

Afrim Krasniqi. 2020. *Kriza e ambasadave. Shqipëria në vitin 1990*. Tirana: Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike, Instituti i Historisë. 484 pp., ISBN: ISBN978-9928-339-08-9, 1500 lekë

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Albania constitutes an interesting case for scholars of political transitions. At the end of 1989, while communism had collapsed everywhere else in Eastern Europe, the Stalinist regime in Tirana seemed to be firmly in control. It had no real opposition. The year 1990, however, would see the eruption of popular unrest. The police shot dead and wounded a number of people, but refrained from committing mass bloodshed. At the end of that year, the communist regime decreed political pluralism. How could such a radical change happen so quickly? Why did people suddenly dare to challenge the much-feared regime, and why did the latter give up its monopoly on power without resorting to extreme measures first? So far, commentators have provided some explanations, but historians know only too well that assumptions based on observations might sound perfectly plausible and yet in the light of sources turn out to be too simplistic or even completely wrong.

Afrim Krasniqi's monograph *Kriza e ambasadave. Shqipëria në vitin 1990* (The Embassies' Crises. Albania in 1990) contributes to the above-mentioned issues by examining the storming of foreign embassies in Tirana in July 1990 by several thousand Albanians. About 5000 of them succeeded in entering the buildings and seeking asylum. After some initial hesitation, the communist regime allowed them to emigrate. The book's focus on this event is particularly welcome, for two reasons. Firstly, it was a genuine turning point, and secondly, it constitutes a blind spot in the research. The very few scholarly studies addressing Albania's transition from communism to political pluralism have granted this event far less space than later developments at the end of 1990 and in 1991. The reviewed monograph is the first study to explore the "embassies' crisis" on the basis of primary sources. Furthermore, the book benefits from the first-hand knowledge of the author, a former participant in the so-called student movement which in 1990–91 decisively contributed to the toppling of the communist regime. Currently, Afrim Krasniqi is among the most active Albanian scholars in the fields of contemporary history and political science. His main research focus is the political transition after the fall of communism, political parties, elections, and civil society. Since September 2021, he chairs the Institute of History of the Academy of Albanological Studies in Tirana.

The book is divided into four main chapters. A foreword introduces the topic, its relevance, the state-of-the-art of research, and the sources that were used. To some extent, it also touches upon methodological issues. Although the author does not explicitly formulate research questions, it is clear that his aim is to collect as much evidence as possible in order to illuminate what exactly happened and possibly why. The study is based first on documents from the Archives of the Party of Labour of Albania, the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs, and the State Security Service. Second, the author uses recollections (memoirs and public interviews) by persons involved in the events, from the highest political decision-makers and functionaries to protestors and refugees as well as the foreign embassies' personnel. Third, he relies on foreign media reporting. In his foreword, Krasniqi draws attention to shortcomings and pitfalls of the archival materials and the biases inherent in recollections. However, he does not engage more broadly with debates and approaches present in international communism, post-communism, and transition studies, which address these challenges and offer ways to profit from them analytically.

The first chapter presents the snowballing process that culminated in the storming of embassies in July 1990. Increasing poverty and news about political revolutions in other East European countries resulted in several protests in the first half of the year. Their brutal crackdown and statements by regime representatives condemning news about unrest as foreign fabrications further exacerbated the tension. Attempts by the government to defuse major unrest through proclaiming reforms did not help either. Instead, these “belated and insufficient measures” (35) increased the popular frustration. Many people tried to escape the country, but dozens of them were shot dead by the border guards, without a legal provision. Meanwhile, the phenomenon of storming foreign embassies to seek asylum had emerged elsewhere. In Tirana, despite increased police presence in front of embassy buildings, between March and the end of June 1990 around 60–70 persons succeeded in entering them. In an attempt to avoid further aggravating the situation, the government agreed to allow at least 20 of them to emigrate (104–24, 127).

The second chapter presents in great detail and based on a wealth of accounts the subsequent mass storming of Albania's foreign embassies and the regime's response to it. In order to lower tensions, the government announced that from 3 July onwards anyone wishing to travel abroad was free to apply for a visa at the respective foreign embassy. It proved to be a political boomerang. Already on 2 July thousands of people took to the streets of Tirana and while fighting with the police invaded the buildings of 14 foreign embassies. The police shot dead at least one person and wounded six others (129), but on the whole seemed to lack a clear strategy. In the following days, the regime started a mass campaign to present the

refugees as hooligans and as manipulated by foreign forces. Eventually, after strong international pressure, it allowed the refugees to emigrate.

The third chapter provides additional and more detailed information about what happened in each embassy that was invaded by refugees and the interactions between the embassies' staff, their respective governments, and the Albanian authorities. By and large, the author shows the decisive role of foreign diplomats in assisting the refugees and their determination to withstand the pressure from the Albanian authorities. The final chapter then elaborates the communist regime's efforts to prevent the recurrence of the events of 2 July. On the whole, the Albanian government combined a massive propaganda campaign denigrating the refugees as hooligans and criminals both within the country and abroad with increased security and repressive measures. At the instruction of the political leadership and without a legal basis, hundreds of people were arrested (436–41).

Running to almost 500 pages, *The Embassies' Crises. Albania in 1990* is rich in evidence and details. To this merit, the author has consulted a wealth of sources and collected a large amount of information. The flood of details and figures is, however, often overwhelming. Furthermore, the reasonableness of including some accounts by former regime protagonists, such as Qemal Lame, head of the General Investigating Authority from 1982 to 1992, is questionable, and the supporting evidence for some of the author's assessment is thin. For example, he argues that the rural population was loyal to the regime (451–2), but gives no sufficient empirical evidence. Finally, the study would have benefited significantly from a separate section summarising the findings and discussing them in light of a theoretical framework. As it is, the book undoubtedly extends our knowledge about the events themselves, but misses the chance of drawing broad and clear analytical conclusions. Overall, however, the monograph constitutes an important first step to explore a key moment in Albania's transition from communism to political pluralism based on archival and other historical sources.