



Albania and Its Place in International Memory Work

Organizers: crossborder factory / Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / CCFD-Terre Solidaire / FrancoGerman Youth Office

Tirana, 29 October to 3 November 2018

Report by Nicolas Mall, Sarajevo

□ Since its creation in 2010, the platform “Memory Lab” brings together organizations and persons who are active in the field of dealing with difficult pasts (wars and dictatorship in Europe during the 20th century) in Southeastern Europe on the one hand and Western / Central Europe on the other hand. Through annual study trips and other projects, Memory Lab aims to tackle gaps of knowledge, exchange experiences, explore together different societies and their ways to deal with difficult pasts, and provide opportunities to network and develop common activities. The general purpose of this platform is to strengthen self-critical and constructive approaches of dealing with the past as part of civic education and strengthening of democracy in Europe, and to contribute to make the Western Balkans an integral part of a common European civil society and memory space.

In 2018 / 2019, Memory Lab will especially focus on Albania, and this for several reasons:

- 1) Albania belongs to the Western Balkans, but since it is not part of the post-Yugoslav area, it has so far been less in the focus of actors of international memory work. This also applies to Memory Lab, which has so far concentrated its work on the successor states of Yugoslavia with regard to Southeastern Europe.
- 2) An examination of Albania's culture of remembrance is worthwhile precisely because of its specific communist history within Southeastern Europe, and also because various new state and civil society initiatives that deal with this history have developed in recent years.
- 3) Tirana has become the seat of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans (RYCO) in 2017, which defines as an important goal of its youth exchange programs "fostering reconciliation and constructive approaches to remembrance", thus creating promising points of contact with the goals and work of Memory Lab.

The opening of Memory Lab to Albania and the exploration of its history and memory cultures is taking place in two stages: First with the working meeting “Albania and its place in international memory work”, which took place in Tirana from 29 October to 3 November 2018, and then with the 9th annual Memory Lab study trip foreseen to take place in Albania in autumn 2019.

The main aims of the working meeting “Albania and its place in international memory work” in 2018 were to learn more about current tendencies and challenges in the field of dealing with the past in Albania, to meet different organizations and persons active in this field, to explore possibilities of future cooperation and to get incentives for the study trip foreseen in 2019. For this, a team of Memory Lab-members traveled to Tirana, which included: Elma Hasimbegovic (director of the History Museum Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo), Frank Morawietz (in charge of the Franco-German Youth Office for South Eastern Europe, Berlin), Judith Brand (director of the ForumZFD-program Bosnia and Herzegovina), Dr.

Kaja Sirok (director of the National Museum for Contemporary History of Slovenia, Ljubljana), Dr. Nicolas Moll (freelance historian, Sarajevo / Paris), and Dr. Tamara Banjeglav (freelance historian, Zagreb).

During the working meeting in Tirana, the following activities took place:

- Visits of the House of Leaves, Museum of Secret Surveillance, with Etleva Demollari, director; and of the National Museum of History in Tirana, with Ledio Xhoxhi, Head of Collection Department.
- Meetings with Ardita Repishti, authority on access to information on the Former State Security Service; Dr. Jonila Godole, director of the Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture (IDMC); Vladimir Banushi and Majk Mila, Peace & Justice-Association from Shkodra; Nedi Petri, Culture Heritage without Borders Albania; Erinda Bllaca, Albanian Center for Rehabilitation of Trauma & Torture; Dr. Enriketa Pandelejmoni, University of Tirana, History Department; Djuro Blanus, General Secretary of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO); and Bojana Bulatovic, Program Officer of RYCO.
- Attendance of two public activities: "Presentation of young researchers in the field of Dealing with the Past", organized by OSCE presence in Albania; and the award-ceremony of the youth competition "Ask your grandparents" on the Albanian past 1944-1997, organized by the IDMC in the framework of the "Memory Days 2018".
- Organization of a public discussion on the topic "Who cares about history? Connecting young people from Albania and the post-Yugoslav space through dealing with the past", at the Libreria Tirana Times, in cooperation with RYCO, with the following panelists: Dr. Enriketa Pandelejmoni, University of Tirana, History Department; Erind Mustafarj, youth researcher, and Edlira Agolli, OSCE presence in Albania.
- Internal working sessions in order to discuss the current situation of Memory Lab and future activities, especially the 9th annual Memory Lab study trip / workshop to Albania planned for autumn 2019.

As a result of these days in Tirana, here some first impressions, observations and conclusions:

There are various very committed civil society actors in Albania which are particularly focusing on the crimes committed during the communist time and which try to strengthen the public awareness and knowledge about these. They explain their strong commitment with the particularly violent nature of the communist regime under Enver Hoxha in Albania, with the fact that also after the end of the dictatorship for a long time the crimes have not been talked about, and that also today strong feelings of nostalgia towards the communist past persist in the Albanian society which continues in majority to downplay or ignore the violent nature of the regime.

Several institutions have been created by the Albanian state since the end of the dictatorship in order to address criminal legacies from the communist past: The Institute for the integration of politically persecuted persons (end of the 1990s), the Institute for the study of communist crimes and its consequences in Albania (in 2010), and most recently, in 2017, the Authority on access to information on the Former State Security Service (with similar tasks as the Stasi Records Agency in Germany). This seems to illustrate that there is also a governmental will to deal self-critically with the communist past. At the same time, several civil society actors are very skeptical and distrustful about the state's efforts in this domain, criticizing that the governments and political parties are not seriously and deeply addressing the communist legacies and are implementing only isolated measures. A striking illustration of the absence of political will to break with the communist past seems to be the fact that the current Chairman of the Albanian Parliament has actually been Minister of Interior in 1990, before the end of the communist dictatorship.

In the past years it appears that there have been increasing efforts regarding the conservation of memory sites about the communist past, also from the side of public authorities. The “House of Leaves”, situated in the very center of Tirana, which had been the headquarters of the notorious *Sigurimi*, the Albanian Secret Service during the communist time, and which was then left widely abandoned after 1991, was transformed in 2017 into a state-funded “Museum of Secret Surveillance”. But many other sites linked to the communist regime remain abandoned and/or unmarked, and one effort of concerned civil society actors is directed against the oblivion of such places, as the former prison in Spac, which is also considered as an important site because of a revolt which took place there in 1973, or the former labor camp in Tepelena in Southern Albania, which is sometimes called “the Albanian Belsen”.

The case of Albania offers very interesting levels of comparison with other post-communist societies: What are similarities and differences between the communist regimes in Albania and other (South)East European countries? And what are similarities and differences between Albania and other post-communist societies regarding the ways they are dealing with their communist history today? Concerning the latter it would also be interesting to reflect more about the attitudes and actions of the international community: Which role do international actors, as for example the OSCE or foundations and organizations from Germany, play in supporting (and even pushing?) efforts to deal critically with the communist past in Albania? And to what extent is this comparable with their role in other post-mass violence societies?

What do young people in Albania think about the communist past? Half of the country’s population is under 30 years old, and was therefore born after the end of the dictatorship, and it is sometimes said that young people in Albania do not feel concerned about the communist past. This might not appear as surprising, as in general the communist past does not seem to be a central topic in Albanian society, what is also illustrated by the fact that in history school books only some pages are dedicated to the 45 years of communist regime, and in general without mention of the crimes. On the other hand, civil society actors that are active in the educational field told us that they experience a very positive resonance among young people when they address this topic, for example through the youth competition “Ask your grandparents” which is organized by the IDMC. Also the panelists of our public discussion “Who cares about history?” confirmed that the interest among young people is high when this interest is properly stimulated. The question of “Youth and dealing with the past” offers also stimulating opportunities for regional youth exchange programs supported by RYCO for young people from Albania and other countries from the Western Balkans.

In comparison to the communist past, how are other periods of the recent Albanian history discussed in the public space? Concerning the Second World War, it seems that the narrative from the communist time about the heroic fight of the Partisans continues to be the predominating narrative today. One topic which appears to be very little talked about is the transition period of the 1990s. A good illustration of the hesitations, contradictions and tensions within Albania in dealing with its recent history seems to be the National History Museum of Albania, which was opened in 1981, under the communist regime, and which has conserved some parts from this time while others have been added (especially the “Pavillion of Communist Terror”), and which is announced to undergo a “deep reconstruction” in the next years. What narrative of the Albanian national history and identity will the Museum then present? More generally, in which relation were communism and nationalism between 1945 and 1991? And what kind of national narratives are promoted in Albania since the end of the dictatorship?

The days we spent in Tirana during the working meeting provided some answers to the questions we had brought with us, and opened many new ones. All together – all what we have seen, heard and discussed during these days – confirmed how important and stimulating it is to include Albania in international memory work. We have met very committed persons and organizations in Albania which will participate, in one way or the other, in the planned study trip / workshop in Albania in 2019, and

then hopefully also in further Memory Lab activities. On the basis of this working meeting we will now prepare the program of the 9th annual Memory Lab study trip / workshop which we plan to organize in September 2019 and which will allow many more persons to explore and discuss with Albanian colleagues the history and the memory cultures of Albania within an European context. We foresee to launch the Open Call for participants in February 2019, through our website: <http://www.memorylabeurope.eu/>.

Last not least, the working meeting in Tirana was also the opportunity to think beyond 2019: In 2020, for the 10th anniversary of Memory Lab, we foresee to organize our 10th annual study trip / workshop in the Slovenian-Croatian-Italian border region, a region which has experienced many changes through the 20th century. The choice of this region will be a striking illustration of the trans-European aim of Memory Lab: to connect Southeastern Europe and Western / Central Europe in the field of and through dealing with the past.
