo" 2017). The book reframes Albania's WWII history through a nationalist, anti-communist lens, portraying communist partisans as foreign-imposed oppressors and nationalist factions as the true defenders of the nation. While claiming to correct 'communist distortions', it selectively interprets British archival documents to rehabilitate nationalist and collaborationist forces, equating *Balli Kombëtar* and *Legaliteti*—many of whose members collaborated with the Axis – with the National Liberation Movement. Kapri depicts the partisan struggle as a civil war provoked by the PKSh under Yugoslav direction rather than a broad-based anti-fascist resistance. Citing British officers' frustrations, he frames the communist victory as the result of 'terrorist' tactics and foreign backing, suggesting Albania's post-war fate was externally imposed rather than shaped by internal dynamics. Finally, *Secrets of War* glorifies nationalist leaders such as Mid'hat Frashëri, Abaz Kupi, and Ahmet Zogu, recasting them as unrecognized patriots rather than actors with complex, often compromised wartime roles. By essentializing anti-communist resistance as the true national struggle and depicting communist victory as illegitimate, Kapri advances a broader far-right agenda: criminalizing the National Liberation Movement while rehabilitating Nazi-fascist collaborators.

These revisionist strategies serve a dual purpose: legitimizing decommunization policies akin to those in Poland, Hungary, and the Baltic states, and rehabilitating far-right figures by shifting historical culpability onto the communist movement. This parallels efforts in CEE, where nationalist collaborators have been reframed as resistance heroes.

Far-right mainstreaming in Albania is thus embedded within transnational mnemonic regimes that position anti-communism as a prerequisite for European democratic consolidation. This process is further reinforced by civil society institutions like the IDMC, which, in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS), plays a key role in shaping public memory. A member of the PEMC since 2016, IDMC is embedded in a broader European network of institutions that promote the equivalence of totalitarianisms. Through initiatives like *Memory Days*—a flagship event that brings exhibitions, workshops, conferences, and publications to a broad audience in order to portray Albania's communist past as inherently totalitarian – IDMC systematically constructs communism as the nation's primary historical threat. In doing so, it downplays or omits the legacies of fascist collaboration and fascist violence. This discursive orientation is exemplified by IDMC's executive director Jonila Godole (2018), who, in the context of public debates surrounding the communist-era forced labor camp of Tepelena, declared: 'Whether Tepelena was an Albanian Auschwitz or not doesn't really matter, because that camp will remain a symbol of the barbarity of Albanian communism'. The invocation of Auschwitz as a comparative framework is not incidental but part of a broader revisionist effort to establish moral equivalence between communism and Nazism. This logic is pushed even further by Agron Tufa, who claimed: 'The food conditions in Auschwitz cannot even be compared to the programmed starvation of prisoners in Tepelena [. . .] In Auschwitz, there was no forced labor torture as there was in Tepelena' (Tufa 2018). These highly controversial analogies serve not to foster historical understanding but to sensationalize and moralize the anti-communist narrative, thereby eroding the specificities of fascist and Nazi crimes while elevating the communist past as the ultimate historical evil. Such interventions not only advance legal and moral condemnations of communism but also embed anti-communist discourse into Albania's EU accession narrative, aligning it with broader European memory regimes that increasingly privilege anti-totalitarianism over antifascism. In this way, IDMC plays a key role in normalizing far-right interpretations of the past under the guise of democratic consolidation and transitional justice.

For instance, the 2023 edition of *Memory Days* presented the Baltic states' stringent decommunization measures as a model for Albania, positioning anti-communism as essential to European integration. By aligning with this framework, Albanian memory entrepreneurs reconfigure national memory around an exclusionary ethno-nationalist discourse, equating anti-communism with Europeanization. *Memory Days* mobilizes a transnational network – including museums, civil society organizations, and former political prisoners' associations – to reshape historical consciousness through public discourse, cultural production, and legal advocacy. While ostensibly promoting dialogue, these efforts overwhelmingly emphasize communist-era repression while minimizing or erasing wartime collaborationist crimes.

By exploiting international platforms and aligning with European memory politics that equate communism with Nazism, Albanian memory entrepreneurs have embedded far-right historical revisionism within state institutions, public discourse, and even EU accession narratives. Media platforms, particularly digital news outlets and television programs,

serve as key vehicles for disseminating totalitarianism paradigm, amplifying conspiracy theories that normalize far-right ideological positions. These outlets frame historical debates as battles between 'truth' and 'communist deception', systematically dismissing alternative perspectives while presenting far-right interpretations as self-evident truths. The institutionalization of far-right historical revisionism in Albania is exemplified by the recent five-volume publication of *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX* (History of Albanians during the 20th Century) (2023) by the Institute of History at the Academy of Albanological Studies, edited by Beqir Meta. As acknowledged by Meta, 'this publication marks a complete break with the previous historiography inherited from the communist regime', for all historical stages (Agolli 2023). Indeed, this work reframes the anti-fascist national liberation war entirely as a civil war, aligning with the revisionist agenda (Kasmi 2024) promoted by ISKK. The official endorsement of this narrative was further reinforced by the participation of Albanian President Bajram Begaj in the book's launch event, where he emphasized the need to 'write history without complexes' and to confront the 'deformations' imposed by the communist regime (Agolli 2023). Historians involved in the project similarly framed their work as a corrective to the supposed ideological distortions of the communist period, further entrenching a revisionist perspective that delegitimizes the socialist past while aligning national history with far-right mnemonic narratives.

Ultimately, the institutionalization of anti-communist memory politics in Albania mirrors broader CEE trends, where state-backed historical revisionism rehabilitates far-right figures and delegitimizes left-wing alternatives.

Against the lingering legacies of communism: politicizing history to depoliticize neoliberalism

Far-right mainstreaming in Albania is not merely a domestic phenomenon but is shaped by transnational anti-communist memory politics, reinforcing ideological resistance to progressive alternatives. By framing the defense of capitalism and traditional social hierarchies as a struggle against the lingering legacies of communism, far-right actors legitimize exclusionary nationalism while shielding neoliberalism from critique.

In this landscape, historical revisionism serves as a key mechanism for embedding far-right narratives – depicting socialism as totalitarian oppression while presenting neoliberal capitalism as the only viable path forward (Wawrzyniak and Pehe 2024). This strategy is exemplified by prominent memory entrepreneurs who simultaneously politi-cize history while depoliticizing structural economic critiques.

Kapri and Agron Shehaj illustrate this dynamic, merging anti-communist mnemonic activism with ultra-neoliberal politics. Their departure from the PD to establish the right-wing party *Mundësia* (*Opportunity*) reflects a broader pattern in the Albanian right, where historical revisionism reinforces neoliberal orthodoxy. A key instrument of their activism is *Kujto.al* ('Remember'), a foundation established and financed by Shehaj in 2018, which, in alignment with ISKK and IDMC, positions itself as the guardian of Albania's collective memory of communism (1945–1991). Through digital archives, educational initiatives, and advocacy for the legal recognition of communist crimes, *Kujto.al* advances a narrative that criminalizes the socialist past while legitimizing neoliberalism. Meanwhile, Kapri and Shehaj's political rhetoric portrays the communist legacy as the root cause of Albania's

present economic dysfunction (Delisula 2025). By shifting blame for post-communist socio-economic crises from neoliberal policies to the supposed persistence of socialist structures, they further depoliticize economic hardship and reinforce far-right narratives.

While Kapri (2025) and Shehaj (2025) critique Albania's economic model, they attribute these issues not to free-market capitalism but to lingering socialist distortions and state corruption. In their view, the country's economic crisis stems not from neoliberal restructuring but from an incomplete break with communism. Consequently, they advocate for a more radical neoliberal model, calling for further market deregulation and minimal state intervention. This framing ignores Albania's extensive neoliberal restructuring under the Rama government, which has prioritized privatization, promoted public–private partnerships across multiple sectors including healthcare and education, and austerity-driven governance. Rather than acknowledging the inequalities produced by Albania's peripheral integration into global capitalism, they frame economic struggles as a failure of incomplete liberalization, reinforcing the notion that the solution lies in deepening neoliberal reforms.

Their historical revisionism thus serves a dual function: rehabilitating far-right narratives while legitimizing an ultra-neoliberal agenda. By positioning themselves as defenders of 'historical truth' and champions of economic liberalization, Kapri and Shehaj instrumentalize memory politics to divert attention from structural critiques of neoliberalism, steering public discourse toward ideological battles over Albania's past.

Far-right mnemonic activism operates as a mechanism to neutralize dissent and consolidate elite power, equating anti-communism with democracy and neoliberalism with progress. While far-right discourse frequently denounces globalization – invoking conspiracy theories about 'Sorosian' influence and foreign plots to undermine national sovereignty – it simultaneously defends neoliberal orthodoxy. The prolonged post-communist transition – marked by economic instability, mass emigration, and deepening inequality – is paradoxically framed as both a result of communist-era corruption and a justification for intensifying neoliberal reforms (Kajsiu 2016b). This ideological framework obscures the structural causes of Albania's socio-economic crisis while reinforcing exclusionary nationalist narratives that blame economic hardship on former communists rather than the failures of neoliberal governance.

By naturalizing neoliberalism as the only legitimate alternative to communism, far-right discourse in Albania neutralizes dissent, delegitimizes progressive alternatives, and entrenches economic and social hierarchies under the guise of national renewal. This process fosters an epistemic environment where alternative narratives are discredited, and far-right discourse becomes increasingly normalized in public debates.

Conclusion

This study has examined the mechanisms of far-right mainstreaming in Albania, demonstrating how memory politics, post-factual historical revisionism, and transnational mobilization facilitate the normalization of far-right narratives in the absence of a dominant far-right party. While existing research has acknowledged the role of mnemonic manipulation in far-right normalization, this study highlights how state-backed memory institutions and transnational anti-communist networks function as key mechanisms through which far-right discourse gains legitimacy –

especially in contexts lacking electorally viable far-right parties. Addressing this gap, this study shows how memory entrepreneurs – operating at the intersection of political, historiographic, and transnational spheres – leverage anti-communist activism to legitimize historical revisionism under the guise of democratic consolidation.

A key finding is that far-right normalization extends beyond party politics, becoming entrenched through post-factual historical revisionism, public discourse, and transnational networks. Rather than requiring an electorally viable far-right movement, these narratives are embedded in public memory formation, fostering exclusionary nationalism and authoritarian tendencies. The Albanian case illustrates how anti-communist memory politics delegitimizes the anti-fascist national liberation war and the socialist past while simultaneously advancing ethno-nationalist ideologies. This selective framing not only obscures the failures of neoliberal transformation but also redirects public grievances away from contemporary socio-economic struggles toward a revisionist historical narrative that rehabilitates wartime collaborationists and marginalizes left-wing alternatives.

Indeed, the very perception that Albania lacks far-right radicalization may be a consequence of successful far-right normalization. Through sustained mnemonic activism, anti-communist historical revisionism has naturalized exclusionary ideologies, enabling them to function as neutral or common-sense positions within the mainstream public sphere. This reveals how far-right ideas can become hegemonic without being electorally dominant.

By applying Couperus et al.'s three-tiered analytical framework of far-right historical revisionism, we identified how the ISKK plays a central role in this process – rehabilitating collaborationists, equating communism with Nazism, and delegitimizing anti-fascist struggles. Further, using Neumayer's political sociology of memory, we traced how ISKK operates within transnational anti-communist networks, particularly the PEMC, demonstrating that far-right mnemonic activism is institutionalized beyond national contexts. This study thus underscores that far-right mainstreaming is not merely an electoral phenomenon but a broader ideological, institutional and inter-societal process, facilitated by transnational memory politics.

Anti-communist rhetoric provides ideological cover for conservative and nationalist actors, and serves to reframe the social crises generated by Albania's post-socialist neoliberal transformation as legacies of communist failure. By branding critics of Albania's post-socialist transformation as communist sympathizers or nostalgics, anti-communist memory politics has effectively foreclosed debate on neoliberalism's socio-economic consequences. As a result, transitional justice and memory politics – rather than fostering democratic engagement – have reinforced an ideological climate in which far-right narratives gain legitimacy, even in the absence of a dominant far-right party.

This study contributes to broader debates on far-right mainstreaming, memory politics, and post-communist transformations in several ways. First, it underscores the role of non-electoral mechanisms – particularly post-factual historical revisionism and mnemonic activism – in shaping political memory. Second, it challenges party-centered approaches, demonstrating that far-right ideology can become institutionalized within state and societal structures without requiring an organized far-right party. Third, it situates Albania's case within broader regional patterns of mnemonic struggles while highlighting its distinct trajectory-one where memory entrepreneurs and transnational networks play

a central role in legitimizing far-right discourse through the depoliticization of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that historical narratives are not merely sites of ideological contestation but powerful instruments for far-right mainstreaming. In Albania, as in other post-communist contexts, memory politics has been weaponized to legitimize exclusionary and authoritarian ideologies, reinforcing regional trends in far-right normalization. However, Albania's case reveals how this process unfolds without a dominant far-right party, relying instead on memory entrepreneurs and transnational networks to institutionalize revisionist narratives, reshape public memory, and entrench neoliberal hegemony.

Notes

1. Although Albania is typically classified within Southeastern Europe (SEE), this study adopts a CEE comparative lens due to the predominance of CEE-focused scholarship on far-right mainstreaming and mnemonic politics. More importantly, Albania exhibits key post-communist dynamics analogous to those observed across CEE – such as transitional justice mechanisms, anti-communist historical revisionism, and the consolidation of exclusionary narratives through institutionalized memory politics.
2. Since April 2025, Çelo Hoxha has been replaced by Mentor Beqa as Chairman of the ISKK Board, which has also been reshaped to include more moderate figures. Unlike the contentious replacement of Agron Tufa – who resigned and sought asylum in 2019 after reporting threats linked to his investigations into communist-era crimes and was sharply criticized by Socialist MPs for allegedly defaming the anti-fascist resistance – Beqa's appointment has not sparked public debate.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Klevis Kolasi:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Jonilda Rrapaj Kolasi:** Data curation, Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing; **Atay Akdevelioğlu:** Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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