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EASTERN EUROPE ECHOES: NARRATIVES,
CULTURES, AND MEMORIES FROM COLD
WAR TO DAYTON'S LEGACY (1946–2026)

Edited by

Vito Saracino, Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice



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1.CARICATURE AS A REFLECTION OF COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA IN BILATERAL RELATIONS BETWEEN ALBANIA AND THE SOVIET UNION (1945-1961)

by Oltsen Gripshi*

Abstract: Questo studio analizza il ruolo del genere artistico delle caricature politiche come strumento di propaganda nell'Albania comunista durante gli anni 1945-1961, con un focus sulle relazioni bilaterali con l'Unione Sovietica. Basandosi principalmente sui materiali visivi della rivista politica satirico-umoristica "Hosteni", la ricerca esamina il modo in cui il linguaggio iconografico, il simbolismo ideologico e la narrazione grafica furono utilizzati per costruire l'immagine dell'URSS come "grande fratello" e difensore del socialismo, nonché per demonizzare l'Occidente capitalista. Attraverso l'analisi di copertine rappresentative della rivista "Hosteni", si evidenzia la trasformazione delle caricature da strumento artistico a "arma" politica per educare le masse e legittimare la linea ufficiale del Partito del Lavoro d'Albania. Lo studio dimostra che i cambiamenti nel discorso visivo riflettono direttamente il ravvicinamento, le tensioni e infine la rottura delle relazioni bilaterali albanese-sovietiche, trasformando le caricature in uno specchio delle dinamiche ideologiche dell'epoca.

Parole chiave: caricatura, arte visiva, realismo socialista, propaganda, Albania.

Abstract: This study analyses the role of the artistic genre of political cartoons as a propaganda instrument in communist Albania during the years 1945–1961, with a focus on bilateral relations with the Soviet Union.

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Relying mainly on the visual materials of the political, satirical-humorous magazine “Hosteni”, the research examines the way in which iconographic language, ideological symbolism and graphic narrative were used to build the image of the USSR as the “big brother” and defender of socialism, as well as to demonise the capitalist West. Through the analysis of representative covers of the magazine “Hosteni”, the transformation of cartoons from an artistic tool into a political “weapon” for educating the masses and legitimising the official line of the Party of Labour of Albania is evidenced. The study shows that changes in visual discourse directly reflect the rapprochement, tensions and ultimately the breakdown of Albanian-Soviet bilateral relations, transforming cartoons into a mirror of the ideological dynamics of the time.

Keywords: caricature, visual art, socialist realism, propaganda, Albania.

Introduction

This scholarly study focuses on analysing and documenting the relationship between communist Albania and the Soviet Union, which began at the conclusion of the Second World War and symbolically ended in 1961 with the severance of bilateral diplomatic relations. This relationship constitutes one of the most ideologically charged periods in modern Albanian history. Throughout this sixteen-year span, Albania’s international relations were profoundly shaped by its ideological orientation and by the broader dynamics of the communist bloc.

Following the rupture of relations with Yugoslavia in 1948, the Albanian leadership under Enver Hoxha significantly deepened its alliance with the Soviet Union, regarding it as the sole centre of political, ideological, and economic legitimacy. Within this framework, the present research seeks not only to identify and document historical developments, but also to familiarise

contemporary readers with the nature and mechanisms of Enver Hoxha's communist propaganda, which evolved into a fundamental instrument for constructing political and cultural reality in the country.

A central role in disseminating this propaganda was played by the artistic genre of political caricature, which assumed particular importance as a means of mass communication and ideological formation for successive generations during this period.

This scholarly study, entitled "*Caricature as a Reflection of Communist Propaganda in Albanian-Soviet Bilateral Relations (1945-1961)*", seeks to examine precisely this intersection between visual art and politics, focusing on the period from the re-establishment of diplomatic relations after the Second World War to their official rupture in 1961. Although Albanian-Soviet relations had originally been established on 17 September 1924 and were interrupted in April 1939 following the fascist occupation of Albania, the post-1945 period represents the most intensive and ideologically charged phase of this relationship. Diplomatic ties were restored in 1945 at the level of legations and were subsequently elevated to the level of embassies, signaling a profound political and institutional rapprochement.

At the core of this analysis lies the manner in which Albanian caricature, particularly that published in the political satirical-humoristic magazine "Hosteni" conveyed and reproduced the official discourse concerning the Soviet Union. Founded in 1945, "Hosteni" became the principal organ of political satire in communist Albania and a platform through which art was explicitly placed at the service of ideology. Through stylised figures, ideologically charged symbolism, and sharply drawn contrasts between "friends" and "enemies," caricature constructed a clear visual narrative that was both readily accessible to the masses and emotionally compelling.

The period 1953–1961, spanning from the death of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin to the official rupture of relations, constitutes a crucial phase for understanding the transformation of propagandistic iconography. In the initial years following Stalin's death, relations between Albania and the Soviet Union were characterised by close political, economic, and cultural cooperation. Soviet assistance, along with exchanges in the fields of education and the arts most notably the dispatch of a group of Albanian artists to pursue studies at the Ilya Efimovich Repin Institute in Leningrad attests to the direct Soviet influence on the formation of Albania's artistic elite. Figures such as Agim Zajmi, Guri Madhi, Kristaq Rama, and Mumtaz Dhrami would later emerge as central personalities in Albanian visual art, reflecting the aesthetics of Socialist Realism acquired in the Soviet Union.

During this phase, caricatures portrayed the Soviet Union as the "big brother," the protector of Albania against the threat of Western imperialism. The figures of Lenin, Stalin, and later Khrushchev were idealised as enlightened leaders of the world revolution, while the United States of America and NATO were depicted as malevolent and menacing forces. The covers of "Hosteni", particularly in the mid-1950s, were frequently dedicated to the "fraternal" Albanian–Soviet friendship, thereby constructing a consistent and enduring pro-Soviet iconography.

However, the process of de-Stalinization initiated by Nikita Khrushchev, together with the Soviet Union's rapprochement with Yugoslavia, was interpreted by the Albanian leadership as a revisionist deviation from Marxist–Leninist principles. This ideological confrontation marked the first serious rupture in bilateral relations and was immediately reflected in the propagandistic discourse. Caricature, which until then had extolled the Soviet Union, began to portray it as a betrayer of the correct revolutionary line. In this way, it assumed a dual function: initially

as an instrument for affirming the alliance, and subsequently as a visual weapon in the delegitimisation of the former ally.

In this context, political caricature was not merely a form of humorous artistic expression, but a structured tool of ideological education and emotional mobilisation. Accordingly, this study examines how the artistic genre of caricature was employed and how it functioned as a direct mirror of official orientations, faithfully reflecting the shifts, tensions, and confrontations in Albanian–Soviet relations. Through an analysis of visual content, symbolism, and discursive transformations before and after 1961, this research aims to demonstrate that caricature was not only a product of communist propaganda, but also a vivid testimony to the political transformations that marked this decisive chapter in the history of Albanian visual art and politics.

1. Communist Albania through the artistic genre of caricature

In its communist journey from the end of World War II to the “great” year of 1990, which shattered a utopia of almost 50 years, Albania, after breaking off bilateral relations with Yugoslavia in 1948, went even further by deepening relations with the Bolshevik Soviet Union. In this sense, the present study examines the role of political caricature in the service of communist propaganda in Albania during the period 1945–1961, an essential phase of relations with the Soviet Union, although these relations had been established many years earlier, on September 17, 1924. In April 1939, these relations would be interrupted due to the occupation of Albania by fascist Italy. Immediately after the end of World War II, diplomatic relations were restored in 1945 at the mission level and a year later in 1956 at the embassy level (Puto and Fischer, 2011). At the centre of this exhaustive analysis are the ways in which Albanian cartoons,

especially those published in the political, satirical-humorous magazine “Hosteni”, conveyed communist ideology and reflected political orientations, tensions, and turns in Albanian-Soviet relations. The analysis includes visual content, ideological symbolism, and changes in approach to the Soviet Union before and after the official breakup of bilateral relations in 1961. Relations between Albania and the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin (*Иосиф Виссарионович Сталин*^[ru]) in 1953 until their official dissolution in 1961 were characterised by a close political and ideological intertwining, which was deeply reflected in all forms of communist propaganda in Albania, including the artistic genre of caricature. The caricature unfortunately became an extraordinary political “weapon”, moving away from its essence of what it represents, which during this period played a dual role: in the years when relations were close and friendly, it reinforced the ideological alliance with the USSR and, later, when the two countries became “enemies” between them, it served to portray the USSR as a traitor to Marxist-Leninist principles. After Stalin’s death, Albania experienced a phase of close cooperation with the Soviet Union, especially during the first years of Khrushchev’s leadership. Ideological reform and economic aid were accompanied by a deepening of all-round cooperation, especially in the cultural sphere. This is also evidenced by the departure of a group of visual artists (who would later become the most prominent names in the history of Albanian visual art) to study at the renowned Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture “Ilia Efimovich Repin” (*Институт живописи, скульптуры и архитектуры имени И.Е.Репина*^[ru]) in Leningrad (today the Repin Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg) such as: Agim Zajmi, Guri Madhi, Jakup Keraj, Kristaq Rama, Kujtim Buza, Llambi Blido, Mumtaz Dhrami, Rafael Dembo, Sali Shijaku, Shaban Hadëri, Thanas Papa, Vilson Kilica and Zef Shoshi (Hoxha, 2008:54). However, the profound changes in Soviet policy,

particularly “de-Stalinization” and the Soviet Union’s rapprochement with Yugoslavia, were seen by the Albanian leadership as a revisionist deviation (Fischer, 1999:72). This would be the moment of the first breakthrough in bilateral relations between Albania and the Soviet Union, where cartoons had an important propaganda function. Communist cartoons in Albania were an ideological tool controlled by the state, which aimed not only at the political education of the masses, but also at conveying official positions in a simplified and emotionally charged manner. The biweekly political, satirical-humorous magazine “Hosteni” (founded in 1945), was the main press where these cartoons were published and used to ironise “class enemies”, “Western imperialists”, as well as to praise the Russian as a strategic ally of the Marxist-Leninist principles of communist Albania (Vickers, 1995:101). The cartoons of 1953–1957 had an extraordinary influence on the rise of pro-Soviet iconography which portrayed the Soviet Union as the “big brother” protecting Albania from the imperialist aggression of the Western countries. Figures such as Lenin, Stalin and Khrushchev were presented as the fathers of the revolution, while the United States of America and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) were depicted as imperialist devils. The magazine “Hosteni” of 1955 would dedicate several covers to this close “brotherly” Albanian-Soviet relationship such as:

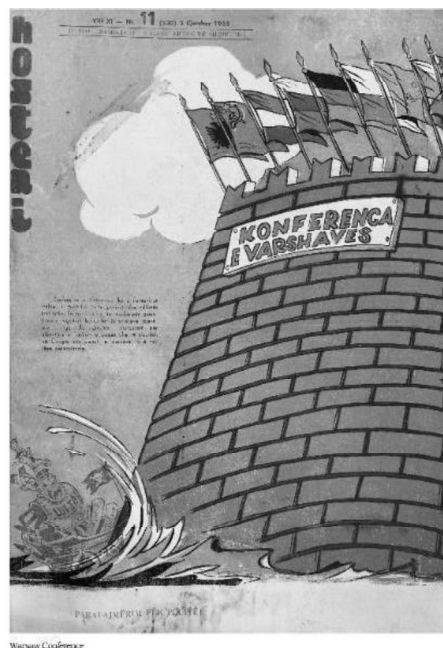
The cover dated June 2, 1955, Year XI of publication, No. 11 (330) (fig. 1) played an important role in the propaganda of the time, especially when we are dealing with that of the communist regime in Albania. A detailed analysis of the elements of this cover testifies to the foresight of the dictator Enver Hoxha and his entire ideological machinery based on the principles of Marxism-Leninism, such as:

- a) The image of a high red brick wall representing the tower of a defensive castle, where the flags of several communist countries and allies of the Soviet Union, led by Albania, the Soviet Union, Hungary, Bulgaria, East Germany, Poland,

Romania, Czechoslovakia and China (despite not being part of the Warsaw Pact) (Collins, 1969:5), wave one after the other;

- b) A sign is drawn on the wall of the tower that reads: “Warsaw Conference.” This refers to the Warsaw Pact, also known as the Warsaw Treaty (*Варшавский договор*^[ru]), a military alliance of Eastern Bloc countries, established on May 14, 1955, as a countermeasure to NATO.

In the lower left part, we can see (although in small size and hidden under the blue tones of the sky) a pirate ship identified by the flag with the skull and crossbones on a black background, on which stands a supernatural creature with three heads and three hands dressed in Roman armor, which presents a satirical caricature, on which is written “WAR” and under the feet of the three-headed creature are two letters; on one is written “WAR PLANS” and on the other is written “AGGRESSIVE PACTS”. The three-headed creature holding the US bomb in its hands represents the Western imperialist forces, the Hosteni magazine, 1955.



US and NATO. The imperialist boat crashes against the symbolic Warsaw Wall, which represents the ideological union of the socialist countries. In this perspective, the caricatured image of this 1955 Hosten cover conveys a pure political and propaganda message for the Soviet Union, such as:

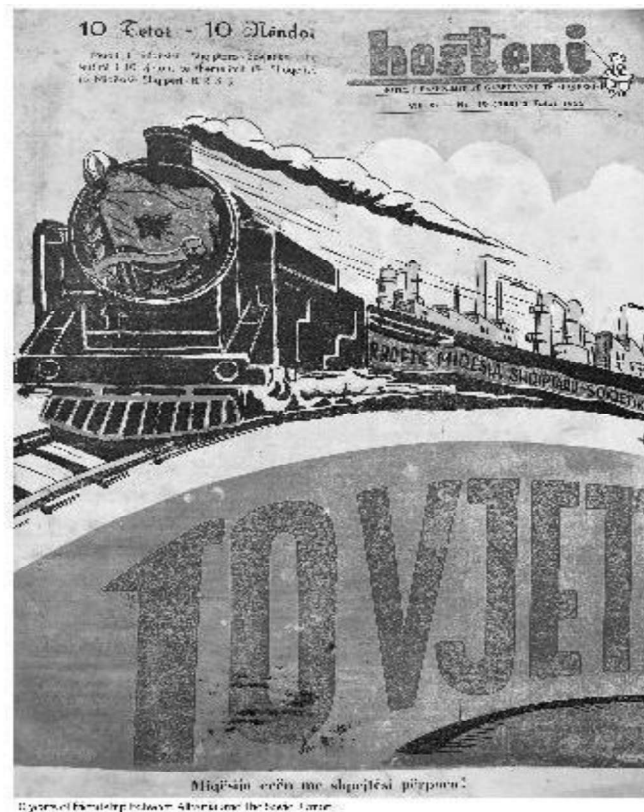
1. The Warsaw Conference and its alliance represent a strong defensive bloc against imperialist aggression;
2. The figure of the pirate is a caricature of the West, which is presented as a failed threat to the socialist countries;
3. The red wall (symbol of communism and collective defence) is impassable for “capitalist pirates”.

The text written below the image in block letters: “WARNING TO PIRATES” is an ironic threat and an expression of the determination of the socialist bloc not to allow intervention or aggression from the West.

The cartoon on this cover is a stereotypical example of communist propaganda art from the 1950s, using humor, irony, and symbolism to reinforce the idea of the unification of socialist countries against Western imperialism. Therefore, the cartoon in this case on the cover of the magazine “Hosteni” was used to influence public opinion in the line of the Party of Labour of Albania.

2. The cover dated October 2, 1955, Year XI of publication, No. 19 (338) (fig. 2) is an object of great importance for the iconographic, symbolic, political and ideological analysis of the Albanian context of the 1950s, at the height of close relations with the Soviet Union. This issue of the magazine “Hosteni” was published at a time when Albania was deeply linked politically, economically and ideologically to the Soviet Union. The image of the cover testifies to the peak period of Albanian-Soviet friendship, before the breakdown of relations in the 1960s. At the top of the cover it is written:

“October 10 - November 10” The month of Albanian-Soviet friendship and the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the founding of Albania - B.R.S.S. Friendship Society” (Hosteni, 1955:338).



Hosteni magazine, 1955

Its image not only shows us a historical fact such as the celebration of the 10th anniversary of friendship with the Soviet Union, but above all it shows us how the dictator Enver Hoxha spread the ideological narrative of his communist regime to the masses to promote and exalt this close and “brotherly” connection with the Soviets.

The iconographic aspect is another very important dimension to deepen by analysing several elements such as:

1. The train: It occupies most of the image, symbolising forward movement, progress, industry and technological development, so much so that on its back the wagons are not visible, but metallurgical constructions of heavy industry. While the wagons themselves are covered by a large red bandage where the slogan is written in black block letters: "LONG LIVE THE ALBANIAN-SOVIET FRIENDSHIP". In a propaganda sense, the train often represents the march towards socialism or the building of a bright future (always according to the doctrines of Marxism-Leninism).
2. The flag and symbolism on the front of the train: An emblem where the Albanian flag is intertwined with the double-headed eagle with the yellow five-pointed star at the top and the Soviet flag with the hammer and sickle behind it. This iconography suggests the ideological union and the indestructible alliance between the two sworn communist countries;
3. Steam and movement: The white clouds of steam of the train create a feeling of dynamism and optimism for moving forward united under the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which we also read in the lower centre with the slogan: "Friendship moves forward quickly!".
4. Colors: Red (the color of communism), yellow (the color of socialist ideological enlightenment) and black (the color of defeating imperialist revisionism) dominate, giving the image a sense of power and determination.

3. The cover dated November 2, 1955, Year XI of publication, No. 21 (340) (fig. 3), which is divided into two horizontally stretched scenes, each with a contrasting color and tone, conveying powerful political messages: the upper scene is dominated by the color red and below it is written "CONGRATULATIONS!". The central subject of this scene is the presentation of an Albanian man with a plis

(symbol of the Albanian people) with his back turned to the audience, embracing with his hand on the shoulder a man dressed in traditional Soviet clothes (yellow shirt with red collar, symbol of the Soviet people), who also embraces the Albanian man with a smile. The background part highlights the industrial aspect with modern factories and a high-voltage electric line; signs of industrial progress and modernisation, linked to the development of Albania thanks to Soviet aid. The red colour of the background symbolises the socialist flag, the revolution and the ideological ties with the Soviet Union. While the text written above on the right side: "On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the recognition of the Government of the R.P. of Albania by the Soviet Union" (Hosteni, 1955:340), reinforces the meaning of the image itself, which clearly represents the political celebration of Albanian-Soviet friendship, where through the fraternal embrace it propagates the sincere and close relations between two nations.

The lower scene is in black and blue, with the ironic inscription: "CONSOLATIONS!" below. In this scene, the central subject is the embrace of two elderly men, one dressed in military uniform, with a royal crown on his head (symbol of Western monarchies) and a cross hanging around his neck, while the other dressed in bourgeois clothes (symbol of the kulak), they embrace while crying. The labels that read "AUCTION" and "CONCESSION" ironically depict the connection between the monarchs and the kulak bourgeois as "old institutions" seeking refuge in each other in a miserable state. The overturning of the chair shows the decline of royal power and the bourgeoisie in the face of the unstoppable socialist revolution. While the dark-colored background and the tears flowing like a "fountain" testify to the great contrast it has with the upper scene, where in contrast, in the lower scene there is sadness, regression and decadence.



Hosteni magazine, 1955

The analysis of this cover highlights the symbolic and political meaning, where the East-West dichotomy reveals two important elements such as:

1. The East (USSR): brotherhood, industrial development, sincere friendship;
2. The West (monarchy + bourgeoisie + religion): decadence, failure, miserable union.

Therefore, the communist propaganda symbolism is conveyed to the masses with a clear thought and ideology:

1. Empires, bourgeoisie and religion are presented as “dead” or past, while socialism is modern, constructive and progressive for society;

2. The use of caricature to mock ideological opponents is a classic technique of leftist propaganda of the time.

Another essential element in analysing the image of this cover is the message conveyed to the Albanian reader through the 1955 magazine “Hosteni”:

1. The regime seeks to reinforce internal faith in the alliance with the Soviet Union, at a time when this friendship is seen as essential for the reconstruction and modernisation of the country after World War II;
2. At the same time, it creates clear ideological enemies, in order to maintain the moral and political right of the regime.

In summary, this cover is a perfect example of the propaganda art of socialist realism, where graphic art is put at the service of a political narrative: strengthening friendship with the communist East and discrediting the bourgeois and religious West.

The three covers analysed above represent the great enthusiasm of the Albanian communists for the defence of Albania and Albanians from the Soviets. A relationship that would not last long, as the “brotherhood” with handshakes and hugs while grabbing each other’s shoulders would end with the breakdown of bilateral relations on the part of Albania.

The Soviet Union (USSR) would withdraw all personnel from the Soviet embassy in Tirana in November 1961. This action marked the break in diplomatic relations between the two countries. These relations were officially severed in December 1961 as a result of deep disagreements between the leaders of the two states, especially in terms of ideological divergences within the socialist bloc (Lalaj, 2006:300-315).

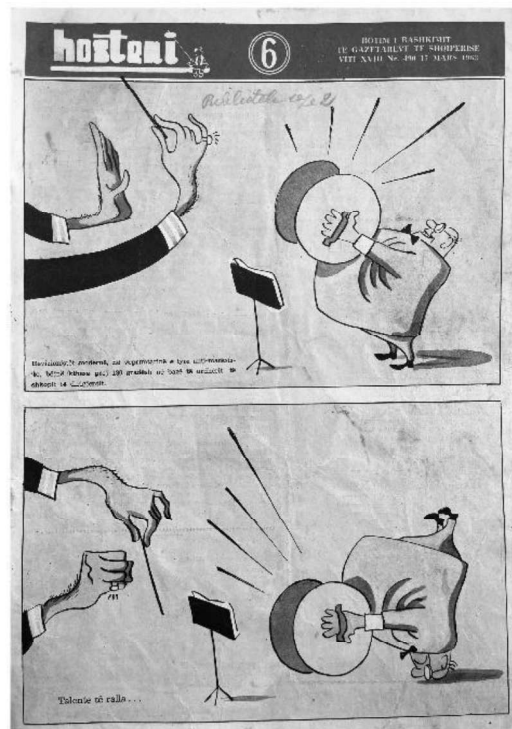
2. Ideological Revolution: From Alliance to Clash

After 1956, with Hrushov's criticism of Stalin and his rapprochement with Tito, the gradual breakdown and changes in the visual rhetoric of Albania-Soviet bilateral relations began. The cartoons began to change their iconographic and substantive approach. Instead of praise, a visual silence began and a shift towards elevating the Albanian leaders themselves to a pedestal as guarantors of the "straight Marxist-Leninist line" (Pano, 1968:123).

After the open deterioration of relations (especially after Khrushchev's visit to Belgrade in 1955 and the Bucharest Conference in 1960), the cartoons began to be anti-Soviet, which had only one purpose, the denunciation of "Soviet revisionism", depicting the leader as a traitor to the socialist revolution. The most discredited figure after Khrushchev was Brezhnev, who was portrayed and caricatured as a burlesque of corruption and unscrupulous compromise. After 1961, for years, the magazine "Hosteni" would pay special attention to discrediting the figure of Brezhnev and the Soviet Union as a whole. On the cover of Hosteni in 1963, dated March 17, Year XVIII of publication, No. 490 (fig. 4), we see a typical cartoon of Albanian political propaganda after the separation from the Soviet Union. The visual language used is satirical, ironizing and discrediting the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, and simultaneously condemning what the utopian communist regime of Enver Hoxha called revisionism.

The caricatured character is Khrushchev, who is shown playing the musical instrument of cymbals (*piatti*^[it]). The cover is divided into two scenes, where in the first one above the figure on the right, with a short, pot-bellied body, a big nose, a half-shaven face and glasses is a stereotypical caricature of Khrushchev, who was known in the Albanian satirical press as a symbol of ideological

betrayal of Marxism-Leninism. He is portrayed as funny, not serious and incompetent, banging the musical cymbals in full swing – an instrument that usually symbolises noise without content.



Modern revisionists, in their anti-Marxist activity, make 180-degree turns at the behest of the conductor's baton.

Hosteni magazine, 1963

In both scenes on the left we see a conductor (with long, elegant hands, but without a face), who represents the forces that command Hrushov decision-making outside Marxist principles, perhaps the Soviet bureaucratic apparatus or Khrushchev himself playing according to the interests of the new Soviet policy. The conductor's batons symbolise ideologically unweighted orders, where any slight change in direction brings exaggerated actions.

In the upper scene, Khrushchev reacts immediately and inappropriately to a signal from the conductor, creating a loud, meaningless noise. At the bottom left of the scene it is written: *"Modern revisionists, in their anti-Marxist activity, make 180-degree*

turns at the behest of the conductor.” (Hosteni, 1963:490). This is to show how Hrushov had turned his back on and betrayed the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism.

In the second scene, he collapses, losing complete control in an attempt to continue the “melody”, so much so that he creates an embarrassing and destabilising situation – a symbol of the consequences of revisionist policies. Again in the lower left we read: “*Rare talents...*” (Hosteni, 1963a), about the way in which the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Union has been reduced, who once was Stalin before Khrushchev, who led and inspired the unification of communist countries around the principles of Marxism-Leninism, but with Khrushchev everything turned upside down!

Hosteni magazine gives us a very clear message, that of ideological interpretation as criticism of Hrushov and Soviet revisionism, where we highlight:

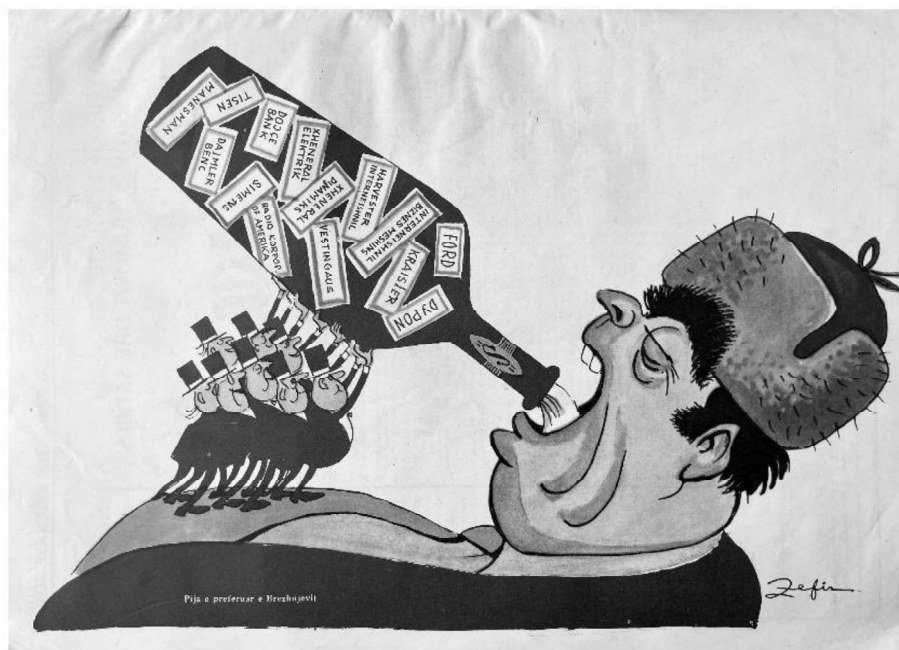
1. Albania under the leadership of Enver Hoxha was at the height of the clash with Khrushchev, after the final split between the ALP and the PKBS in the early 1960s;
2. Khrushchev was accused of abandoning the Marxist-Leninist line, of collaborating with Western imperialists and of peaceful policies that weakened the class struggle;
3. The cartoon shows that he behaves like a puppet, incapable of acting according to principles, dependent on the orders of Westerners, making useless ideological “noise” but without content.
4. The satire of this Hosteni cover image also serves as a symbolic punishment for any country or individual that might follow Hrushov’s path. The message is clear: those who betray Marxism-Leninism end up ridiculed, unstoppable, and a failure.

This cartoon on the cover of “Hosteni” is a visual propaganda weapon that conveys with harsh sarcasm the line of the Party of Labor of Albania towards the Soviet Union after the collapse. Hrushov is presented as a ridiculous caricature of a leader who no longer has either ideological control or dignity, “playing” in a perverted orchestra that no longer follows the true principles of the socialist revolution.

With the same discrediting and contemptuous approach, the new General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, is also caricatured after Khrushchev’s resignation from all political and state functions on October 15, 1964 (Walker, 1982:137). In the caricature of Zef Bumçi published inside the magazine “Hosteni” in 1973 and in the graphic novel by Enriko Veizi also published in “Hosteni” in 1977 we see how the figure of Brezhnev was interpreted by Albanian artists of that time.

In the caricature published inside the magazine “Hosteni”, January 12, 1973, Year XXVIII of publication, No. 1 (716) (fig. 5) we see expressed a strong political and propagandistic criticism towards the figure of Leonid Brezhnev, the leader of the Soviet Union at that time. The composition of the image is built with a simple language where it presents the caricature of Leonid Brezhnev in profile with a deformed face and a grotesque expression of facial expressions, consuming a drink from a giant bottle. The bottle he holds in his hand is large in proportion to the entire painted subject, similar in shape to a Russian wine or vodka bottle (where the American dollar sign is clearly read on its mouth), the contents of which are poured directly into the thirsty mouth. The bottle’s surface is covered with labels of Western corporations such as: Ford, DuPont, Chrysler, International Business Machines Corporation, International Harvester Company, Westinghouse, General Dynamics Corporation, General Electric Company, Radio Corporation of

America, Siemens, Deutsche Bank, Daimler-Benz AG, ThyssenKrupp AG and Mannesmann.



Brezhnev's favorite drink

Hosteni magazine, 1973

Below the bottle is a mise-en-scène depicting eight men wearing top hats and wearing black suits, white shirts, and bow ties, holding up the bottle that Brezhnev is drinking. The eight men are a symbol of the stereotype of Western capitalists, who themselves symbolise the financial and industrial elites of the West.

Brezhnev is depicted with an ushanka (ушанка) on his head, a characteristic Russian hat, and a swollen, sleepy face from the consumption of the drink that flows freely into his mouth. An iconography that presents him as addicted to “Western poison”! What we observe in this iconographic-symbolic analysis is that:

1. The bottle is a symbol of dependence on Western capitalism. The labels are from American and German corporations that represent the economy and industrial power of the West;

2. Brezhnev as a consumer of these products shows the alleged hypocrisy of the Soviet leadership, which theoretically was against capitalism, but practically benefited from it;
3. The capitalists in top hats represent American imperialism, which according to this satire feeds and controls the foreign and domestic policies of the Soviet leaders.

In the political context, this cartoon of Brezhnev can be read as a smear and as an attack on the “betrayal” of the principles of Marxism-Leninism, to which the Albanian communist dictator Enver Hoxha was loyal until his last breath. Therefore, by carefully looking at how this cartoon was conceived by the well-known Albanian cartoonist Zef Bumçi, who signs his cartoons with the pseudonym Zefir, several key elements emerge in analysing this cartoon from a political perspective, such as:

1. This cartoon directly represents the mindset and political approach of communist Albania under the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, which at that time was in open conflict with the USSR, after the breakdown of relations in the early 1960s. Albania accused the USSR of revisionism, especially under the leadership of Brezhnev;
2. Albanian communist propaganda wanted to show that the USSR under the revisionist leadership of Brezhnev had deviated from the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism and had become part of the compromise with the failed capitalist West;
3. The cartoon reinforces the message that the Soviet Union was no longer a reliable socialist power, but a satellite of capitalism, which fed on foreign interests and harmful to the communist peoples.

In this field of view, Albanian propaganda through this image floods in a discrediting way, so much so that the satire with which this cartoon appears is sharp and accusatory. Brezhnev is

presented as drunk on capitalism, a metaphor for his unforgivable ideological betrayal. The use of Western symbolism (capitalists' hats, American and German company names) is intentional to draw the contrast between "pure Albanian socialism" and "rotten Soviet revisionism". The caption "Brezhnev's Favorite Drink" written on the lower left above Brezhnev's bloated belly further reinforces the symbolic message with political content of this cartoon, implying that this addiction is conscious and desired, not imposed – a serious indictment of the ideological context of the time.

This cartoon is a powerful propaganda instrument of the dictatorial regime of Enver Hoxha, which aimed to denounce (always according to Hoxha's utopia) the ideological deviation of the USSR and to present Albania as the only defender of true socialism in the world. In the artistic aspect, the cartoonist Zef Bumçi has used the grotesque, hyperbole and clear symbolism to communicate a strong ideological message. It is worth emphasising in the overall formative aspect the balanced composition in relation to space, the use of flat colouring, clean lines and what makes this cartoon masterful is the stylisation in emphasising Brezhnev's character.

While the graphic novel published inside the magazine "Hosteni", July 26, 1977, Year XXXII of publication, No. 14 (825) (fig. 6) in contrast to the cartoon analysed above, we note that this graphic novel is a meaningful example of political satire from the time of the communist regime in Albania. As in the cartoon published in 1973, this graphic novel also continues the satirical propaganda of the Party of Labor of Albania for its ridicule and unstoppable attack against "internal and external enemies". In this case, as in the 1973 cartoon, the satire is directed against the Soviet Union and its leader Leonid Brezhnev.



Hosteni magazine, 1977

Unlike the caricature, the subject of this comprehensive and exhaustive analysis is the treatment of the figure of Brezhnev through the artistic genre of the graphic novel, where the artist (among the most talented of the time) Enriko Veizi has not only created an image, but tells us the propaganda dictated by the Albanian communist regime for the contempt of Brezhnev, divided and spread out in 14 scenes.

The graphic novel begins with the title: “BREZHNEV PROVIDED THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE WITH LIGHT...” This title is ironic and implies that Brezhnev is using the natural resources of other nations to secure the interests of the “Soviet empire”, but

which in reality highlights the great failure of his revisionist policies. The artist Veizi has depicted Brezhnev visually and iconographically as the new Tsar of Russia, thick-browed, with an ushanka on his head, sluggish and dressed in a suit, where at times the arrogant aspect prevails and at times his servility towards America comes to the fore. The first scene is very meaningful, as Brezhnev is seen holding behind him in his right hand the results of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, where on February 25, 1956, Nikita Khrushchev gave a closed speech to the delegates of the Congress, known as the “Secret Speech”, which concerned Khrushchev’s undoing of “On the Cult of the Individual and Its Consequences” (*“О культе личности и его последствиях”*^[rul]) (Service, 1997:331-356). In the same scene, in front of Brezhnev, the artist has drawn an overturned house with the word “KOLKOZ” (*Колхоз-Kolkhoz*^[rul]) written on the back, and a bulging kulak lying on top of the house drinking, with the word “PROFITS” written on his bottle. A scene that shows us the harsh persecution that the communist system inflicted on the so-called bourgeoisie of the time (who were called “kulaks” by the communists), nationalising their private property and everything they had.

The entire sequence of scenes in this graphic novel is structured in such a way that from one to the next they convey a certain message, such as:

1. Brezhnev’s figure on the throne is visually portrayed by the artist Veizi as an arrogant leader who issues orders and mocks the needs of his own people, once again reviving the image of the Tsar. In the third scene, he says to himself: “*We might run into trouble, – thought the Tsar – something must be done. And his ‘brilliant’ mind did not fail him...*” (Hosteni, 1977:10);

2. Sending an emissary to seek grain, asking him in the fourth scene *"Come here – ordered the Tsar; Chief of Police and Commander of the Warsaw Pact!"* (Hosteni, 1977a). The emissary, a Soviet bureaucrat, bows to Brezhnev to carry out his request to seek grain abroad and ends up stealing, taking or extorting;
3. Using the "trust of comrades" to gain advantage, Brezhnev manipulates "friendly" relations to obtain the much-needed grain. In the tenth scene, he is seen showing his American friend almost on his knees the miserable situation he is in, in order to encourage him to pity and help the peoples of the Soviet Union;
4. Images of hypocrisy and exploitation, where Brezhnev is presented as maintaining a hypocritical attitude towards the allies, to the extent that he appears on the one hand as humble and on the other as a benefactor who turns aid into a commodity for political and economic gain, until he returns to his "empire", where trusted bureaucrats await him with open arms in the thirteenth scene;
5. Criticism of cooperation with the "new imperialists" – The cartoon alludes to the fact that the Soviet Union has deviated from the path of true socialism, becoming complicit with imperialism to the detriment of socialist peoples throughout the Eastern world;
6. In the last scene, the message addressed to the Albanian people is clearly read through a Soviet worker, who is unloading grain, which states: *"– Oh, where did we go wrong! The time has come to send Tsar Brezhnev to Tsar Nicholas..."* (Hosteni, 1977b).

This is a clear statement that identifies the USSR as an enemy to the healthy developments of socialism and Albania as a pure defender of the Marxist-Leninist ideal. In this analysis, we

cannot fail to touch on the symbolic dimension and the direct political message that the artist Veizi reveals to us in this graphic novel as:

1. The denunciation of Soviet revisionism, where Brezhnev and the Soviet policy after Stalin were considered “revisionist” by Enver Hoxha. This graphic novel, in addition to the artistic mastery with which it was realised, further reinforces the idea that the USSR has deviated from the principles of true socialism, to the point of degrading itself by begging for alms from imperialist America;
2. The moralization of Albanian isolation is conveyed to the masses through the message that; only a country like Albania, which did not accept compromise with the “traitors”, has preserved the principles of Marxism-Leninism. Satire is used to justify the isolation and self-sufficiency of a nation that was on the brink of an economic, social, cultural, and identity:
3. The irony of the former “socialist friendship” with the USSR is now seen by the Albanian communist regime as a deception. In this perspective, Enver Hoxha’s communist Albania positions itself as the only country that was not deceived, but knew how to look ahead to defend the principles of Marxist-Leninist socialism.

This graphic novel is a clear propaganda manifesto that aims to strengthen the loyalty of the Albanian people to the Party of Labor and the leadership of Enver Hoxha. It presents Brezhnev as a rampant, hypocritical and corrupt figure, who uses socialism for imperial gains. At the same time, thanks to the visual treatment that the artist Enriko Veizi has given to the propaganda of the time through this graphic novel, the glorification of Albania’s moral and ideological position comes to the fore, reinforcing the narrative of ideological self-defense in a world betrayed by the “allies”.

Artistically, the use of the caricature genre overloaded with grotesque stereotypes makes this graphic novel easily understandable to the general public, especially in a centralised propaganda system like that of Albania in the 1970s.

The biweekly political, satirical-humorous magazine “Hosteni” uses this mode of communication to mobilise Albanian public opinion and to reinforce Albania’s position as a defender of “Marxist-Leninist purity”.

In this sense, Albanian communist caricature was loaded with clear ideological symbolism: hammers, tractors, red flags, figures of peasants and workers. A key element was the presentation of Albania as a small country, surrounded by enemies, but always heroic and righteous in defense of the socialist principles of Marxism-Leninism. After 1960, this small country often faced the Soviet Union, stigmatising it as an internal enemy of socialism (Leka, 2021:43-60).

Caricature during the years 1953–1961 in Albania was not simply satirical art, but a strategic propaganda instrument that faithfully reflected the political twists and turns of the bilateral relations between communist Albania and the Soviet Union. A political relationship, which from a means of consolidating friendship with the “socialist camp”, was transformed into a weapon against the “revisionist deviants”. The analysis of the caricatures of this period offers a clear picture of the way in which visual art and propaganda were combined in the function of the communist dictatorial power of that time in Albania.

Conclusions

The analysis of Albanian political cartoons during the period 1945–1961 proves that graphic art did not function as an

autonomous form of aesthetic expression, but as a direct instrument of the ideological apparatus of the Albanian communist state. In this context, cartoons were institutionalised as a means of political education and propaganda mobilisation, reflecting and reinforcing the official line of the Party of Labor of Albania regarding relations with the Soviet Union. Through them, political discourse was translated into a simplified, emotional and easily absorbed visual language by the masses.

The study of materials published in the political, satirical and humorous magazine “Hosteni” shows that the iconography used built a stable pro-Soviet narrative, where the USSR was presented as the “big brother”, the guarantor of security, industrial development and socialist progress of Albania. Symbols such as red flags, figures of communist leaders, motifs of industrialisation, and the metaphor of the march forward (train, factory, dynamism of movement) served to create an optimistic collective imagination and to legitimise political, economic, and cultural dependence on Moscow. At the same time, the capitalist West, NATO, and “class enemies” were represented through grotesque, demonising, and ironic figures, constructing a clear binary East–West antagonism.

On the aesthetic and semiotic level, Albanian caricature operated through strong visual and symbolic contrasts: light/dark, red/black, progress/decadence, friendship/hostility. These oppositions not only simplified the complex political reality, but also oriented the public’s perception towards a single ideological interpretation. In this way, art was reduced to an illustrative function of propaganda, losing the critical and pluralistic dimension that traditionally characterises the satire genre.

A fundamental finding of this study is that caricature did not simply reflect political reality, but became an active mechanism in its symbolic construction. The changes in content and tone from the fraternal enthusiasm of 1953–1957 to the rhetoric of suspicion

and then confrontation after de-Stalinization show that the visual discourse responded directly to fluctuations in Albanian-Soviet relations. As a result, cartoons served as a barometer of the ideological climate, reflecting the rapprochement, tensions, and ultimately the breakup of the alliance in 1961.

Also, the involvement of Albanian artists in Soviet art schools and the borrowing of Russian socialist realism influenced the standardisation of graphic style, creating a unified aesthetic that better served the propaganda message. This proves that the Soviet influence was not only political, but also cultural and formative, directly influencing visual production and the shaping of the national artistic language.

In conclusion, the Albanian communist cartoon of the period 1945–1961 must be understood as a historical document with a double value: both as an artistic product and as evidence of the mechanisms of ideological control. It provides an important source for understanding the way in which visual propaganda constructed political identities, produced symbolic enemies, and legitimised the regime's geopolitical orientations. Through its analysis, it becomes clear that graphic art, far from being aesthetically neutral, was transformed into a strategic tool of power, directly reflecting the dynamics and crises of Albanian-Soviet relations in one of the most crucial periods of Albania's modern history.

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