

# State-organised Religion and Muslims' Commitment to Democracy in Albania

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## *Abstract*

This article questions why, and indeed whether and how, Muslims have agitated for democracy during different stages of post-Communist transition. Theoretically, we merge the theoretical insights of moderation paradigm and more specific institutional, ideological and historical devices that characterize the post-communist religious field in investigating Muslims' commitment to democracy in post-Communist Albania. The empirical analysis traces how the centralised Muslim organization, the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC) has navigated the spaces between the emerging institutional solutions, religious interpretations and intellectual arguments in order to define and justify its positions on democracy during different stages of post-communist democratization. The analysis suggests that arguments inherited from the past have provided a familiar 'Albanian-specific' template and has facilitated the reclaiming of Islam in a local, pro-democratic and pro-European manner.

## Introduction

Religious groups, committed to a sacred *telos* beyond the realm of politics, have long been perceived as suspicious, or at best, ambivalent, actors of democratization. During various waves of democratization, the burden of proof has fallen upon the respective denominations involved, namely Protestants, Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians, and more recently, Muslims. Latest attempts of democratization across Muslim countries, however, have attracted renewed attention to the role of Islam, and the broad conditions that induce Muslim communities to choose, adjust to, and ultimately commit to, the democratic rules of the game. A burgeoning body of research on the moderation of Islamic groups identifies alternative mechanisms, and respective forms of pro-democratic behaviour: groups' rational calculations of existing opportunities and constraints, which might lead to their strategic support for democratic rules; leaders' recasting of religious doctrines, which provides legitimacy for democratic choices (Schwedler 2011). Existing empirical research, however, draws mostly on Muslim groups' short-term behavioural shifts, which correspond to swift institutional changes, usually in the context of Middle East, where radicals tend to be concentrated (Wickham 2004; Bellin 2008; Tezcur 2010). Such time-limited, and region-specific, accounts of Muslims moderation tend to miss broader patterns, explanations and cases of Muslims' long-term and sustainable support for democracy. The participation of Muslims in democratic openings across the Balkans, moreover, is totally lacking from the analysis. The experience of war, and dominance of nationalist and post-conflict paradigms in investigating the resurgence of Islam, have hindered a proper analysis of their relationship to the ongoing democratization processes in the region (Elbasani and Roy, forthcoming). No studies have thus far attempted to investigate the way in which revived Muslim communities have navigated the spaces between emerging opportunities and religious interpretations to position themselves vis-à-vis crucial issues and challenges of democratization.

This article merges the theoretical insights of moderation paradigm and more specific institutional, ideological and historical devices that characterize the post-communist religious field, in investigating Muslims' engagement with democracy in Albania. A Muslim-majority country, also comprising Catholic and Christian Orthodox populations,<sup>1</sup> Albania has

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<sup>1</sup> According to the most recent 2011 census, the breakdown of religious affiliations of the total population is: 57.12% Muslims, 10.11% Catholics, 6.8% Orthodox, 2.11% Bektashis, 0.11% Evangelists. Only 2.5% of the

embarked upon a sustainable process of democratization after the collapse of Communist regime in the early 1990s. Being one of the few Muslim-majority polities that has irrevocably embraced the goal of democracy, and proceeded to further democratic gains for more than two decades since, Albania provides a crucial case in any quest to investigate what explains Muslims' choices for a democratic system; and indeed whether and how they have shifted positions and arguments in response to the changing configurations of institutional opportunities and ideological trends arising during different stages of democratization.

We employ the concept of state-organized 'religious field' in order to capture the crucially important role of the post-Communist state, and respective political and intellectual elites, to construct, select and indeed 'manage' the resurging Islamic life (Epkenhans 2011). Following the model of other post-communist cases, the Albanian state has institutionalised an array of religious freedoms, but it has also maintained a domineering and interventionist role in order to co-opt religious communities into its own political project and exigencies. Centralised religious hierarchies have closely collaborated with the state in consolidating an official version of Islam, which is at home with state's vision and needs (Akiner 2003). Despite the interventionist, and at times hostile, role of the post-Communist state in framing the emerging market of religion, the range of institutional solutions and ideas on offer have swapped across different conjectures of democratization, moulding differential opportunities, interpretations and valid arguments at use by the religious hierarchy.

This article hones into the question of why, and indeed whether and how, Muslims have agitated for democracy despite the changing institutional structure of opportunities and ideological offers that constitute the organized religious field at different stages of post-Communist transformation. We identify three different phases: liberalization of the communist dictatorship (1990-1992), democratic transition (1992-1997) and consolidation of democratic gains (1998-2013) – which mark a differential configuration of constituting institutions and valid ideologies of the religious field. Our main unit of analysis is the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), the nation-wide central organization recognized by the

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citizens declare themselves atheists. Note that recent data show slight differences compared to usual estimates of religious shares used in different publications: 70% Muslims, 20% Eastern Orthodox, and 10% Roman Catholics.

state as the official authority representing the entire community of Muslim believers. The analysis of AMC's political choices at different stages follows a within case comparison, which enables us to keep many variables intact, and instead focus on the explanatory power of changing institutional incentives, ideological premises and historical sources in shaping Muslims' behaviour. The data sources include a wide range of primary records – legal documents, the AMC's statutes, official declarations, religious leaders' memoirs, public intellectuals' statements, and interviews.

The argument is structured in two parts. The first part summarises alternative explanations on the moderation of Islamic groups, and outlines the crucial role of the state in framing the liberalized religious sphere after the collapse of Communism. The following empirical part traces and contrasts how the AMC has navigated the state-organized religious spaces – institutional solutions, religious interpretations and intellectual arguments – to define and justify its positions on democracy during different phases of post-communist democratization.

### **Moderation of Islam: Institutional Incentives, Religious Interpretations and Historical Sources**

Mainstream research on the moderation of religious actors identifies external institutions – formal and informal arrangements that regulate state-church relations – as the most crucial factor in shaping their respective commitment to 'play by the rules' (Kalywas 1996; Langohr 2001; Nasr 2005). The set of institutions that regulates the religious sphere, and in particular the format of the separation and cooperation between state and religion, provide the broad structure of opportunities and constraints on the basis of which specific religious groups calculate their available choices. *Democratic openings*, and related opportunities of inclusion, which permit previously excluded groups to participate in a pluralist 'market' of ideas, entice religious groups to recalculate and reshuffle respective choices (Schwedler 2011, pp. 352-8). Democratic rules of participation enable religious organisations to compete with other socio-political forces for market 'shares'; but the process also confronts the organizations involved with at least two constraining mechanisms: a) state scrutiny for compliance with its rules and b) the appeal of the religious program to prospective followers (Bellin 2008, pp. 319-26). The

organizations' necessary trade-offs between opportunities of inclusion and restraints of competition, arguably entice them into diluting red-line contested theological issues, which antagonise state authorities and/or alienate possible followers. Rules of competition, thus, shift religious programmes towards 'centrist' platforms, which are most at home with states' legal restrictions and peoples' broad preferences. Muslims' calculation of available choices, and respective gains, in a given institutional structure of opportunities and constraints also hinges on the strength of the *organizational resources* they can mobilise to benefit from the existing rules and to parry constraints (Elbasani and Saatcioglu 2014, p. 464; Alexander 2000, p. 468). Critics of the rational school of religious behaviour, however, contest that all religious behaviour is instrumentally tuned to the strategic calculations of the best available choices in a given institutional structure. Evidence from evolution of Islamic movements, moreover, shows that not all inclusive arrangements and democratic openings, lead to the moderation of Muslims' political programs, and even less so, to Muslims' consistent commitment to democracy over time (Schwedler 2011, pp. 358-61).

A recent surge of moderation studies, which follows on the ideational turn in comparative politics, instead insists that religious organizations' primary commitments, perhaps more than those of any other groups, are to their *core teachings* (Tezcur 2010, p. 73; Wickham 2004, pp. 211-5). Support for democracy, therefore, hinges on the role of democratic ideals in their respective doctrinal principles and *authoritative interpretations* thereof. Beliefs that a religious community holds on legitimate political authority, and who has the right to exercise it, define the boundaries of justifiable political action (Philpott 2007). Those beliefs might not directly influence political action by determining its ends, but they certainly predispose the community of the faithful to prefer certain options, insist on some, and exclude others (Collins 2007, pp. 70-3). What constitutes the body of religious doctrine, however, is influenced by ancient formative teachings, but also the way in which religious authorities recast those teachings according to the necessities of time and place. Religious authorities' adjustment and moderation of core ideals to fit democratic aspirations depends upon various circumstances of learning and related cognitive changes, a process which usually takes place in the context of severe crises, frustrations and dramatic changes of the socio-political environment (Wickham 2004, pp. 214-5). Moderate interpretations that reconcile Islamic teachings with polities' new democratic aspirations, whether a result of changing institutional structures or authorities' own exposure to new ideals and life-changing experiences, entail an

inherent process of habituation and rethinking of collective norms, which goes further than simple strategic shifts of behaviour.

Authorities' recasting and reinterpretation of Islamic teachings, still, require legitimising *intellectual sources* in order for those interpretations to take hold and convince the rank and file of the believers (Tezcur 2010, p. 73). Sources and arguments most commonly used to legitimize new streams of interpretations are often borrowed from a country's familiar *historical experiences*, namely institutional or ideological solutions tried successfully in the past (Philpott 2007, p. 508). As Belin puts it, past legacies 'provide varying institutional and ideological sources that Muslims may engage, and define the parameters of debate, ambition and strategies for political action' (2008, p. 335). Indeed, Islamic movements able to come up with interpretations that find resonance 'in the particular cultural and historical context' have proved the most successful in attracting the faithful and sustaining themselves in the long run (Collins 2007, p. 74). While the past may provide diverse sources and samples of arguments to draw on, solutions achieved during the founding moments of nation-states, establish particularly enduring patterns, which resist over time and are commonly invoked in the context of religious interpretations (Kuru 2007, p. 585).

#### *The State- Organized Religious Field after Communism*

The way in which institutions, interpretations and historical legacies develop and interact in explaining Muslims' commitment to democratization in the post-communist context, reflects the crucial role of the state in the establishment of the organized 'religious fields' (Epkenhans 2011, pp 83-5). All modern nation-states attempt to maintain boundaries, and impose social uniformity, by charting clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion, but this was crucially important in light of the legacies of extremely centralized former Communist regimes. Communists, 'armed with a utopian vision of radical remaking of society and the individual... set about creating an activist state that intervened in society at all levels' (Khalid 2003, p. 576). The centralized Communist state apparatus was particularly keen on controlling the religious sphere, which Communist ideology considered the 'opium' of the people and an effective obstacle to the social engineering project. Consequently, Communist regimes, assembled, to a lesser or greater extent, a ruthless bureaucratic machinery in charge of appropriating all aspects of religious life, including public religions, but also intimate

spheres of personal piety (Hann 2006; Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997, p. 26). This went hand in hand with a meticulously organized campaign of indoctrination where all social mechanisms of control – extensive party networks, pervasive mass organizations, a stern education system, well-screened intellectual structures and ruthless security services – worked side by side to inculcate people with the rational materialist outlook (Ibid).

Succeeding post-Communist regimes capitalized on the inherited state structures, in order to construct, select and use religious symbols as an anchor of political legitimacy. Although all former communist states have liberalized the religious sphere and allocated new religious freedoms in line with their polities' new democratic aspirations, they have also taken the lead in framing this open and competitive market of religiosity. Institutionally, the post-Communist states continued to closely 'manage' nations' religious life by preserving a multi-tiered system of registrations, and institutional controls, subject to unilaterally revocable conditions (Stan and Turcescu 2011). As Hann and Pelkmans suggest, referring to Central Asia, 'state policies towards religion have [only] shifted from disregard and hostility towards intensive co-option' (2009, p. 1519). Post-Communist states have certainly treated and co-opted their composing denominations differently, depending on their respective size, historical importance and political weight, but the usage of state 'muscle' to discipline the emerging market of religiosity, and revived Islamic groups in particular, has remained the same. The experience of the ancient regimes, ostensibly committed to the atheist modernization project, has thus bequeathed vestiges of interventionist, and occasionally hostile state policies to the new post-Communist institutional format of re-arranging the relations between the state and Islam.

Communists' ideological convictions on the necessity of oppressing public religion, have also spilled into the re-imagined role of religion in the new post-Communist polities. Communist-school intelligentsias – historians, linguists, ethnographers, writers, artists and scholars of Marxist ideology – generously funded by the former Communist state, and supported by an overstaffed academy, have worked as transmission mechanisms of the atheist-informed readings of Islam (Khalid 2003, p.579). During the *ancient* regime, state intelligentsias were in charge of articulating and safeguarding their nations' historical 'heritage,' complete with a pantheon of politically subservient great thinkers, artists, and heroes. They were additionally trained to legitimize and disseminate the regimes' animosity towards religion and

independent clergy. The recirculation of statist intellectuals in key positions of post-Communist political hierarchies and the institutional reproduction of knowledge has enabled what Gellner typically dubbed a ‘diffusion of a school-mediated, academy supervised [religious] idiom’ (1983, p. 140). The carriage of old communist ideals, or at least a core of them, has enforced stagnant parameters on how nation, history and religion merge and part aways in the official memory of each political unit. Mainstream readings of historical heritage, when it came to Islam, were frequently re-interpreted in line with former socialist principles of denigrating faith and keeping it under close state surveillance (Khalid 2003).

Government-sponsored ‘official’ Islam – an organizational concept, which refers to the creation of centralized religious hierarchies operating under state supervision – has become a powerful state tool in imposing ‘correct’ interpretations of Islam. Headed by a Chief Mufti, governed by modern organizational statutes, and monitored by the state, central organizations are recognized by the state as the sole authority in all administrative and spiritual affairs pertinent to their community of believers. The constitutional system awards them special privileges – representation in state institutions, public funds, state recognition and protection. The central ‘establishment’, in return, are expected to enforce political oversight and maintain the historical ‘tradition’ against any undesirable expressions and influences, which have permeated the open market of religiosity after the fall of Communism (Ghodsee 2010, p. 19). Even where power- or ideologically-driven rifts have split central structures, state authorities have intervened to remedy internal conflicts and affirm their preferred interlocutors. The new post-Communist states have also randomly intruded in the internal processes of the selection of community leaders. By incorporating selected interlocutors into the institutional hold of the state, post-Communist regimes have instituted an intricate relationship between politics and centralized Muslim organizations – the sovereign retains the prerogative of intervention, Ulamas are tempered, central hierarchies supervised, and scholarship corrected in line with states’ political vision. Subsequently, central religious hierarchies are commonly ‘relegated’ to ‘a subordinate role remarkable chiefly for [their] unquestioning support of government policies’ (Akiner 2003, p. 103).

## **The Organized Religious Field and Muslims' Engagement with Democracy in Albania**

The collapse of Communism, and the gradual institutionalization of democratic freedoms afterwards, has created a new momentum for the re-envisioning of the restrictive atheist religious space – including new institutional structures, religious interpretations and valid intellectual sources – in post-communist Albania. Large-scale changes have provided a new play field for Muslims to calculate their choices and to articulate their positions on crucial issues of post-communist democratization. The emerging religious field, with a new set of institutional solutions and ideas on offer, however, has alternated during different phases of democratization, moulding a changing configuration of institutional opportunities and ideological trends that foster Muslims' commitment to democracy. In line with the Communist legacy, the state has maintained a domineering role, but the envisaged institutional framework and the role assigned to religion have changed over the course of democratization. Which of these stagnant and changing features of the organized religious sphere explain Muslims' choices for democracy? What is the role of the state-organized 'religious field' in explaining Muslims' political behaviour? How has the central Muslim organization navigated between emerging institutional opportunities, valid religious interpretations and arguments from the past to position itself on different challenges of democratization? And how have its positions changed in response to shifting dimensions of the organized religious spaces?

### *Mobilization for Religious Rights Oppressed by the Dictatorship*

During the initial period of the liberalization of the ancient regime (1990-1992), newborn Muslims capitalised on the emerging institutional openings, and positioned themselves besides anti-communist forces that challenged the hated dictatorship. Indeed, Muslim believers and anti-Communist opposition shared the same interest in the liberalization of the regime's restrictive policies, particularly the expansion of negated human rights. Decades of atheist policies (1944-1991) had deprived the Muslim community, as well as other religious communities, of the most essential rights to organize and practise their faith. Communists' initial attacks on religious organizations – cutbacks on their financial sources, control of religious education, censorship of publications and the appointment of regime cronies in key positions of the religious hierarchies – had gradually given way to regime's massive purging

of the clergy and forceful shut down of all places of worship (Basha 2000, pp. 163-7). The 1967 cultural revolution, modelled on China's example, became stage of one of the fiercest atheist campaigns in the Communist world: all religious institutions were banned by law, religious infrastructure was demolished or converted to other uses including as public toilets, surviving *Ulama* were imprisoned or executed as 'enemies of the people and the regime', and the performance of religious rituals, even possession of religious literature, in private, became criminal offences dealt with under the penal code (Prifti 1978, p. 153). Some accounts of the Communist period indicated that the surviving clergy continued to offer minimal services and families continued to celebrate major religious holidays, and pass on religious mores to their children, in secret (Basha 2000, p. 171). Such isolated enclaves nourished anti-regime sentiments and maintained alive a sense of social resistance to the mummifying language of the Communist regime, particularly in urban Sunni strongholds, which suffered additional economic and political marginalization under the Communist regime (Clayer 2003, 294). After decades of official prohibition and ruthless oppression of religion as a social and moral institution, these insulated enclaves proved too weak, decentralized and fearful to directly challenge the Communist dictatorship.

The liberalization of atheist policies, and the lifting of the ban on religious practices in 1990, provided the necessary prerequisites for the organization of the faithful, and bolstered their capacity to mobilize the by-then boiling anti-regime dissent. Religious ceremonies and public celebrations, that took place immediately after the lifting of the religious ban in November 1990, turned into public events expressing wide-spread anti-regime sentiments throughout the population. The explosion of 'religious fervour' after decades of a ruthless atheist campaign to inculcate people with the 'scientific world outlook', most probably had little to do with faith itself, and was more of an act of disobedience towards the hated dictatorship (Trix 1995, 539). Yet, the mobilization of believers around religious practices and celebrations forbidden by the regime, provided the first collective sparks of rebellion, and lowered the real and perceived costs of political action against the regime. It was not by chance that the first massive anti-communist protests that took throughout the major cities in December 1990, first spread amongst the most marginalized urban Sunni strongholds such as Shkoder, Durrës and Kavajë, which had resisted giving up religious practices altogether.

Faith-based mobilization against the regime took another turn after the constitutional changes of 1991, which guaranteed that ‘the state respects religious freedoms and creates the conditions for their exercise’ (Peoples Assembly 1991, article 7). The re-organization of Muslim believers into a centralised organization, operating near centres of political power in Tirana, at around the same time, strengthened Muslims’ capacities to engage in collective action and agitation against the regime (Jazexhi 2011). Emerging AMC leaders, all of them former prisoners and dissidents of the outgoing regime, used every chance to defame Communists as *Kafir*, a Quranic epithet for enemies of Islam. Sermons delivered during overcrowded Friday prayers and annual rituals became powerful public pronouncements against the regime, which was openly accused by religious authorities of ‘shutting the door of the soul, conscience and memory of God’ (Dizdari and Luli 2003, p. 3). For Sunni leaders, the collapse of Communism was God’s wish ‘to help the damaged and shamefully defeat the damagers’ (Ibid, p. 5). Muslims’ prayers and ceremonies also paid routine tribute to martyrs of democracy, ‘those hundreds of thousands who were killed, slain and tortured in the jails and extermination camps of the regime’ (Ibid., p. 6).

While AMC structures agitated against the regime, AMC leaders openly advocated democracy, as ‘God’s wish’ that ‘religion in the country can only flourish along with the development and progress of a democratic Albania’ (Ibid). Muslims’ vocal support for democracy, indeed a matter of survival, was so strong that it overran any serious engagement with written prescriptions and teachings of religious doctrine. Legitimising arguments and sources, if any, were drawn from a general reading of the Quranic values, and the essential place of human rights in the broad Islamic tradition. The Sermon during during *Laylat al-Qadr* prayer by one of the AMC leaders and Mufti of Shkodra, Faik Hoxha, who had suffered 23 years in Communist prisons was typical of clergy’s interpretation of human rights:

According to the *Quran*, people have the irreversible right to life, liberty and work, as well as to enjoy material and spiritual rights. Denial of these rights is an attack on human integrity, on individuals in particular and the community in general (Sytari 2011, pp. 56-7).

Yet, it was the Muslims’ organizational alliance with the new-born anti-Communist movement, the Democratic Party (DP), which endowed them with the institutional power to directly confront the regime. The DP’s founding programme, published in November 1990, had already pledged commitment to ‘freedom of meeting, free press, belief and its exercise,’

rendering the party a close political ally to Muslims in their struggle for the liberalization of religious freedoms (Krasniqi 2014, 8). In a public show of support for the anti-Communist alternative, AMC leaders joined anti-Communist rallies, spoke side by side with opposition leaders, expressed their gratitude for DP's political struggle and called on their believers to vote for the DP program during the first free elections in 1992 (Ibid.) The DP, on the other hand, relied on Muslim leaders and networks to organize its activities: lay Muslims filled the party's local structures, volunteered for the party, and participated in great numbers in rallies against the regime (Jazegji 2011: 12). Sunni strongholds in Northern and Central Albanian finally voted overwhelmingly for the DP alternative and were crucial to the enthusiastic vote for regime change during the first free elections to decide about the future of the regime in 1992.

### *Benefiting from Institutional Openings during the Democratic Transition*

The allocation of religious rights, and the organic links between the AMC and incoming DP majority, however, informed a more complex relationship between resurging Islamic structures and the challenges brought about by democratization during the next stage of regime change (1992-1998). The coming into power of DP, AMC's close political allies, opened up a new array of institutional opportunities for the revival of Islam. The constitutional amendments of 1993 prescribed that 'the right of thinking, conscience and faith are inviolable. Everyone is free to change religion and beliefs and express them individually or collectively in public or public life via education, practice or performance of rituals' (Albanian Parliament 1993, article 18). Besides legalization of religious freedoms, the DP government used a set of institutional incentives to boost its preferential links with the Muslim majority and ensure the latter's co-opting into the party's governing project. The close links between the two became official state policy when the incoming government appointed an AMC representative to chair the new State Secretariat on Religion, the only institution in charge of checking and documenting the activity of faith-based organizations. The leadership of the Secretariat, which, moreover, lacked proper regulations and clear competences, permitted the institution to mix 'state functions' with 'religious interests', but also 'exceed [its] competences.'<sup>2</sup> Even more important in terms of close institutional links

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with an employee of the Committee of Cults, Tirana, November 2010.

between the government and Muslim community was the creation of *Kultura Islame* (KI), a semi-official organization found by high-level DP exponents, and chaired by a state Official – the head of the State Security Services, Bashkim Gazidede. KI helped the party to maintain informal institutional links with the AMC structures.<sup>3</sup> It also served the government in establishing connections with cash-rich Arab associations, willing to invest in the country.<sup>4</sup> Finally, soon after the elections, DP's leader and the new president of the country, Sali Berisha, decreed the country's full membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), a decision that was fiercely contested by other political groups. OIC membership ensured that the government garnered even closer formal contacts with Saudi investors, who were quick to transfer multi-million dollar credits into the economy together with generous assistance for the regeneration of Islam (Lakshman-Lepain 2002).

All the while, the country lacked proper mechanisms and regulations on the registration, screening, and surveillance of the surging religious associations and their activities. The lack of any legal restrictions, opened the country to all kinds of activists, missionaries and investors from different parts of the Islamic world. To paraphrase an observation of that period, 'when the communist law was swept aside, but no new legal framework was put in place, Albania was invaded once again: by business prospectors, "advisors" of all kinds, observers and religious groups who came to recruit for their faiths' (Youngs 1997, p. 5). Competition for the hearts and minds of post-atheist Albanians was particularly fierce in the context of the country's location in Europe and its mixed religious composition, which made the Muslim population a crucial target for global Islamic movements to diffuse the message of Islam in Europe. Accordingly, some Arab foundations had projected a three-phase process of Islamization: initial financial assistance would lead to the second stage of promoting 'pure' Islamic norms, which would then lead to the final installation of an Islamic state (Othman 1993). In line with this project, most incoming Arab assistance promoted teaching of 'pure' Salafi ideas, strict forms of Islamic behaviour, and aggressive proselytizing strategies (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, pp. 44-45). The creation of *Ulama* educated in best international centres of Islamic theology, who could then correctly 'coach' Muslim believers, was at the

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<sup>3</sup> Skype Interview with Olsi Jazegji, Berlin, January 2011.

<sup>4</sup> In 1992, then president of the country Berisha wrote a letter to premier Alexander Mexi, suggesting that the country's inherited poverty could be eradicated only with the help of external support and recommended that the government should encourage aid from Islamic countries.

core of the Islamization attempt: hundreds of Albanians were given scholarships to study theology abroad; *Quran* courses proliferated everywhere; translated Islamic literature became readily available for free; and religious periodicals and translations abounded. One of the Arab foundations alone distributed 3 million copies of the Quran, corresponding to approximately the total size of Albanian's population between 1992 and 1994. With the abolition of visas requirements for all OIC nationals, after the country's accession to the organization, Arab associations and missionaries could enter the country, together with their own ideas and agendas, free of any state supervision. KI's underground links with Arab Associations, on the other hand, helped Islamic missionaries to acquire expedited citizenship and reside in the country permanently.

The AMC seized the opportunities that came with favourable state policies and the inflow of foreign funds in order to recover its infrastructure and strengthen the role of Islam.<sup>5</sup> According to country's Chief Mufti, 'the democratic victory of 1990 has created new chances [for the AMC] to connect with the world, develop new thinking, renew attempts to strengthen faith and discover religious morality' (Dizdari and Luli 2003, p. 9). During, the DP's period in government, the AMC proliferated its international links; rebuilt a whole new infrastructure, including 528 new mosques and an entire education system; launched new official publications; and revived its social and humanitarian activities (Jazegji 2011, pp. 10-13). The Community's 1993 statutes expanded its competences accordingly: the AMC was empowered to issue binding decisions on all affairs pertinent to Sunni believers, was rendered responsible for the management of religious endowments, the maintenance of religious infrastructure, the organization of religious education, and the representation of Sunni believers in all relevant internal and external ceremonies and activities (AMC 1993).

Although the AMC benefited from the available institutional opportunities in order to regenerate itself, it was more reluctant to subscribe to various Islamic interpretations that penetrated the open market of religiosity in the first half of the 1990s. New incoming foreign interpretations of faith put in motion an internal process of souls searching for appropriate

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<sup>5</sup> In the early 1990s, more than 90% of the budget of the AMC came from external sources. Moreover, aid from Islamic countries amounted to around 50% of foreign investments and over 5% of GDP. For detailed information see Lakshman-Lepain 2002, 49.

local ideas, which reflect post-atheist citizens' personalized and relaxed recovery of faith, but also familiar concepts and ideas inherited from the past. Decades of Communist-style propaganda, and the eviction of religion from the public arena, certainly impacted upon the way post-Communist believers perceive and practice their newfound faith: 98% of Albanians respond that they belong to one of the religious communities; but almost 50% celebrate only religious holidays and ceremonies relating to poignant moments in life such as birth, marriage and death; and only 5.5% attend weekly religious services.<sup>6</sup> Post-atheist Albanians seemed particularly reluctant to embrace rigid orthodox prescriptions promoted by foreign Arab missionaries. As Vickers and Pettifer put it, 'after so many decades under a rigid, stifling dictatorship ..., the last thing most Albanians want is to be told what they are allowed and not allowed to do, let alone see Sharia law...introduced' (2007, 117).

The AMC authorities' search for socially appealing new interpretations, adequate to country's post-Communist circumstances, borrowed extensively from familiar pre-Communist templates, commonly referred to as the Albanian tradition. The communication between one of the high-level AMC leaders, Faik Hoxha, and the Saudi Minister of Vakifs, sums up the position of the community towards foreign interpretations: 'We do not need others to teach us faith because we have had ours for 500 years. We need your economic assistance for the regeneration of our own faith' (quoted in Sytari 2011, p. 46). The Albanian 'tradition', in AMC's discourse, captures decades of reform that Islam underwent during the founding moment of the post-Ottoman independent Albanian state, when modernizing political and intellectual elites pressured the Islamic majority to adopt to the 'demands of the new age' (Clayer 2009). Muslims' central organization, first found under the direct pressure of the state in 1923, had increasingly become the hotbed of Muslims' search for progressive ideas appropriate to country's new 'modern European times'. The reforms already conducted during the founding period of the independent state (1914-1939) have thus left Islam closely intertwined with issues of nation- and state-building process as well as with concerns of European modernity and progress. When created in 1991, the AMC presented itself as the successor to the pre-Communist Sunni organization and a carrier of its reformist legacy. The leaders of the community deemed it a 'sacred obligation to ... remain faithful to the national

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<sup>6</sup> Survey conducted in the framework of the project: Strategies of symbolic nation-building in West Balkan states –intents and results, Available at <http://www.hf.uio.no/ilos/english/research/projects/nation-w-balkan/>, accessed on 30 June 2014

traditions inherited from their ancestors' (Dizdari and Luli 2003, p. 5) transforming the reformist *tradition*, or what was meant by it in different stages, into the AMC's official guide for the recovery of Islam in the present.

The ideas that comprise the tradition are randomly selected and recast by the Sunni establishment via the process of 'reflect[ing] on problems associated with contemporary life' (Ibid). Arguments on 'national unity', 'patriotism', and 'religious tolerance', which were used as political instruments to keep a multi-confessional polity together during the creation of the independent state, resurfaced as critical tenets of the AMC's interpretations of the role of Islam during the prolonged periods of civil disorder that plagued the Albanian polity in between 1992 and 1998. The Community's statutes, indeed, consider it the highest duty to foster 'love for religion ... fatherland and the whole Albanian nation' amongst the Albanian people (AMC 1993, article 2). The AMC leaders, have, moreover, persistently called upon their believers 'to be tolerant and to be together for the good of the country and the people' (Sytari 2011, p. 59). Merging political goals with their religious mission, the leaders of the community promise that that Albanian-specific Islamic values will help the country to 'find human and brotherly stability, respect everyone's rights and freedom [and] qualify them to integrate into the United Europe' (Koci quoted in Dizdari and Luli 2003).

#### *Adaptation to New Institutional Restrictions and Consolidation of a National 'Medhab'*

The re-arrangement of the regulatory framework, and the shifts in the political attitude towards Muslims, after the coming into power of the Socialist Party (SP) in 1997, reversed the tight connections between Islam and politics that developed during the previous DP government. Under the leadership of the Socialists, the new religious play field has become increasingly structured, restrictive and state-supervised. The Constitution of 1998 became the first crucial document to elaborate in detail new provisions regulating the relationship between the state and religion in the post-Communist era. The Constitution prescribes that the Albanian state is neutral on questions of belief; and recognizes the equality between religious communities (Albanian Parliament 1998, article 10). State and faith communities are required to 'respect the independence of each other' but also 'work together for the good of each of them and for all' (Ibid.). The relations between the two are, furthermore, regulated by bilateral agreements, agreed between representatives of each side, and ratified by the

parliament. The chapter on individual rights further elaborates a long list of religious freedoms, but also ensures that ‘no one may be compelled ... to take part or not in a religious community or in religious practices’ (Ibid, article 24). Next to the new constitutional frame, the new Committee of Cults, which replaced the State Secretariat in 1999, was re-conceptualized to ‘supervise religious affairs’ under the chairmanship of an impartial civil servant representing the state (Council of Ministers 2009, p. 1-3). The latter Non-Profit Organization Law of 2001 laid down clear guidelines for the registration of faith organizations, a process that subjects them to screening by the Court of Tirana for compatibility with state rules and regulations. The AMC, as one of the four central organizations representing religious communities present in the Albanian territory – the other three representing the Catholic, Orthodox and Bektashi communities – must also register with state authorities but it enjoys a privileged constitutionally recognized status. Its separate status includes the right to negotiate a bilateral agreement with the state, to receive state funds, to be represented in the Committee of Cults, and to participate in state ceremonies as the official state-recognized ‘authority’ representing the entire Muslim community.

Along with the consolidation of new legal restrictions and state surveillance mechanisms, the revived Muslim majority came to face particular state scrutiny for alleged links with terrorist movements, which had arguably taken root during DP’s ‘open’ model of governance. By 1998, different reports suggested that foreign associations has used political links with the highest echelons of power to develop illegal activities and to establish local bases linked to broader terrorist networks, activities which thrived during periods of socio-political turmoil in 1997 (Vickers and Pettifer 2000, pp. 106-7). In 1998, the country featured amongst those providing ‘a safe and undisturbed refuge for Islamic terrorists’ (ICG 2009: 7). Upon transfer of power in 1997, the new government, with the assistance of European and US anti-terrorist units, initiated the screening of all Islamic ‘charities’ in the country, which led to the arrest of a suspected group of terrorists in August 1998, the closure of some of the most active foundations, and the expulsion of related personnel a few months later (Ibid. 6-8). New waves of arrests and expulsions followed the 9/11 attacks in the US, and also the killing of an AMC official, allegedly executed by radical groups within the AMC in 2004. Previously close diplomatic and economic contacts with the Islamic world, meanwhile, gave way to distant bilateral relations with selected Islamic countries (Lani and Schmidt 1998).

The state's organized assault on the burgeoning Islamic networks also shifted broad socio-political discourses towards a real and imaginary 'threat' posed by Islam. The political background of the SP, which had inherited some of the former Communist networks, leaders and intellectuals imbued with a rigid atheist education, played its part in the emerging anti-Islamic penchant dominating public discourse after 1997. The 1991 founding program of SP, indeed, pledged respect for the right 'to not believe ... and atheist propaganda' as much as for new 'religious freedoms' (Krasniqi 2014). Mainstream Albanian intellectuals, educated during the Communist period, were very active in articulating pejorative images of Islam, as a remnant of the obscure Ottoman past, an almost treacherous population in the heart of Europe, and an obstacle in the country's path towards European Union accession.<sup>7</sup> Ismail Kadare, the widely celebrated Albanian novelist, represents the ideals of many former communist intelligentsias, when claiming that, 'the Albanian path to Europe should be taken without the baggage of Islam, which is not worth it, and only delays the arrival' (quoted in Sulstarova 2006, p. 265). The anti-Islamic discourses are well represented also in public school textbooks, which teach future generations stories of Muslim fanaticism and backward Ottoman occupation, often reproducing the communist-era images of religious obscurantism (Jazezhi 2008).

Much too frequently, political debates reverberate intellectuals' denigrating attitudes towards Islam. In 2005, Alfred Moisiu, then president of the country, would explain to an academic audience that 'Albanians are often cited as ... a country of Muslim majority. [But] this is a very superficial reading of the reality. ...Islam in Albania is neither a residential religion, nor a faith spread originally.... As a rule it is a shallow religion' (2005). All the while, the political leaders of the right and left have forcefully reminded Muslims of the state's conceived framework for the recovery of faith: 'religious tolerance and national learning of

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<sup>7</sup> A recent novel written by Ben Blushi, a writer and prominent member of the Socialist Party, for example, portrays Muslims as barbarians, violent, immoral, and traitors of Christianity. The novel follows other works written by leading Albanian intellectuals and high ranking SP officials, who depict Islam as a primitive remnant of the Ottoman past and a stranger to the European Union where Albania belongs and wants to adhere. For a comprehensive discussion of the orientalist influences in the Albanian discourse on Islam, see Sulstarova 2006, 265

our Islam [are] two treasures of Albanian culture and a mission towards our European dream'.<sup>8</sup>

Given the stringent institutions, increased political controls and hostile intellectual ideas that dominate the state-organized religious sphere, the AMC has re-dimensioned itself and has abided by the new restrictions established by the regime. The new Chief Mufti selected in 2004, Haxhi Sali Muca – an engineer educated in the Czech Republic and previous low-level bureaucrat in AMC with only a basic religious education – came from the within the Communist-educated strata. Muca's 'new' vision for the community indeed consisted in improving its image, consolidating its independent finances, modernizing religious publications, updating the education curricula, and refreshing key positions within the Sunni hierarchy (AMC 2012). His new appointments saw a massive replacement of Arab-educated students of theology with graduates of social science from Turkish universities. New statutes approved in 2002 and then again in 2005 made sure to consolidate the authority of Muca and the executive organs close to him in governing the affairs of the community (AMC 2005). In line with the changing tide of state policies, AMC's amended statutes pledged respect for 'the Constitution' and legislation of the Republic of Albania' and demanded appointed Muftis to swear an oath of loyalty both to the 'Quran' and the 'Community's statutes' before taking the job (Ibid, article 8, 40).

The AMC's next response to the tightening opportunities within the institutional-political structure of the organized religious field was the reinforcement of the local Albanian 'medhab', interpretations that resonate with the dominant political/intellectual ideas of appropriate Islam, and their readings of the tradition. Following the new socio-political discourses, the AMC describes itself as seeking divine guidance in the universal sources of revelation of Islam, *Quran* and *Hadith*, and as the guardian of 'the culture, tradition and characteristics of Albanian society' (AMC 2013). The embracing of 'Albanian-specific' Islamic values was formalized with the institutionalization of *Hanefi Medhab*, as the only school of Islamic jurisdiction in the Republic of Albania (AMC 2002). The Hanefi school, which emphasizes the role of human intellect and reason in adapting universal Islamic principles to the needs of time and place has proved particularly apt to AMC's objective to

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<sup>8</sup> 'Nishani në 90-vjetorin e KMSH-së: Toleranca fetare, pasuri kulturore', *Shekulli* 11 March, 2013, Available at <http://www.shekulli.com.al/web/p.php?id=18441&kat=88> , accessed on 30 June, 2014.

‘take into account Albanian reality and the social and national situation’ (AMC 2013). The close connection between the state and AMC in consolidating an official Albanian Islamic doctrine, which perpetrates the political goals of the state is also entrenched in the bilateral agreement signed between the two in 2009. To protect its authoritative position and its monopoly of interpretation, the AMC has required state authorities to protect its actions ‘against any deformations, extremist tendencies, or other aggressive demonstrations in the spaces occupied by [its] believers’ (Agreement 2009). In return, the AMC has pledged to respect state guidelines on freedom of thought, conscience and religion within the necessary restrictions ‘of a democratic society, public security and protection of third-party rights’ (Ibid). The AMC’s protected official doctrine, thus, develops parallel to the country’s socio-political expediencies. The AMC hierarchy, much like the country’s political elites, vouches to ‘promote ... democracy, human rights and the rule of law’.<sup>9</sup> In line with the consensual goals of the post-communist Albanian polity, AMC leaders also pray for ‘the rise of Albania among the [European] nations ruled by liberty, justice and service to people’.<sup>10</sup>

Alternative groups – sections within the official hierarchy, parallel structures, and autonomous movements that operate outside the auspices of the state – have increasingly challenged the exclusive alliance between the state and the AMC and what they perceive as the spiritual weakness of the latter.<sup>11</sup> Being effectively excluded from the AMC structures, alternative groupings have less incentive to succumb to the politically-oriented official doctrine, but they are also subject to similar tempering institutional, learning and historical legacies that mark the development of Albanian Islam. Autonomous Islamic groups, although very diverse and heterogeneous, have all made use of the existing institutional framework and broad democratic rights – protests, petitions, public declarations, legal suits, and statutory irregularities – to make their claims in the public arena. Their primary demands have been greater civil and political rights in accordance with European citizenship standards. As one of the organizations created in opposition to AMC puts it, ‘Albanian Muslims ... are citizens devoted to the principles of democracy and human rights’ adding that ‘[they] have a great

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<sup>9</sup> *Deklaratë e përbashkët e komuniteteve fetare shqiptare*, 18 Mars 2005, Available at <http://www.albasoul.com/vjeter/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1697>, accessed on 30 June, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Olsi Jazexhi, Berlin, February 2011

need for the democratic liberties that the common [European] continent has built up over the years' (Muslim Forum 2008). Such alternative groupings, typically labelled 'extremists' by the official establishment, also make use of local idioms 'acceptable to the country and contemporary context' rather than advocating 'new' ways of being Islamic.<sup>12</sup> For them, however, the return of Albanians from studies of theology abroad is a positive point of rupture for the domestication of Islam, because the new graduates enjoy religious authority but also 'know their people and country better than foreign missionaries.'<sup>13</sup> In the context of post-communist Albania, what is crucial amongst alternative Muslim networks, as much as official networks, is reclaiming Islam in an Albanian-specific, European and democratic way.

## Conclusions

This article has investigated how institutional structures, ideological directives, and past legacies, developed under the domineering role of the state, have influenced Muslims' support for democracy in post-communist Albania. We focussed particularly on the role of the post-Communist state in framing the emerging market of religion after the fall of Communism. The analysis traces and compares AMC's choices, enabling us to assess the role of various institutional changes and ideological offers that constitute the state-organised religious field at different stages of democratization.

Our analysis of AMC confirms the main assumption of the rational school of religious behaviour, namely that Muslim organizations' political choices are largely driven by the institutional structure of opportunities and constraints, and changes therein. The concept of the state-organized religious field, which highlights the domineering role of the state in re-envisioning state-mosque relations, is particularly helpful in explaining the AMC's positions vis-à-vis democracy after the fall of Communism. The initial democratic openings, and respective liberalization of atheist policies, have enabled the mobilization of Muslims besides and beyond the anti-Communist forces that challenged the oppressive communist dictatorship

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<sup>12</sup> Deklaratë e 41 imamëve të xhamive në vend," *Shekulli*, 18/11/2009, Available at, <http://arkivamediatike.com/lajme/artikull/iden/352586/titulli/Deklarate-e-41-imameve-te-xhamive-ne-vend>, accessed on 30 June, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Besnik Sinani, *A kanë zëvendësuar 'turqit' 'arabët' në Shqipëri?* <http://e-zani.blogspot.it/2010/09/kane-zevendesuar-turqit-arabet-ne.html>

between 1990 and 1992. The close political connections between the ruling anti-Communists and Muslim structures enabled the flourishing of AMC activities but also new foreign associations with competing ideas about the future of the regime during the subsequent period, 1992-1997. Stringent institutional controls after transfer of power in 1997 have reversed the tide of privileged state policies and encouraged significant adaptation of AMC in line with the state's new political vision and exigencies.

The post-Communist state has also proved active in outlining AMC's appropriate ideological interpretations, especially after the stringent institutional framework was established, with rising political attention being devoted to radicalised elements within the Islamic community after 1997. The new political and intellectual elites, often sharing a solid Communist-style education, have made sure to instruct newborn Muslims with the pillars of Albanian historical tradition, and keep faith as far as possible towards the margins of political sphere. In general, the AMC has closely collaborated with the state to define and safeguard the broad contours of official Islam at home with state policies and its political vision. AMC's choices, and positioning on issues of democratization, were accordingly continuously fine-tuned in response to structural and ideological shifts within a religious field, which has become increasingly rational and hierarchical, but also heavily controlled by the central state. AMC's hierarchy, in line with political elites, has pledged to promote democracy as the consensual goal of Albanian polity.

Yet, the state-framed religious field with its own institutional restrictions and ideological directives does not suffice to explain why post-Communist Muslims have consistently resorted to Albanian-specific reformist traditions to borrow arguments from and position themselves on political issues, even in the context of state's *laissez-faire* approach towards the revival of Islam during the initial period of transition. Neither does it explain why Muslim movements out of AMC structures, which do not have the same incentives to abide by state rules, have resorted to local familiar idioms in order to articulate and make their claims within a framework of support for the democratic rules of the game. Our analysis of the AMC's interpretations shows that, in line with ideological explanations, it is the AMC leaders' learning experiences and a pool of useful arguments from the past, which have helped them to articulate convincing pro-democratic interpretations under changing institutional incentives and ideological offers. Harsh persecution and deprivation of most

essential religious rights during the Communist regime became a crucially formative experience for religious leaders and their followers, and have greatly shaped the ideological contours of the post-Communist search of faith within the parameters of democratic rules and human rights. The existence of useful arguments inherited from the past, the so-called Albanian traditional values, has, moreover, provided the Sunni hierarchy, autonomous groups and lay Muslims with a common 'Albanian-specific' template that facilitated the reclaiming of Islam in a local, pro-democratic and pro-European manner.

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