



Fig. 1: English map of the ancient Roman Via Egnatia crossing the South of the Balkans. (Image courtesy of Wikimedia user Eric Gaba ["Sting"] and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2006.

Fig. 2: The whitewashed stone-roofed buildings in the bazaar quarter of Gjirokastra, Albania, retain their original Turkish character. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user David Stanley and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2018.

Exploring the Links Between Albania and Asia: A Historical Journey

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Historical crossroads: A tapestry of exchanges

Albania's history is intrinsically linked to the broader narrative of the Balkans and Asia, highlighting centuries of interconnectedness. This tapestry of exchanges began long before the modern era. Strategic pathways traversed the Balkans throughout history, and what we now know as Albania has long facilitated an array of cultural, economic, and military interactions between East and West.

The origins of these exchanges can be traced back to the eras of Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire. Alexander the Great's conquests during the 4th century BCE and the subsequent expansion of the Roman Empire established enduring trade routes that traversed through Albania. These routes became channels for the movement of people, ideas, and commodities, contributing to the vibrant cultural landscape that characterized the region. During that period, the Via Egnatia was a Roman road connecting Dyrrachium (now Durrës) on the Adriatic Sea to Byzantium (now Istanbul) [Fig. 1]. The route served as a vibrant channel for trade between the Roman Empire and the Eastern territories, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and influences between the Mediterranean world and the East. The route has been considered and studied for its military and economic functions as well as for its profound cultural influence, which shaped the intellectual and social landscape of the regions it traversed, including those of present-day Albania. Cities like Apollonia thrived along the Via Egnatia as learning centers, attracting minds from parts of the Mediterranean.¹

This article explores Albania and Asia's lasting and complex relationship, tracing a historical narrative that stretches back thousands of years. From ancient trade routes to the lasting impact of the Ottoman Empire and the complex dynamics of the Cold War period, Albania's narrative is knitted with cultural, economic, and diplomatic exchanges that have left an indelible mark on its identity. In this piece, through traveling among Eastern influences that have shaped Albanian society, culture, and development, we bring some insights into Albania's distinctive role as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

The Ottoman era: A fusion of cultures

For five centuries, the Ottoman Empire significantly shaped Albania's cultural and demographic landscape, blending European and Asian influences. This period introduced a lasting imprint of Islamic religion and traditions into Albanian society alongside its predominantly Catholic and Orthodox Christian communities. Due to its geostrategic position, Albania served as a bridge between the East and the West, absorbing and assimilating various cultural, religious, and economic influences.

The Ottoman Empire's expansion into the Balkans began in the 14th century and culminated in the conquest of Albania in the late 15th century. During this period, significant changes occurred in Albanian society as the Ottomans introduced their governance systems and cultural traditions.² The relationship between Albanians and their Ottoman rulers was complex, marked by periods of coexistence and resistance. While some Albanians embraced Ottoman rule and rose to positions of power within the empire, others actively resisted, forming alliances with European states.³ This historical period ultimately paved the way for the proclamation of Albanian independence and the establishment of a modern state. While some scholars suggest that the

Despite the decline and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, its influence on Albanian society and culture remains prominent, evident in language, architecture, and cuisine. Islamic customs and Arabic vocabulary integrated into the language reflect the enduring impact of that era. Mosques, baths (hammams), and Ottoman-style buildings found at UNESCO sites in several cities in Albania, such as Gjirokastra [Fig. 2], Berati, Tirana, and Kruja, serve as reminders of this cultural fusion.

The Cold War period: A shift in global alignment

Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albania entered a new era characterized by rising nationalism, which soon became entangled with broader 20th-century geopolitical struggles. Albania aligned itself with the communist bloc during the Cold War era, establishing ties with the Soviet Union (until 1960) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) (until 1978).

After World War II, Albania embraced communism under the leadership of Enver Hoxha (1908-1985). It joined the Soviet bloc, aligned with the communist ideology, and sought support from Moscow. This alignment led to intense cooperation with the Soviet Union, with Albania receiving economic aid, military assistance, and cultural exchanges. The Soviet Union supported Albania's industrial development, providing expertise and resources. In many Albanian cities (e.g., Tirana, Elbasan, Berat, Durrës, etc.), there were neighborhoods with Russian or Chinese experts who helped develop Albania's economy, industry, and military. About 6000 Chinese technicians and engineers came to Albania to assist in the

Albanian national identity partially emerged as a response to Ottoman dominance, its formation is a complex phenomenon shaped not only by the Ottoman Empire's presence, but also by broader historical and cultural dynamics in the Balkans.⁴



Fig. 4: "We are real friends". Commemorative recordings of songs about Albanian-China friendship made during the 1967 visit to China of the Albanian art troupe "With a Pick in One Hand and a Rifle in the Other." 2019. Image available courtesy of Sinopsis.

expertise in fields like agriculture, industry, and military technology [Fig. 3].

Ismail Kadare (1936-2024), one of Albania's most celebrated authors and a crucial figure for understanding the country's complex historical and cultural tapestry, particularly its interactions with Asian influences, had also partly studied at the Institute of World Literature "Maxim Gorky" in Moscow during 1958-1960. His work encapsulates the nuances of Albania's identity as it transitioned from Ottoman rule through the communist era, with each phase shaping its cultural landscape. From *The Castle* (1974) and *The Palace of Dreams* (1981) to the *Winter of Great Solitude* (1971) and *The Concert* (1978),⁸ Kadare [Fig. 4] captures the intricate relationships between Albania and various influences, providing profound insights into the nation's quest for cultural autonomy and identity.⁹

Navigating the modern world: Balancing relationships and embracing opportunities

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, Albania embraced globalization while maintaining its historical ties with Russia and China. The country is now focused on building relationships and integrating into the global economy, particularly through its pursuit of European Union membership.

Trade ties and cultural cooperation have become key focus areas between Albania and China, while both countries continue to face challenges in overcoming historical and political baggage. The "One Belt, One Road" initiative has fostered increased cooperation between Albania and China, although concerns about the depth of this partnership remain.¹⁰

Trade between China and Albania has increasingly flourished in the past decade. The import and export rates have intensified despite the distance, differences, and political implications. It is safe to argue that business has a life of its own in China-Albania relations. Bilateral economic ties have grown steadily in the past two decades, but most of the increase was witnessed after the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, if there is a field where relations are excellent, it is trade.¹¹ For example, in the overall picture for 2023, Albania's leading trading partners are Italy (29.2%), China (7.9%), Turkey (6.8%), and Greece (6.5%).¹²

The cultural ties have also deepened significantly, reflected in the organization of various exciting initiatives. One highlight was the exhibition "Albanian Authors for China, Chinese Authors for Albania," which opened in Tirana in November 2019 to celebrate the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, showcasing over 400 translated works, including those of Albanian writer Dritëro Agolli (1931-2017) and Nobel Prize-winning Chinese author Mo Yan (1955). The cultural exchange is not limited to literature; Albanian cinema has also carved a niche in China. The first Albanian film to reach Chinese audiences was *Tana* back in 1959, and the recent screening of *Borxhliu* in 1999 reflects decades of growing interest, with nearly 30 Albanian films now making their way to China. The reasons behind the popularity of Albanian films in China are mainly attributed to the strong alliance between China and Albania during the 1960s and the cultural life configured by socialist internationalism. These films have left an indelible mark on Chinese society, even influencing fashion trends and showcasing

Fig. 6: Still from the Albanian film *Ballë për Ballë (Face to Face)*, 1979. Image accessible at [imdb](https://www.imdb.com).



how cultural influences can create waves far beyond their context of origin [Fig. 5].¹³

Meanwhile, Albania's relationship with Russia is characterized by a complex interplay of tensions and collaboration, reflecting the broader geopolitical landscape. Recent years have seen heightened tensions in the Balkans due to Russia's assertiveness on the stage and its involvement in conflicts like the Ukrainian War. Russia's efforts to bolster its regional influence by exploiting historical divides have raised concerns. As a NATO member, Albania has stood alongside allies in denouncing Russian aggression and supporting Ukraine.¹⁴

Another country in Asia with which Albania keeps good relations, despite their distance and economic differences, is Japan. Albania and Japan have had relations since 1972. After the 1990s Japan offered development assistance to Albania, focusing on infrastructure and disaster relief. Although there have been exchanges, the economic connections remain limited.

More recently, Albania has forged relations with Singapore, focusing mostly on trade and investment interests. Both nations have engaged in discussions, with Singapore showing interest in building partnerships with Albania. They aim to collaborate in sectors like tourism and trade. Albania sees Singapore as a development model due to its prosperity, leading to talks about sharing strategies.

On the other hand, Albania has expanded its international connections further, focusing on the Middle East, India, and Southeast Asia to enhance its cultural influence and attract investments. This approach reflects Albania's ambition to strengthen diplomatic ties, promote collaboration in various sectors, and learn from the experiences of these diverse regions.

Embracing Asia in education and research

The Albanian educational landscape increasingly embraces Asia in its studies and research, reflecting a growing interest in collaboration and cultural exchange. Higher education institutions such as the University of Tirana and Epoka University are leading this initiative with programs that explore the geopolitics of Asian countries, fostering student exchanges and scholarships with institutions beyond Europe.

POLIS University and Co-PLAN, Institute for Habitat Development, both pioneer innovative approaches to urban planning and development education. POLIS University specializes in architecture, urban planning, and design, emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach. This creates opportunities for strategic partnerships with Asian scholars and practitioners. By integrating theory with practical applications, POLIS aims to prepare students to address contemporary urban challenges while promoting sustainable development.

Meanwhile, Co-PLAN is a prominent research institution dedicated to advancing sustainable urban development in Albania and the Balkans. It focuses on various aspects of urbanism, including planning, governance, and community engagement. Co-PLAN conducts research, offers training, and facilitates projects that promote social and ecological sustainability, drawing valuable insights from global practices to enhance local urban policies and development strategies.

Additionally, Co-PLAN is a member of the River Cities Network,¹⁵ a global initiative focused on ecologically and socially inclusive revitalization of waterways and urban

landscapes. This transdisciplinary network enables local scholars, scientists, and activists to collaborate on river-city case studies, addressing the complex interactions between communities and their rivers.

Through these initiatives, Albania's educational institutions are enriching their curricula and positioning themselves as vital participants in a global dialogue on urban sustainability and cultural exchange.

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Notes

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Fig. 4: Sculpted frieze in honor of author Ismail Kadare at Gjirokastra Castle, Gjirokastra, Albania. [Photo courtesy of Wikimedia user Adam Jones and reprinted under Creative Commons license, 2018.]

country's development.⁵ They also interacted with local residents, creating mutual respect, and Albanian children exchanged letters with the children from these experts' neighborhoods. Albanian students of our parents' generation were sent to study in the Soviet Union to bring the Soviet culture and ideas back to the country. Sometimes, new families of Albanians and Russians were formed and established back in Albania. These families often suffered due to political divergences with the Soviet Union that became more evident after 1960, and most of them were separated, only to be reunited after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the 1990s.

Though the relationship between Albania and Russia is complex, oscillating between periods of tension and collaboration, it was short-lived. Official diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1945, and over the years, relationships strengthened through Enver Hoxha's visits to Moscow and meetings with Soviet leader Stalin (1878-1953) until tensions mounted following Stalin's death and Hoxha's criticisms of Nikita Khrushchev's (1894-1971) policies in 1956.⁶ This estrangement peaked in 1961, when Albania severed diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union, entering a 30-year period of relative isolation.

This split paved the way for a new alliance with the People's Republic of China under Mao Zedong (1893-1976). This alliance, fueled by shared ideological beliefs and a desire to challenge Soviet dominance,⁷ lasted for nearly two decades. China provided Albania with economic assistance, military training, and technical expertise, contributing to the development of various infrastructure projects and industries.

During the same period, Albania joined forces with other communist and socialist nations, offering assistance to various movements and governments in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. This was in line with Albania's foreign policy strategy, which aimed to advance socialism and build connections with other countries that opposed Western influences.

Albania stood by North Vietnam during the Vietnam War by providing backing and economic aid such as supplies and food. Albania officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and openly criticized U.S. involvement in the region.

Similar to its support for Vietnam, Albania also backed the Pathet Lao movement in Laos and offered support to Cambodia, despite complexities arising from Khmer Rouge's policies. It showed solidarity through several gestures, but on a scale comparable to the involvement with Vietnam.

The Cold War period witnessed a significant change in cultural and educational ties between Albania and the Soviet Union and between Albania and the PRC. As Albanian students were sent to study in both countries, the Soviet Union left its mark on culture through music, literature, films, and architecture, while China offered Albania