



# THE PYRAMID

## Tirana, Albania

41.3275, 19.8187



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### Executive Summary

Constructed in 1988, during Albania's communist regime (1946-1991), the *Qendra Ndërkombëtare e Kulturës "Pjetër Arbërori"* (International Cultural Centre "Pjetër Arbërori"), best known as the "Pyramid of Tirana" used to commemorate Albania's communist dictator Enver Hoxha. To many, it symbolises a dark period of Albania's history, characterised by political oppression. Following the fall of Communism in 1991, the building has served a number of different functions and became associated with numerous political leaders. In 2011, the government's attempts at replacing the Pyramid were reversed, following public protests. In 2018, plans to renovate it were proposed, and met with resistance. There is a lack of consensus about what the pyramid represents and its ambiguous historical, cultural, political, and architectural value. Renovations of the Pyramid began in February 2021 and were finalised in September 2023. Questions remain about the transparency of the decision and the unresolved disputes over the meaning of the Pyramid.

## Introduction

The Pyramid of Tirana was constructed in 1988 to commemorate Enver Hoxha, Albania's twenty-second Prime Minister and communist dictator who held a leadership role in the country for over 40 years. Located in the heart of Tirana, the building symbolises to many a dark part of Albanian history as a consequence of the socialist and oppressive regime installed during Hoxha's rule. His political oppressions continue to haunt the country, despite Hoxha's achievements in bringing a degree of social progress to Albania. Following the collapse of communism in 1991, the building had been left to decay. In 2011, the government's attempt to replace the Pyramid caused great controversy amongst the public and ultimately led to a reversal of that decision. In 2018, new plans to renovate the Pyramid were designed in cooperation with the Albanian-American Development Foundation and the Municipality of Tirana. Attempts at replacing and restoring the Pyramid have been controversial for multiple reasons. Some associated the Pyramid with Hoxha's terror, viewing the building as an insult to the victims of the regime and a reminder of Albania's dark period of history. Others, instead, viewed the building's presence as a way of honouring the past and commemorating Hoxha's victims. To further complicate the picture, the changing functions of the Pyramid following the fall of communism, along with the building's associations with other leaders besides Hoxha (e.g. his opposition), has made it difficult for Albanians to come to an agreement on what the Pyramid represents. Finally, it is also important to consider the building's architectural value and its role in the landscape of Tirana. Following years of dispute, renovation of the Pyramid commenced in February 2021 and was completed in September 2023. The government has made some architectural compromises to make reconstruction less controversial. However, the lack of transparency about renovation procedures continues to cause discontent amongst the public.

## Background

### *Enver Hoxha*

Prime Minister Enver Hoxha was a supporter of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and a staunch admirer of Stalin. He became Prime Minister and the de facto leader of Albania in 1944. Although he relinquished his role as Prime Minister in 1954, he continued to play a leading role in politics until 1985, under the role of First Secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania, which was the sole legal party in government until 1991. Under his tenure, he has been credited with bringing electricity to all parts of Albania, eradicating epidemics (particularly malaria and syphilis), considerably reducing the illiteracy rate, as well as enabling the country to be more self-sufficient<sup>1</sup>. These goals, however, were often achieved through centralisation and state

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<sup>1</sup>"Enver Hoxha", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, April 8, 2020.

violence, making Hoxha a controversial figure. For example, he was known for stamping out potential opposition through execution, imprisonment and exile. Additionally, he controlled Albania's citizens through the use of the secret police, known as the 'Sigurimi', which helped him further consolidate his rule of terror.

## *The Pyramid*

The Pyramid of Tirana was inaugurated in 1988 in honour of Hoxha, three years after his death. Originally opened as a museum, the Pyramid was meant to commemorate Hoxha's achievements. Hoxha's successor Ramiz Alia believed that Hoxha should be remembered "with great respect" by the future generations and the Pyramid would make a suitable tribute to his legacy.<sup>2</sup> Alia's motivations, however, were partially political: he used Hoxha's reputation and personality cult for his own gain, legitimising and entrenching his own oftentimes violent views in Albanian politics. The Pyramid, to some extent, helped Alia achieve his political goals. The Pyramid was designed by Hoxha's daughter Pranvera Hoxha, an architect, and her husband Klement Kolaneci, along with Pirro Vaso and Vladimir Bregu. At the time of its construction, the Pyramid was considered to be the most expensive structure ever to be built in Albania and has at times been referred to as Hoxha's 'mausoleum', despite never having contained Hoxha's corpse.<sup>3</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *Original purpose and the fall of the communist regime*

The Pyramid first became contested after the success of the Democratic Party of Albania in the first multi-party elections in 1992.<sup>4</sup> This victory for the opposition party reflected ongoing dissatisfaction with the communist regime.<sup>5</sup> Considering that the building was first built as a museum in honour of Hoxha, it was no longer welcome in Albania's new political climate, nor did it find favour with those who suffered under the regime.

In the wake of the 1992 election, following the fall of communism, the role of the Pyramid changed rapidly. It was repeatedly repurposed, serving as a military base for NATO during the Kosovo War (1998-1999), a nightclub, a theatre and a host venue for media outlets. The Pyramid was officially renamed in honour of one of Hoxha's most famous political opponents Pjetër

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<sup>2</sup> Artan Puto, Dhima Mimoza, "The cult personality: King Zog I and Enver Hoxha", *International Journal of Social and Educational Innovation*, vol. 3, issue 5 (2016), 70.

<sup>3</sup> Hoxha was originally buried in the Martyrs Cemetery and later exhumed and reburied in the public cemetery of Sharrë. Kailey Alana Rucker, "Following the Bodies of Enver Hoxha: an Illumination of Albanian Post-socialist Memory Politics", College of Arts and Sciences, *Department of Anthropology*, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Peter R. Prifti and Elez Biberaj, "Albania - Collapse of Communism", *Encyclopædia Britannica*, October 4, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Arbnori following his death in 2006, although the building continued to be referred to as *Piramida* (the Pyramid)<sup>6</sup>.

### *The plans on the future of the Pyramid*

Before the commencement of renovations in February 2021, the state of the Pyramid was one of dilapidation. The Pyramid was classified as a “Category II” monument in 2009, based on its architectural value. This classification means that the exterior of the monument should remain preserved.<sup>7</sup> In 2010-11 there was an attempt to remove the Pyramid by the former President of the Democratic Party Sali Berisha, who wished to replace it with a Parliamentary building and subsequently passed a law which enabled the Pyramid’s destruction.<sup>8</sup> This action sparked criticism from the opposition Socialist Party, an online petition against the decision, which gained over 6,000 signatures, was launched by *Aksioni Qytetar për Shpëtimin e Piramidës* (Civil Action for the Safeguarding of the Pyramid)<sup>9</sup>.

Central to the debate about the preservation of the Pyramid was the connection of the building to Hoxha. The ideological reasons for the Pyramid’s destruction were among the most memorable reasons used by The Democratic Party in government, stating: “[w]e [*The Democratic Party*] cannot preserve a monument which houses the sleeping ghost of a dictator.”<sup>10</sup> The state’s actions reminded the public of how monuments and buildings used to be taken down for not adhering to the party’s ideology<sup>11</sup>, so the Democratic Party was unsuccessful in gathering public support for its plans.

The run-down state of the Pyramid was reflective of the way in which the recent past continues to plague many of those who have suffered injustice under Hoxha’s regime. Dr Lori Amy, Co-founder of the non-profit OTTONomy<sup>12</sup> notes that there has been virtually “no public discussion” about the violence of Hoxha’s regime, and the situation in Albania’s post-communist transition is becoming similar to that of Spain post-Franco.<sup>13</sup> This is particularly evident in the fact that many members from the Communist party in Albania, as in post-Franco Spain, continued to play a role in the

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<sup>6</sup> Kailey Alana Rocker, “Following the Bodies of Enver Hoxha”, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Category II monuments in Albania includes buildings or objects with either cultural or architectural significance for the nation. Their status means that the interiors of these buildings can be modified, but the exterior must remain unchanged.

Fatmira Nikoli, “Aktivistët nga Shqipëria shprehin keqardhje për rrënimin e piramidës së Hoxhës” [Albanian Activists lament demolition of Hoxha’s Pyramid], *Balkan Insight*, May 30, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Agim Vinca, “Piramida dhe sindroma e prishjes”, July 17, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> “Piramida, dorezohet peticioni”, Top Channel, July 26, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Agim Vinca, “Piramida dhe sindroma e prishjes”, July 17, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The OTTONomy initiative works in the cultural heritage field in Albania, with the goal to restore historical monuments for public use.

<sup>13</sup> Amy Lori. “Re-Membering in Transition: The Trans-national Stakes of Violence and Denial in Post-Communist Albania”. *History of Communism in Europe*, vol. 1 issue 1 (2010), 2018

governing of the country,<sup>14</sup> particularly because the Party had never truly been disbanded and continued in the form of the Socialist Party. This subsequently led to a collective 'silence' regarding memories of the regime.<sup>15</sup> As such, the decision by many Albanians to fight for the pyramid's preservation can be seen as a desire to understand more about Albania's past. This desire became evident in the establishment of the Institute of the Study of the Crimes of Communism, although it should be noted that the state continues to be lax in its investigation of the communist era.<sup>16</sup> Original plans to remove the Pyramid caused great controversy, underscoring for many an imposition of 'collective silence', which many Albanians opposed. As argued by philosopher George Santayana, "those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it". A similar sentiment can be seen in Professor of Political Theory Lea Ypi's article in *The Guardian* regarding the destruction of the Hoxha statue in Tirana after the fall of the communist regime.<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Albanians desire to know more about the communist regime. However, many facts remain unknown.<sup>18</sup> This subsequently illustrates the significance of the preservation of the Pyramid for many. The secrecy of the communist state has left many gaps in people's understanding of the regime, but the continuing existence of the Pyramid allows the history and Hoxha's victims to not be forgotten. This is arguably the greatest value the Pyramid has to offer, which is why it is important to preserve on a national level.

Archeologists Francesco Iacono and Klejd L. Këlliç have argued that some objections to the removal of the Pyramid were centred around its architecture and its significance in the landscape of Tirana on a local level.<sup>19</sup> They argue that the Pyramid was "designed to be one of the most visible landmarks of the city" and that "the main issue is the condition of the building". Their investigation demonstrated some interesting findings: many felt an attachment to the building, particularly the younger generation, which viewed the Pyramid as part of the Tirana landscape. The older generation, however, associated the Pyramid with Hoxha. Architectural researcher Elisa Miho has also discussed the importance of the Pyramid in relation to the capital, stating that it constitutes an "essential part of the city of Tirana".<sup>20</sup> According to a survey conducted by heritage

<sup>14</sup>Gjergji Erebara, "Albania's MPs Propose ban on studying WWII Communist Crimes", *Balkan Insight*, July 16, 2019.

Alice Taylor, "Diaspora Group Seek No Confidence Motion for Albanian Prime Minister Following Communists on Right Side of History Comment in Parliament", *Exit News* September 20, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> During his rule, Hoxha feared foreign invasion and enforced a 'siege' mentality upon the nation as well as creating a number of bunkers in preparation for such an attack. Hoxha's government was also relentless in tackling opposition and the creation of the Sigurimi meant one could not trust those around them as people were often bugged to relay information to the state which could potentially result in incarceration or murder.

<sup>16</sup> Gjergji Erebara, "Albania's MPs Propose ban on studying WWII Communist Crimes", *Balkan Insight*, July 16, 2019.

Fatjona Mejдини and Marija Ristic, "Në kërkim të së vërtetës në dosjet sekrete të Shqipërisë komuniste", *Balkan Insight*, March 12, 2018.

Gjergji Erebara, "Search for Victims of Albanian Communism Impeded by Prosecutors", *Balkan Transitional Justice*, October 31, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Lea Ypi, "By Tearing Down our Statues, Albanians Stopped Learning from the Past", *The Guardian*, June 14 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Some other examples of this include: "FONDACIONI KUJTO" founded by Agron Shehaj and archive on the victims of the regime.

<sup>19</sup> Francesco Iacono and Klejd L. Këlliç, "Exploring the public perception of Communist Heritage in Post- communist Albania", *EX NOVO Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2016), 58.

<sup>20</sup> Elisa Miho, Kristiana Kumi, Julia Demiraj, "The Decommunization of the Pyramid in Tirana, the Mausoleum of Enver Hoxha", 23rd International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies, *Visualising Controversial Heritage*, 2018 (PDF 16)

researcher Karin Myhrberg, some of those surveyed viewed the Pyramid as simply a “fantastic piece of architecture”.<sup>21</sup> Such research presents a compelling case for the Pyramid’s preservation.

Others in favour of the Pyramid’s preservation have mentioned their feelings of nostalgia associated with the building. These people did not view the communist era as entirely negative. Architectural researchers Ianoco and Këlliçi suggest that this ‘nostalgia’ may stem from the ‘voluntary’ work undertaken by many of Tirana’s citizens to help build the Pyramid.<sup>22</sup> However, such views may also be a result of the positive aspects of Albania’s experience of communism, with some citizens becoming disillusioned with the reality of a more capitalist, and supposedly democratic government. It must be remembered that despite periods of terror and oppressive practices, communism in Albania also brought some positive changes. Heritage researcher Karin Myhrberg, however, has argued that this suppression of memory is at the very least a factor in generating a sense of nostalgia and reminiscence in Albania.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, the decision to remove the Pyramid was partially contested on this basis.

## Decision-Making Processes

The fate of the Pyramid has been determined by politics and public pressure. After renaming the building in 2006, the first proposed plan was to transform the inside of the Pyramid into the National Theater of Albania. From the start of the project, it was clear that the structure however was unsuitable therefore the project was stalled and the Pyramid was left abandoned. One and a half years later, in 2010, the government led by the Democratic Party decided that the new Parliament would be built in the Pyramid, however this project was never initiated. The Socialist Party fought for its preservation in 2010 against the Democrats.<sup>24</sup> They succeeded in 2013 after winning the parliamentary election and rejecting Sali Berisha’s plans with support from the Prime Minister Edi Rama and the Mayor of Tirana Erion Veliaj for its restoration. In 2016 the authority under which the Pyramid was managed was changed from the Ministry of Culture to the Municipality of Tirana, allowing for a less bureaucratic decision making process. This change was also considered however as a manoeuvre to make the process less transparent.

In the years of discussions marked by a lack of a final decision on the future plans for the Pyramid, MVRDV - a Dutch and international architecture firm - joined a discussion with the Municipality of Tirana on the plans for the Pyramid in 2017. The Municipality, in collaboration with the

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<sup>21</sup>Karin Myhrberg, “Heritage from the Communist Period in Albania – An Unwanted Heritage Today?”, University of Gothenburg, *Department of Conservation* (2012), pp. 61 (PDF 17)

<sup>22</sup>Iacono and Këlliçi, “Exploring the public perception of Communist Heritage in Post- communist Albania”, *EX NOVO Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2016), 58.

<sup>23</sup>Myhrberg, “Heritage from the Communist Period in Albania – An Unwanted Heritage Today?”, University of Gothenburg, *Department of Conservation* (2012), pp. 61 (PDF 17)

<sup>24</sup>Joel Joel, “Planet “e vjetra” për Teatrin e ri dhe si u përdor Piramida në këto 20 vite”, *Faktoje.al*, May 19, 2020.

Albanian-American Development Foundation commissioned the architectural firm MVRDV to 'revitalise' the Pyramid into a "multi-functional centre for technology, culture and art."<sup>25</sup> It is unclear, however, how MVRDV managed to get the job, as many have complained about the absolute lack of transparency in the process and the absence of a clear and fair tendering process.<sup>26</sup> For a long time also the budget remained undisclosed, until 2020 when the Municipality of Tirana opened a tender for 14 Million Euros that was then won by MVRDV, despite having already "won" the project in 2018<sup>27</sup>.

MVRDV claims that the project aims to "give the building back to the public", fostering "public [participation] in its diverse educational programmes".<sup>28</sup> The framework of the Pyramid project has been advertised by the Albanian-American Development Foundation as 'Enhancing Digital Literacy in Albania'. Additionally, the technical task of restoring the pyramid and giving it a modern meaning can be viewed, by society at large, as a symbol of Albania's technological and social progress. The main user of the Pyramid is going to be TUMO, an educational centre in Tirana that will offer free learning opportunities in programming, robotics, filmmaking and more<sup>29</sup>. Despite the initial dissatisfaction of the population with regards to the lack of transparency, within two years from the start of the works, the exterior of the Pyramid was open to the public in May 2023. A large opening ceremony was held, with Edi Rama and Erjon Veliaj addressing the hundreds of people participating<sup>30</sup>.

The chief architect on the Pyramid project stated that the restored Pyramid would be "open to everyone".<sup>31</sup> This openness stands in stark contrast with Albania's former secretive regime, making the building as more appealing to the masses as a result of its new aesthetic design, which tries to incorporate many of the original structure's most memorable features. This is particularly important given the controversial history of the monument. Restoration of the Pyramid, however, can also be seen as an insult to the thousands of Hoxha's victims and their relatives. To address this issue, the project keeps the exterior structure of the building in place, but seeks to incorporate more glass to make the Pyramid more transparent, symbolising an attempt at making the historical legacy more accessible to the public and thus paving a new future for Albania.

However, while the architectural design attempts to increase physical transparency, there are still concerns about the project's political transparency. Some have expressed concerns about

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<sup>25</sup> MVRDV, "The Pyramid of Tirana", Projects *MVRDV* (2018)

<sup>26</sup> "KKT i jep Leje Bashkisë Tiranë për rikonstruksionin e Piramidës", Bashkia Tiranë, Politikë & Politika, *Exit News*, June 16 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> MVRDV, "The Pyramid of Tirana", Projects *MVRDV* (2018)

<sup>29</sup> TUMO Tirana, "About", TUMO (2023)

<sup>30</sup> "Hapet Piramida, Veliaj: Do të shërbejë si qendër e madhe digjitale në Ballkan! Rama: Godina do mbajë miliona njerëz mbi shpinë e do hyjë në Guinness", *Shqiptarja.com*, May 11, 2023.

<sup>31</sup> "Tirana's 'pyramid' puts checkered past behind it for new tech future", Tirana AFB, *France 24*, May 1 2019

attempts to hide the cost of renovations and a lack of opportunities for the public to get involved with the project.<sup>32</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

With renovations of the pyramid commencing in February 2021, the fight for the preservation of the Pyramid can be seen as a success: the renovated Pyramid does not seek to commemorate Hoxha, thus respecting the victims of the regime. It however remains unclear whether there is sufficient public discourse of Hoxha's complicated legacy. This lack of discussion may potentially have negative consequences, continuing public silence about a dark part of Albania's history, and the Albanian government must work harder to address this issue. Furthermore, this study shows that, not only the dark legacy of the monument, but also the lack of transparency in relation to the cost of the reconstruction, budgeting, accountability to the public, and opportunities for public participation in the project continue to fuel controversy.

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<sup>32</sup> "KKT i jep leje Bashkisë Tiranë për rikonstrukcionin e Piramidës", Bashkia Tiranë, Politikë & Politika, *Exit News*, June 16 2020.



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## Figures

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## About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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