

A semiological Analysis of Albanian Women's Education and Emancipation in light of the Communist State Propaganda

Abstract: *The communist regime in Albania, which lasted from 1944 to 1991, availed itself of every possible instrument of propaganda to establish and reinforce the state-led ideology, despite dire circumstances in all domains. The state-fabricated propaganda proclaimed that the regime managed to eradicate illiteracy and achieve women's emancipation by offering them education and work. However, when the discourse of women's right to education and work conflicted with the class struggle discourse, women's education was deemed less important than the class struggle. The communist war against "state enemies" was considered more important and was waged much more violently than the war against illiteracy and unemployment. This paper addresses the state propaganda regarding women's emancipation in communist Albania and examines how the regime targeted women through a monthly women's magazine, Shqiptarja e Re (The New Albanian Woman). Being the only women's magazine, Shqiptarja e Re was used by the state to communicate top-down instructions for women on their expected duties and responsibilities within the socialist state, allegedly emancipating women, but without providing proper support for them. This article uses semiological analysis to explore images and captions in this particular women's magazine as a methodology to achieve some understanding of how images were used to make meaning and articulate ideology. The semiological analysis follows five steps, as illustrated by Gillian Rose's book Visual Methodologies (2016).*

Keywords: *education, women's emancipation, propaganda, semiological analysis, Albania.*

Introduction

Albania's fierce totalitarian regime, ruled by Enver Hoxha from 1944 until his death in 1985 and continued under Ramiz Alia until the fall of communism in 1991, created dire conditions of violence and isolation across economic, educational, health, religious, social, and political spheres. Widely recognized as one of the most severe cases of dictatorship and isolation in Europe, the Albanian totalitarian regime violated what we now consider basic human rights. However, the socio-political

discourse that was pervasive in state-produced and state-controlled means of propaganda during the communist period blatantly claimed that gigantic progress was made in at least two realms: education and women's emancipation. Even though some progress took place in these domains, the biggest fallacy regarding these two claims is encountered in another strongly pronounced topic of propaganda: the class struggle. Many of those who lived under the state-socialist regime in Albania would mention all three above-mentioned claims consecutively, thus listing the class struggle as a so-called state achievement alongside the eradication of illiteracy and women's emancipation in their memories of the communist period propaganda. However, the war against state enemies was waged more ferociously than the war against illiteracy or gender inequality.

When Albanian communists took over the country in November 1944, Albania was facing poor economic conditions due to having struggled for five centuries under the Ottoman Empire rule, two Balkan Wars, one decade under the self-proclaimed King Zog I, and different occupations during World War I and II. Albania proclaimed its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, consequently having the "first Albanian state" (Mustafaj, 2009, p. 286) and more schools in the Albanian language, which wasn't endorsed during the five centuries of Ottoman occupation. There had been several initiatives from intellectual and national groups that resulted in having the first Albanian school in the Albanian language in Korça in 1887. The first Albanian girls' school was also opened in 1891 in Korça, by the Kyrias Institute, starting with only three girls at the beginning and ending with fifty-three pupils in the 1892-93 academic year (Dako, 2016, p. 111). Gradually, more schools were opened in Elbasan, Shkodër, and Gjirokastër, too, resulting in a total of 536 elementary schools nationwide during the 1926-1927 school year, where 830 teachers worked (Pollo, 1984). However, the work of these schools was often limited to having one single classroom and often basic literacy lessons. The total number of pupils attending school in Albania was 26.612, which is a low attendance rate considering the total number of the population, which that same year was 834.000 inhabitants (Pollo, 1984). Nonetheless, both individual attempts and organized initiatives in pursuit of education in Albania continued throughout the First and Second World War years.

After WWII, 123 schools in Albania were destroyed, and almost the same number of schools were partially damaged or unsuitable to function as educational facilities; textbooks and school equipment were missing, and more importantly, there weren't enough trained teachers (Beqja, 1976, p. 34). According to official records dating September 30, 1945, out of a total population of 1.122.044 inhabitants in Albania, only twenty percent of the population was literate (Kambo, 2005, p. 48). Enver Hoxha

officially came to power in December 1945 and his immediate goal was to ensure that his power was strengthened through the communist party and its mechanisms; thus, he aimed to give the Labour Party of Albania a huge and direct effect in achieving the economic results that Albania badly needed (Ndoja, 2013, p. 10). To re-establish the state of Albania from the wounds of post-WWII, the Labour Party had several goals to attain, and all the mechanisms of the newly-rebuilt state were supposed to coordinate their work for the country to progress in all domains. However, paramount importance was given to arrests and purges of everyone who was perceived by the Party as a threat to their absolute power, including all the Western-educated, the affluent, the religious, or the politically different members of Albanian society. As Father Zef Pllumi, a Catholic priest who survived atrocious tortures in communist prisons, gives evidence in his book *Live to Tell*, "the year 1946 in Albania was the record year of blood and terror" (Pllumi, 2006, p. 61).

As Zickel and Iwaskiw also argue in their research about Albania, the goals regarding education were not purely education-oriented. Instead, eradicating illiteracy and building a new and functional educational system throughout the country were closely intertwined with the class struggle. In this way, a scheme of vigilance against the educated elites of the time, also regarded as state enemies, was implanted at the core of the education system. "The regime's objectives for the new school system were to wipe out illiteracy in the country as soon as possible, to struggle against "bourgeois survivals" in the country's culture, to transmit to Albanian youth the ideas and principles of communism as interpreted by the party, and finally to educate the children of all social classes based on these principles" (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994). With a high illiteracy rate of 80% of the population after WWII, the Albanian state enabled a much-needed educational reform that *de jure* proclaimed gender, ethnic, and religious equality in elementary, secondary, and higher education. On the other hand, the communist regime practices during the years proved that *de facto*, student acceptance in educational institutions was mainly based on certain predetermined criteria, class status, and party interests being the main ones.

Theoretical and contextual considerations about women

My argument in this article is that the state leadership in Albania more often than not considered its citizens as amalgamated instruments of the regime, which were to be used to build and strengthen the state power mechanisms as needed by the party, despite their gender. Kligman refers to this as the state being gender-blind (1996). This explains why, even when explicitly addressing women or the illiterate as target groups for specific policies, state leaders used the class struggle as a pre-selective criterion,

which prevailed over gender and educational background. Also, this explains why extreme cases of human rights violations were witnessed in Albania during the communist regime, with little or absolutely no respect for human dignity and freedom, thus dehumanizing all citizens who were perceived as threats to the communist hegemony. Moreover, introducing a divisive approach among citizens through the class struggle between the so-called bourgeoisie and proletariat was utilitarian to the regime, as it falsely made anyone with a proletariat background feel entitled to certain rights that they deserved to begin with, regardless of class status. Consequently, throughout the whole period of Communist rule, anyone not from a proletariat background was labeled *kulak* or *deklasuar* and was said to have a 'bad biography', which extended to everyone in their family, and meant they were forbidden to access education past elementary level and were assigned low-skilled jobs, often under surveillance, regardless qualification or professional expertise (Sadiku, 2016).

There were, however, gendered approaches to education and employment, which in their turn reinforce the argument that the state needed its citizens as instruments, and addressing women specifically as such, better enabled such gender-specific exercise of power by the party. For instance, after ensuring the male communist establishment, state socialism in several Eastern European countries "brought an enormous and forceful mobilization of women into the world of paid labor (Daskalova & Zimmermann, 2015, p. 11). The totalitarian regimes called for the "equality" and "emancipation" of women to engage them as laborers and citizens who would strengthen the establishment because they needed women to work (Ansorg & Hürtgen, 1999). These open claims of women's emancipation and gender equality generated the space for women's subjectivity and agency, as well as propaganda and lies. The former was important for improving women's lives eventually, but the latter was vital in maintaining a facade system by the regime.

The statement "women (being present) in all fields of life" was repeatedly used by the Albanian Party as a slogan in paintings, literature, and movies, and is one illustration of what Hannah Arendt called "fantastic statements" (1951) as a means of propaganda regarding women's emancipation. Furthermore, to legitimize the dominating discourse of women's emancipation to the point of make-believe propaganda, women's assumed holistic engagement was explicitly delineated even in the Constitution of Albania, in its Preamble in 1976, claiming that "the Albanian woman, along the uninterrupted process of revolution, gained equality in all fields of life, becoming a huge social force and going towards its complete emancipation" (Constitution of Albania, 1976). The constitutional preamble used the past tense ("gained equality") to consider the "woman

issue" a completed action and direct attention to other priorities for future regime intervention. In fact, following previous declarations on women's emancipation made by Enver Hoxha in 1965, the state's official campaign on women's emancipation was started by the state leader in 1967. As Zickel and Iwaskiw have recognized, "During Albania's Cultural and Ideological Revolution, which began in 1966, the regime encouraged women to take jobs outside the home in an effort to overcome their conservatism and compensate for labor shortages" (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994, p. 132). This is why referring to it in 1976 as an issue belonging to the past is inadequate because the 1960s and 1970s were times when the country was under pressure to meet several state reforms, women's burden was heavy and people's life quality was very low, with Albania being "Europe's poorest nation by every economic measure" (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994, p. 132).

Despite dire financial circumstances, the state propaganda was constantly working as a tool of make-believe reality for its citizens, having gender-specific approaches regarding women's desired performance by the state. Another example of dictatorship propagandistic lies alleged to help with women's emancipation in Albania was that the Party of Labour in Albania wanted to release women from the so-called repressive power of religion, which supposedly subjugated women and kept them tied to backward traditions. As Pandelejmoni states, it was in 1967 that "influenced by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, (the party) initiated a series of ideological, political, economic, and social reforms, which aimed at strengthening the control of the party-state over the life of the country's citizens" (2011, p. 19). The Party considered religion a menace, as religious leaders in churches or mosques could exercise more power over the citizens than the party itself, which is why, as Rago maintains, "believing the presence of different religious beliefs as a mortal threat and emulating and exceeding Mao's China, (in 1967) Hoxha ordered the closing down of all places of worship and intensified the persecution that had been launched at the end of the war against the representatives of religion" (Rago, 2016, p. 80). What was presented as a women-oriented initiative aiming to set women free from religious influence was a propagandistic lie: indeed, it was taking away women's agency. This way, the party aimed to maximize its authority over women, simply addressing them as a gender-specific group to make the most of the anti-religion intervention. Moreover, extending this intervention to men as well, the communist party was amalgamating men and women into a gender-blind group of citizens that recognized and followed no other authority but that of the Party of Labour in Albania.

Similar to women's realities in other socialist and communist regimes in Eastern Europe, women's emancipation in Albania led to a forced "double" or "triple" burden for women (Einhorn, 1993) since most men's

roles and duties in the private domain did not change to make up for women's additional work. The Party viewed women as a group that had to reinforce and maintain the hegemonic order of the state party and thus propelled women to undertake responsibilities in both public and private domains while giving them little or limited welfare support. Furthermore, living under conditions where resources were scarce, women also had to be creative regarding their choices of attire and nutrition, which were in short supply, yet supporting the imposed system of "total equality". These constrictions hindered women's self-expression and individuality, which, as Drakulić perfectly explained, threatened the totalitarian system. In her words: "To be yourself, to cultivate individualism, to perceive yourself as an individual in a mass society is dangerous. You might become living proof that the system is failing" (Drakulić, 1993, p. 26). Yet, this was not the sole violation of human rights in Albania.

The methodology of semiological analysis: Exploring images for traces of ideology

This paper examines how images on the covers of "Shqiptarja e Re" (The New Albanian Woman) served as indicators of a projected reality aimed at its primarily female readership. The research seeks to uncover how these images conveyed the communist state's ideology, focusing on the first four magazine covers from 1976, the year the Albanian constitution explicitly stated that women's emancipation had been achieved. The analysis employs Gillian Rose's methodology of semiological analysis of visual images (2016).

Semiological analysis, unlike content analysis, isn't concerned with statistical representation but rather with understanding how images construct meaning. Rose emphasizes intertextuality, where the meaning of an image is shaped by its relationship with other images and texts. She argues that "A specific visuality will make certain things visible in particular ways, and other things unseeable, for example, and subjects will be produced and act within that field of vision" (2016, p. 188). Understanding these images also requires considering their historical context. As Sturken and Cartwright (2017, p. 37) note, "To explore the meaning of images is to recognize that they are produced within dynamics of social power and ideology. Images are an important site through which ideologies, as systems of belief, are produced." Here, ideology refers to a system of beliefs that legitimizes unequal social power relations.

During the communist period in Albania, "Shqiptarja e Re" functioned as a key tool for disseminating state ideology, particularly regarding women's emancipation. Këlliçi and Danaj (2021) suggest the magazine acted as both propaganda and a pedagogical tool. Each issue consistently highlighted

women's contributions across various sectors, praising communism and the Party of Labour for these achievements. However, this often occurred without significant practical support for women, reinforcing state-assigned roles. This message was conveyed through both imagery and accompanying text. Vehbiu (2009, p. 156) points out how totalitarian ideologies subtly manipulate language, even altering the meaning of political keywords.

The semiological analysis derived from Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2016) follows a five-step process:

1. *Identifying Signs*: Pinpointing the specific signs present in the magazine cover images.
2. *Signification*: Determining what these signs inherently signify.
3. *Relational Meaning*: Exploring how these signs relate to other signs within the image.
4. *Intertextuality*: Investigating their connections to broader systems of meaning.
5. *Ideological Articulation*: Examining how these signs precisely articulate the socialist regime's ideology in Albania.

Semiology, also known as social semiotics, directly addresses how images generate meaning. Rose (2016, p. 106) states that it provides a comprehensive set of analytical tools for deconstructing images and tracing their connections to wider meaning systems. She differentiates ideology from scientific knowledge, defining the former as "knowledge that is constructed in such a way as to legitimate unequal social power relations; science, instead, is the knowledge that reveals those inequalities" (2016, p. 107). Rose's semiological framework builds on Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign as the fundamental unit of language, comprising a signified (concept or object) and a signifier (the sound or image attached to it) (2016, p. 113). Additionally, Pierce identified three types of signs based on the signifier-signified relationship: iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs (2016, pp. 119-120).

The Class Struggle in Communist Albania

A Human Rights Watch report published in 1996 referred to communism in Albania as "a brand (of communism) unknown to the rest of Eastern Europe" (1996, paras. 1-2). The report blamed communism and its leader Enver Hoxha for isolating the country, for leaving Albania the poorest and most repressive (country) in all of Europe, where religion was banned, traveling was forbidden, private property was outlawed, resistance was severely punished with exile, imprisonment or execution, and independent courts, free media or human rights mechanisms were missing. The regime crushed all forms of individual or collective acts of freedom. As Musta and Memisha affirm, "Human rights were the staircase

on which the tyranny stamped its feet on its climb towards the altar of glory" (2006, p. 8).

Hoxha followed Stalinism even after the death of Stalin in 1953 and aimed to create the "new man" alongside strengthening socialism, and he used the class struggle in Albania as the main element in doing so (Ndoja, 2013, p. 181). The purges became most violent in 1967. People who owned land and property were called *kulaks*. They were punished by having their property confiscated (nationalized) and being put into forced labor under surveillance and continuing persecution (Sadiku, 2016). In 1967, the Minister of Agriculture divided purged families into three categories based on the extent to which they were seen as a threat to the regime, ranging from the worst "irreparable" category to a more moderate one that included *kulaks* that were on their way to "reparation" (Sadiku, 2016, p. 151). The first category was given the hardest jobs and extreme surveillance and isolation, the second category was assigned to different kinds of work but had no right to attend meetings on collective farms, and the third category was able to work with everyone else and participate in the meetings as listeners, yet were deprived of the right to speak. The same categories were also used when politically persecuted people were made redundant from jobs they were qualified for and sent to lower-quality and higher-difficulty jobs because of their "bad political attitude." The Party had to sometimes accept the fact that a politically persecuted person was irreplaceable, and then they kept their job under extreme supervision from the Party and state security (Sadiku, 2016, p. 124).

A real-life testimony of the above-mentioned extreme supervision has been collected by Shannon Woodcock in her oral history book about Albania under communism. One of her respondents was born into a politically persecuted family and put into the category of isolation and close surveillance, despite being irreplaceable at her job.

Due to her bad biography, Mevlude was not allowed to participate in any State or professional events, and she was the object of constant suspicion and surveillance. Her work included the first Albanian production of washing detergent, and then paint, both of which were vital to everyday life, yet she could not be acknowledged by name for her contributions. On the positive side, she was also barred from political ideology lectures at the factory and from doing overnight security shifts. Under the baseless suspicion of potential sabotage, Mevlude could not attend state parades and festivities but had to hand out the paper flowers to workers to take to the mass-choreographed events, making sure that all flowers were returned the next day for future use. As a young, intelligent person, the constant performance of

social exclusion was painful and depressing, even as she saw the absurdity of the choreographed collective celebrations. On one occasion, the resin in the factory caught fire and Mevlude was denounced and discussed at the weekly Party meetings as possibly responsible. She had no right to attend or defend herself at the factory Party meetings, and although she was cleared of blame for the fire, she was nevertheless disallowed from working alternate shifts. Every six months, the factory Party members updated her "characteristics file," a surveillance report in which enemies of the state were monitored by their colleagues (2016, p. 62).

The state made false accusations against and denied professional recognition of both persecuted women and men alike, thus reinforcing the argument that the state leaders were mostly gender-blind in their hostile class war. Their surveillance and denunciation actions were directed against the "state enemy" whose identity, in their perspective, was clad with homogeneous negative traits that saw no gender difference, and their rights were violated nonetheless. The state also intervened in hindering people from engagements or marriages with *kulaks*, in addition to cases of public denunciations aiming at openly fighting the overruled classes by the masses. These extreme infringements of human rights were directed against "the class enemies", thus showing gender-blind approaches, whose main goal was merely to annihilate politically persecuted people without any repercussions and show no differences amongst them.

Barred access to higher education due to the "class struggle"

Education of the masses and the war against illiteracy were commonly used as the focus of propaganda during all decades of the communist regime in Albania. Indeed, as Gjonca, Aasve, and Mencarini state, "The investment in education, particularly female education, was unprecedented in Albania. Female illiteracy improved from 92% in 1945 to less than 8% in 1989, and by 2002 it was less than 5%, similar to most developed European societies" (2008). However, as a study conducted on politically persecuted women affirms, the regime would intentionally propagate in favor of the eradication of illiteracy as a tool to shift attention from another problem: university study access, which was only for those who served the regime with utmost devotion. The same study asserts that attending higher education was regarded as "taboo" for the girls coming from the families of "former classes", which were now overruled, and for the democratic and patriotic people in particular (Skëndi et al. 2006, p. 31). Therefore, the members and children of most of the persecuted families were not allowed to pursue higher education, not even middle technical schools, with the

exclusion of agriculture schools that were of poor quality (Skëndi et al. 2006, p. 31).

As Kambo also points out, the selection of students who could pursue education was made based on “purely” selective policies, aiming to create a “new intelligentsia” consisting of people from the laboring class as well as people from villages, who were identified as the main allies of the Party of Labor in Albania, thus making the social origin and the political orientation the two selective criteria for higher education (2005, p. 396). The same selective-policy condition is also documented by Elisabeth and Jean-Paul Champseix who worked as French language lecturers at Tirana University from 1982-1988, as they observed that many families dreamt of sending their children to university, but were unable to do so since the “party would use inaccessibility to university as a mechanism of penalty against those people that crossed the line” (2015, p. 244). What is more, families having a “bad biography” for political reasons were also hindered from obtaining loans or scholarships for their children, and all those who helped “enemy elements” to advance in education would be publicly denounced, disciplined administratively, or even suffer from penal measures taken against them (Sadiku, 2016, p. 154). As Sadiku confirms, these guidelines were communicated through a circular letter that the Council of Ministers distributed to all state structures on August 06, 1968 (2016, p. 154).

These extreme measures against whole families put many people who were expected to take actions against “state enemies” contrary to their will in such difficult positions that they often had to think of coping mechanisms that would enable them to merely remain unharmed or even create better opportunities for themselves and their children by openly positioning themselves against “enemy elements”. In Woodcock’s oral history research, there are several stories of people who did just that: survived dictatorship in communist Albania. For example, after the same respondent’s (Mevludë) brother disappeared while escaping from Albania, she became isolated, both socially and professionally, while “one of her sisters broke contact with the family to give her children a chance to have good biographies and thus be able to access higher education” (216, p. 69). Other examples of people’s coping mechanisms to remain unharmed, that Woodcock presents, are linked with the gentle actions of teachers, who “were expected to use shame and fear as a tool of the education they provided” (p. 98) and “were not allowed to formally recognize the achievements of *deklasuar* students” (p.150). Yet some chose to at least respect and try to leave unharmed the children they were supposed to intimidate, while still not going against the party line in taking certain actions.

State propaganda about women's emancipation

Propaganda in communist regimes was systematically used to shape ideology and behavior through controlled messaging (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). The propagandistic tone on women's emancipation in Albania was higher than the actual results of state policies on women specifically, even though concrete measures were taken regarding women's progress in several ways. These measures, though, were not primarily and genuinely concerned with women and girls' needs or realities; instead, the focus was on women as members of the workforce who had to contribute to building and maintaining the socialist state rule. As state leadership openly propagated in favor of women's emancipation in 1967, it was visible that this campaign wasn't primarily catering to women's needs. As Këllici and Danaj state, "the purpose of emancipation was to crush patriarchal relations (i.e., the submission to the authority of the father or husband, marriage arrangements, productive roles to be performed strictly in the domestic sphere, etc.) bringing the state/party control within the family" (2016, p. 40). This political move once again reinforces the argument that women were just a cog in the machine that the state needed to control and command to overcome its shortages. Indeed, the need to control women was higher than the concern about women's rights and their position in society, and this control was dominant in all spheres. Yet, state propaganda constantly tried to trick the masses into believing that religion and capitalism were the evils of society while failing to address the harsh realities that women and girls faced in socialist Albania.

In fact, "*Shqiptarja e Re*" and the resounding state propaganda about women's emancipation in Albania did generate the discourse of women's rights, and many female figures performing in different jobs were promoted as instances of such a mission being accomplished thanks to the Party of Labor. Almost all the covers of different issues of the magazine featured real women in the workplace domain, thus communicating the message that women were present in all types of jobs. Many issues of the magazine included speeches of women politicians, who were mainly related to the male leaders of the time and took, in their turn, leadership roles regarding women's lives as contributors to the state. As Logoreci also argues, "the cause of emancipation was greatly enhanced by the prominent position that the wives of the three leading politicians - Enver Hoxha, Mehmet Shehu, Hysni Kapo - achieved during the post-war years" (1977, p. 138). Within their responsibilities, these important women promoted emancipation as part of women's identity and self-perception.

As Liri Belishova stated in her speech at the Second Congress of the Albanian Labour Party in 1952, she recognized the strength women have as active members of society who had to be freed from confinement

within their reproductive role. However, her use of Stalin's rhetoric to promote women's participation in the workforce reveals an underlying contradiction. Rather than advancing a genuine women-friendly agenda, this framing reinforced the idea that women's emancipation was valuable primarily insofar as it served the interests of the party and the socialist state. As Këlliçi and Danaj (2016) argue, the regime's gender discourse often mobilized women for labor and political visibility, not to achieve gender equality, but to meet production goals and ideological objectives under a patriarchal party structure. Coming from a woman, this statement ironically defines the limits within which women's subjectivity had to be confined: men's approval of agency within the party. However, the claim that Liri Belishova's exclusion from the Political Bureau in 1960 stemmed from her strong female leadership threatening Enver Hoxha does not hold upon closer scholarly scrutiny. As Boriçi (2023) demonstrates, the real reason for her political downfall was her opposition to the abrupt break in relations between Albania and the USSR, at a time when the Party of Labour of Albania was aligning itself with Maoist China. Belishova, along with her husband Maqo Çomo, openly questioned this realignment, which led to their removal from key political positions and internment. Furthermore, Boriçi (2019) emphasizes that after 1953, no individual posed a true threat to Enver Hoxha's absolute authority in Albania, indicating that her exclusion was not a matter of gender-based rivalry but a reaction to her dissent on a crucial foreign policy matter.

As Sonia Combe discusses, the issue of women's political subjectivity under the socialist regime and women's oppression under the omnipotence of the party-state has been neglected by historiography (2015). Belishova's case is only one of many more examples where women's contribution could be easily forgotten if a woman opposed the system, which showed no differential treatment towards women by exposing them to torture or imprisonment. As Woodcock argues:

"Women as well as men were politically persecuted, but the experiences of women in political prisons have never been culturally or politically recognized in Albania—even now, twenty years after the communist rulers instituted neoliberal reforms and called themselves democratic. Women who were persecuted, unlike men, have not been perceived as heroic survivors of the regime's cruelest torturers. Instead, the shame of having been tortured and imprisoned in that time still adheres to the individual and their family" (2014, p. 42).

As a group of Albanian researchers has shown after thorough archival work, the Party's actions after 1967 greatly affected women's lives

in Albania, adding more workload to women while not providing services in compensation. According to these findings, the party was lying about the achievements regarding the eradication of illiteracy as well as the extent to which women's lives were improved through employment under the "women's emancipation" propaganda. In their study, they concluded that Enver Hoxha also used lies in his war against private property, which proved that gender equality was only used for propagandistic purposes Musaj et al. (2012, p. 49). State control became omnipresent in the lives of Albanian citizens through ideological reforms, which showed little consideration for human rights, but relied on several propagandistic means to claim the so-called achievements in several spheres.

What did the Pictures Try to Show?

This part of the research explores how images in the *Shqiptarja e re* magazine were used to convey the ideology of the communist state in Albania. Using semiological analysis for 4 photos used on the magazine covers of January, February, March, and April 1976, this paper analyzes images looking for hidden or explicit traces of ideology. Most images were accompanied by iconical, indexical, and symbolic signs that were carefully prepared to convey the intended meaning of the party.

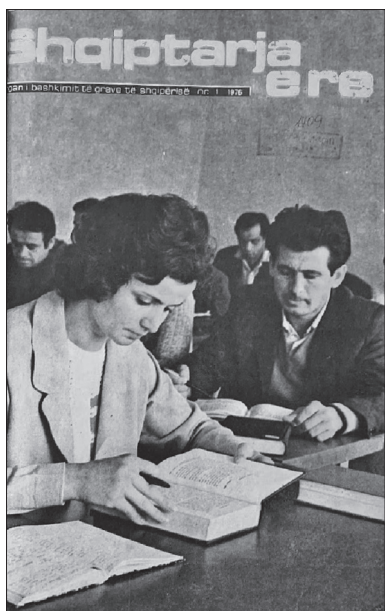


Figure 1. The cover of "The New Albanian Woman" magazine, an organ of the Union of Albanian Women. No. 1, 1976.

Step 1. What are the signs in the images on the magazine covers? This image portrays a classroom environment, showing adult education, where there are at least 5 men and only one woman. However, the main focus of the picture is on the woman, surrounded by several books that are placed on the desks. Some of the books are open, while others are closed, and everybody is reading, dressed in a formal dress code.

Step 2. What do the signs signify 'in themselves'? The books, desks, and the classroom signify education and are symbolically chosen to unmistakably convey this idea. The adults in formal dress codes that are focused on reading signify serious devotion to education by the state.

Step 3. How do these signs relate to other signs ‘in themselves’? The books are symbols of knowledge, while men and women are iconic signs of mature and devoted people.

Step 4. What are their connections to wider systems of meaning (intertextuality)? Books and adults are two signs of the education of new men and women in communist Albania.

Step 5. How can we use the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology? As stated by Abazi & Doja, “the broader political and social context that generated widespread interest in the collection, description, conservation, and often exaltation of one’s own nation’s and people’s culture, all together with the scientific ideal of a nation-state building discipline” (2016, p. 166).



Figure 2. The cover of “The New Albanian Woman” magazine, an organ of the Union of Albanian Women. No. 2, 1976.

Translated Text: The woman, liberated by the popular revolution from political oppression and economic exploitation, takes an active part in the socialist construction of the country and the defense of the homeland. The woman enjoys equal rights with the man at work, in remuneration, in rest, in social security, in education, in all social-political activity, and in the family. (From the draft constitution of the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania: Article 46).

Step 1. What are the signs in the images on the magazine covers? The background of the picture shows the inside of a working environment, most probably a factory. In the center appear 6 workers, 4 women, and 2 men. The women are wearing head covers and are placed in the center of the magazine cover, surrounded by one man on the left and the other on the right side of the picture. One of the women is holding the main newspaper of the time, *Zeri i Popullit* (The people’s voice), and reading out loud the draft constitution of the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania. The rest are listening to her with their eyes fixed on the newspaper.

Step 2. What do the signs signify ‘in themselves’? The newspaper is an icon of information, the group of workers indicates working people and the factory symbolizes production work.

Step 3. How do these signs relate to other signs ‘in themselves’?

The composition of a factory working environment and 6 workers, where women outnumber men while reading the newspaper, combines production work with the reality of complying with the state-building process.

Step 4. What are their connections to wider systems of meaning (intertextuality)? Having the text explain the image simplifies understanding the intended meaning of this magazine cover. This caption juxtaposes the past, when women were supposedly subject to economic exploitation, to the present, when women are reported to “take an active part in the socialist construction of the country and the defense of the homeland”. The image of women positioned inside a factory, in dressing attire, stopping their working tasks to read this statement, reinforces the idea that conveying the message of “the woman enjoy(ing) equal rights with the man at work, in remuneration, in rest, in social security, in education, in all social-political activity, and the family”, is more important than the factual truth of that very message.

Step 5. How can we use the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology? As stated in step 4, the ideology of the party “liberating women” is so forcefully narrated that it can easily lead to the counter-argument of asking the question: then why are these women not working but reading the newspaper inside the factory?

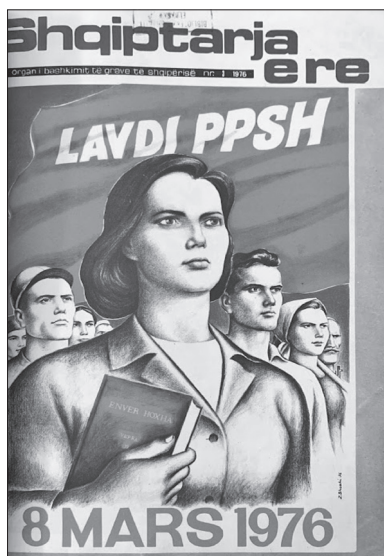


Figure 3. The cover of “The New Albanian Woman” magazine, organ of the Union of Albanian Women. No. 3, 1976. Painting by Z. Shoshi, 1976.

Translated text appearing on the cover: Glory to the LPA (Labour Party of Albania); March 8th, 1976.

The titles of two articles on the next page are:

1. FULL OF OPTIMISM AND REVOLUTIONARY ARDOR, WITH NEW VICTORIES ON THE CELEBRATION OF MARCH 8TH
2. The lessons of the party illuminate the path of Albanian women

Step 1. What are the signs in the images on the magazine covers? Unlike other pictures of real women, this cover

is a painting of a desired image to be distributed by the magazine. There is a sharp contrast of colors in this image, with black and white used for the people and red used for the flag, the book cover, and the text: March

8th, 1976. The signs on this cover include a red flag with white text saying *Glory to the Party of Labour*, the book of Enver Hoxha, and the unified gaze of the people painted on the cover. The far right image shows an elderly man holding a gun.

Step 2. What do the signs signify ‘in themselves’? The flag is a symbolic sign of the Albanian nation; the book the young woman is holding is an indexical sign, and so is the gun that the old man is holding. The book written by Enver Hoxha signifies the lessons guiding every step women and men were supposed to take, while the elderly man wearing a mustache and holding a gun signifies the support, protection, and involvement of the elderly in the future.

Step 3. How do these signs relate to other signs ‘in themselves’? The composition of this painting in contrasting colors shows a different pattern, with people’s faces and bodies painted in black and white, while the sky and the flag have light blue and red colors.

Step 4. What are their connections to wider systems of meaning (intertextuality)? This is the cover of March 1976, which refers to International Women’s Day, whose semantic meaning shifted from a day of protest to a day of celebrating victories “full of optimism and ardor”. Also, the contrast of the painting refers to darkness and light, with the people supposedly being in the darkness and the lessons of the Party of Labour shedding light on them and providing them with knowledge.

Step 5. How can we use the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology? The flag, the book, and the text from *March 8th 1976* written on the cover of the magazine, have the same red color. Being the color of the Albanian national flag, red symbolizes Albanian identity. This knowledge is used as a foundation upon which Enver Hoxha’s books and ideology are embedded into a made-believe continuum of Albanian identity. Also, using red to write March 8th serves as a reminder that it is because of the “revolutionary ardor” of the party that women can “celebrate new victories. This visual portrayal of 3 signs in red color has a top-down movement in how it is portrayed on the cover, Flag-Hoxha’s Book-March 8th. Meanwhile, the men and women painted in black and white are staring at the same point in the distance. Some of the men and women in the picture are wearing head covers, indicating their status as workers, who supposedly will work with optimism and ardor, led by the (red) principles of Enver Hoxha. In contrast to most other covers where the magazine title is in red, this particular issue is green, which reinforces the idea that the red color in this particular cover has been used symbolically to convey the socialist ideology. This message is also explicit in one article in this month’s magazine, which is entitled: “The lessons of the party illuminate the path of Albanian women”.



Figure 4. The cover of “The New Albanian Woman” magazine, an organ of the Union of Albanian Women. No. 4, 1976.

Translated text on the cover:

DEFENDING THE SOCIALIST
FATHERLAND IS THE HIGHEST DUTY
AND GREATEST HONOR FOR ALL
CITIZENS.

Step 1. What are the signs in the images on the magazine covers? This image shows a very young girl in military clothing, holding a weapon and wearing a helmet.

Step 2. What do the signs signify ‘in themselves’? The military clothing, the weapon, and the helmet signify war or readiness to fight.

Step 3. How do these signs relate to other signs ‘in themselves’? The military clothing, the weapon, and the helmet are signs that relate to war, but the surrounding environment where the young girl is standing is a peaceful spring day in a city, under a blooming tree. However, the war signs relate to the accompanying caption of the image, whose main message is focused on the need to defend the fatherland as the most important duty for all citizens, despite gender.

Step 4. What are their connections to wider systems of meaning (intertextuality)? This gender-blind call for defending the fatherland comes in contradiction to the target of the magazine, which usually addresses mainly women as both subjects and objects.

Step 5. How can we use the signs via their codes to explore the precise articulation of ideology and mythology? These three war-related signs in this picture are the embodiment of the gender-blind “call to arms”, which aligns with many other guidelines of the Party of Labor.

The analysis of these images requires understanding the complexities of “state feminism” in Albania. These visuals reveal how women’s emancipation was often defined exclusively through their relationship to the state and labor, rather than through genuine autonomy or individual liberation. The persistent emphasis on women’s participation in education, labor, political loyalty, and military readiness, as systematically displayed across the covers, directly aligns with the state’s agenda of comprehensive mobilization and control. Figure 2, with women reading about equality

in a factory, is the embodiment of this instrumentalization. Women's "liberation" is presented as being dependent on their service to the state, mainly as productive workers and loyal citizens rather than on their fundamental rights or personal freedom.

Additionally, what is *not* shown in the images of the magazine covers is as significant as what is. The consistent absence of domestic labor implies that women's value was primarily derived from public production, reinforcing the intensified "double burden" by making their private responsibilities invisible. Similarly, the lack of space dedicated to any kind of personal joy or individual fulfillment suggests that true fulfillment was to be found only through collective service to the state, incorporating individual aspirations within the regime's grand narrative. Also, despite repeated rhetorical claims of liberation, education, and emancipation, the images subtly undermine genuine gender equality by consistently portraying women within male-dominated frameworks and domains, suggesting a state-dictated rather than an autonomous form of equality. Therefore, this form of emancipation that was closely tied to the state needs reveals a utilitarian and constrained form of women's emancipation.

If we look at the sequence of the magazine covers across the first 4 months of 1976, it reveals a deliberate visual progression, mirroring the totalitarian state's comprehensive demands on women's lives. In January (Figure 1: Education), the cover, featuring only one woman prominently placed among men in an educational setting, signifies the demand that women must be transformed through knowledge. It underscores the state's emphasis on education as a primary tool for ideological molding and social re-engineering. In February (Figure 2: Labor), following education, the next logical step in the state's agenda is highlighted by the factory setting. Here, the idea is that women must contribute to production, demonstrating their active role in the socialist economy and state. In March (Figure 3: Political Loyalty), the highly idealized painting takes center stage, illustrating that women must adhere to party ideology, even instrumentalizing March 8th as a so-called achievement of women's emancipation. With its stark contrasts and emphasis on the flag, Hoxha's book, and the unified collective gaze, this image symbolizes unwavering loyalty to the Party and its leader. In April (Figure 4: Military Readiness), the culmination of this ideological progression is encapsulated by the militarized girl, conveying the ultimate demand that women (and their children) must be willing to sacrifice for the state. This image represents the most extreme form of loyalty and readiness for national defense, extending to the youngest generation.

Conclusion

The totalitarian state in Albania meticulously sought to construct an entirely new political and social system, which included molding “new men and women” in strict adherence to state-mandated rules and ideology. This pervasive ideology was disseminated through numerous national and local publishing bodies, such as the newspaper *Mësuesi* (The Teacher) and *Revista Shkenca dhe Jeta* (The Magazine Science and Life), whose main purpose was to transmit the directives of the Labor Party from the top down. *Shqiptarja e Re* specifically targeted women, utilizing carefully crafted images and texts to ensure that the ruling party’s intended messages were conveyed.

Recognizing women as a vital force for state-building and an integral part of the labor force, the magazine covered a broad spectrum of topics. These ranged from educating the masses, through initiatives like women’s schools or three-month courses and promoting women reading the press in workplaces, to fostering a high spirit of mobilization, particularly in anticipation of International Women’s Day on March 8th. Every article was filled with ideo-political education, frequently employing slogans such as: “Women are a great force for the construction of socialist Albania,” “Women in every field of life,” and “Our women are everywhere.”

Despite the severe socio-economic hardships experienced across Albania during the Party of Labour’s rule, certain segments of society were explicitly targeted as “enemies of the state.” As Musta and Memisha (2006, p. 7) noted, “Even though no one was immunized from the attacks of the class struggle... the degree of suffering that people went through under the communist dictatorship was in no way the same.” Under the guise of a propagandistically well-intentioned but often notorious “equality for all” slogan, human rights were systematically violated nationwide. These abuses, however, were silenced by loud state propaganda designed to intimidate the oppressed and their sympathizers. Fear of imprisonment, persecution, and execution permeated daily life under a totalitarian regime that had no agenda for human rights.

This study on the communist period in Albania sheds light on the propaganda techniques employed over decades concerning education and women’s emancipation. The totalitarian state exercised total control over its citizens, approaching issues like the “eradication of illiteracy” and “women’s emancipation” as instruments in building and maintaining the state’s power. These issues were often disregarded when dealing with persecuted individuals, who were denied access to higher education or desirable jobs due to “class struggle” policies.

This article articulates how totalitarian regimes use emancipatory language and concepts such as women’s emancipation or eradicating

illiteracy while simultaneously undermining genuine emancipation and imposing more burdens on women without providing support. This was also the purpose of many of the images inside the magazines and on the cover of *Shqiptarja e Re*. Some of the specific propaganda techniques that made the Albanian regime's visual communication effective were juxtaposition, symbolism, and gendered positioning. Juxtaposition is seen in the strategic placement of contrasting elements such as the innocent young girl with military gear in Figure 4, and the factory setting with a reading circle in Figure 2, to create new meanings and neutralize ideological dissonance. Symbolism is portrayed in the extensive and repetitive use of powerful symbolic signs (e.g., the red flag, Enver Hoxha's book, military attire) to evoke specific patriotic, ideological, or dutiful responses, forging a strong emotional and cognitive link to state-sanctioned narratives. Gendered positioning is observed in the careful and deliberate placement of women within visual compositions, such as central yet outnumbered in Figure 1, or as part of a homogenous collective in Figure 3, to convey both their increasing presence in public life and their controlled integration into existing, often patriarchal, power structures.

These visual strategies are not unique to Albanian propaganda and can be observed in contemporary political imagery across various contexts, highlighting the enduring relevance of semiotic analysis in deconstructing visual persuasion. By understanding these historical mechanisms, we can better identify how similar techniques are used to shape public opinion, normalize specific ideologies, and even appropriate progressive language for conservative or authoritarian ends even in the present day. These images of *The New Albanian Woman* present one study within the complex and often contradictory visual politics of totalitarian control.

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