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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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INDICE

EDITORIALE

- Viaggio “a Est”: alla ricerca della complessità
Vito Saracino, Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice 13

RUBRICA EDUCATION

GENERAZIONI TRANS E INTERCULTURALI 21

1. “La nuova Italia siamo noi”: il ruolo delle culture e delle pratiche musicali nei processi di costruzione di appartenenza delle generazioni dell’immigrazione
Resmie Hallulli 23

2. La scuola e le sue identità multiple. Una testimonianza dal nord est italiano
Marco Siragusa 33

RUBRICA EMPOWERMENT

I. MEMORIE E PRESENZE DA EST A OVEST 41

1. Lo Spomenik di Barletta
Rosanna Rizzi 43

2. The Twinning Between Barletta and Herceg Novi
Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice 53

3. La musica nella Polonia socialista: potere, rivolta e alienazione
Lorenzo Ferrazzano 61

RUBRICA EMPOWERMENT

II. REMEMBERING SREBRENICA 1996-2026 71

1. Il ruolo dell’OSCE in Bosnia 1995-1996. Una testimonianza
Tomas Miglierina 73

2. From Propaganda to Preservation: Film as Historiography in 1990s Massacres <i>Vito Saracino</i>	81
SAGGI	
I. MASS MEDIA, CULTURA VISUALE, SPORT E PROPAGANDA OLTRE LA CORTINA DI FERRO	93
1. Caricature as a Reflection of Communist Propaganda in Bilateral Relations between Albania and the Soviet Union (1945-1961) <i>Oltsen Gripshi</i>	95
2. The Albanian Media Issue: Between Italian Proximity, Western Influences, and the New Turkish Influence <i>Vito Saracino</i>	125
3. La trasformazione della figura femminile nel cinema albanese: tra comunismo e transizione <i>Malda Lika</i>	159
4. Il basket come strumento diplomatico oltre la Cortina di ferro <i>Giacomo Giuseppe Colaprice</i>	187
SAGGI	
II. STORIE E MEMORIE CHE RESTANO	215
1. Una resistenza internazionale. Partigiani jugoslavi in Puglia, quindici anni di ricerche <i>Gaetano Colantuono, Adriano Capanna, Rosanna Rizzi, Andrea Martocchia</i>	217
2. Topografie della memoria: i cimiteri tra distruzione, ricostruzione e conflitti simbolici nel Kosovo post-bellico <i>Michele Martini</i>	251
3. Yugosfera digitale: nuovi territori di mediatizzazione della memoria <i>Elisabetta Zurovac</i>	279

4. A Contribution to the Understanding of the Dynamics of the Massacres in Srebrenica <i>Nika Vrbek</i>	309
5. Dayton at 30: Peace, Power, and the Politics of Post-War Bosnia & Herzegovina <i>Amir Duranović</i>	335
6. Vae victis? Interpretazioni accademiche serbe degli accordi di Dayton <i>Bogdan Zivkovic</i>	353
7. Engeneering Democracy: Consociationalism in Post-Dayton Bosnia AND Herzegovina <i>Rebecca Bowen</i>	379
APPROFONDIMENTO	403
Uno sguardo oltre. L'esperienza di Meridiano 13 <i>Gianni Galleri, Marco Siragusa</i>	405
RECENSIONE	409
Recensione del libro: "A Century of the Media in Italian-Albanian Cultural Relationships" <i>Rebecca Bowen</i>	411

2. THE ALBANIAN MEDIA ISSUE: BETWEEN ITALIAN PROXIMITY, WESTERN INFLUENCES, AND THE NEW TURKISH INFLUENCE

by Vito Saracino*

Abstract: La questione mediatica albanese esplora l'evoluzione del settore televisivo come specchio di prossimità culturale asimmetrica tra Italia e Albania, dalla clandestinità del regime comunista alla globalizzazione contemporanea. Sotto Enver Hoxha, i palinsesti RAI vengono ritrasmessi e clonati dalla RTSH nonostante i divieti su "manifestazioni aliene", instillando un'influenza italiana involontaria capace di forgiare intere generazioni attraverso ascolti radiofonici proibiti e visioni televisive di varietà e neorealismo. La liberalizzazione del 1998 genera un boom di 31 emittenti private che, emulando format Mediaset reality e talk show, favoriscono l'autostima post-dittatoriale e programmi satirici quali Fiks Fare, ispirato a Striscia la notizia – tanto da valere a Ezio Greggio la cittadinanza albanese nel 2015. Negli anni Duemila emerge una bolla oligarchica, con tycoon sostenuti da Edi Rama che privilegiano interessi commerciali sulla sostenibilità editoriale. Persistono italianismi linguistici, riti condivisi come la puntata di Sanremo 2020 co-condotta da Alketa Vejsiu e riconoscimenti a Maria De Filippi, ma l'influenza declina sotto i venti anglosassoni e l'ascesa turca le cui serie low-cost dominano i palinsesti di Top Channel e Klan, erodendo la produzione locale in un contesto di disincanto nei confronti della cultura pop italiana. L'Albania, periferia euromediterranea in bilico, invita l'Italia a una partnership strategica oltre la narrazione dei decenni passati.

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Keywords: Storia della Televisione, Relazioni Internazionali, Egemonia culturale, Italia-Albania, Influenza turca, Unione Europea, Soft power italiano, Albanian media, Post-comunismo mediatico.

Abstract: The Albanian media issue examines the television sector's evolution as a mirror of asymmetric cultural proximity between Italy and Albania, from communist clandestinity to contemporary globalisation. Under Enver Hoxha, RAI schedules were retransmitted and cloned by RTSH despite bans on "alien manifestations," instilling involuntary Italian soft power that shaped generations through forbidden radio listens and TV variety-neorealism viewings. The 1998 liberalisation sparked 31 private broadcasters emulating Mediaset formats, like talk shows fostering post-dictatorship self-esteem and satirical programs such as Fiks Fare, inspired by Striscia la notizia – earning Ezio Greggio Albanian citizenship in 2015. The 2000s reveal an oligarchic bubble, with tycoons backed by Edi Rama prioritising commercial interests over editorial sustainability. Italianisms, shared rituals like Sanremo co-hosted by Alketa Vejsiu, and awards to Maria De Filippi endure, yet influence wanes amid Anglo-Saxon winds and Turkish ascent: low-cost series dominate Top Channel and Klan schedules, eroding local production in a European disillusionment context. Albania, as Euro-Mediterranean periphery in flux, calls Italy toward a strategic partnership beyond exotic narratives.

Keywords: Media Studies, International Relations, Cultural hegemony, Italy-Albania, Turkish influence, European Union, Italian soft power, Albanian media, Post-communist media.

Introduction

In Albania, the evolution of mass media over the last fifty years has been strongly influenced by the Italian radio and television model. The Italian media presence across the Adriatic has very ancient origins. Suffice it to say that, since the days of the Ottoman

Empire, Italian has been used as the lingua franca for trade, and many of the patriots who fought for the independence of the Albanian nation in 1912 or had studied in Italy or learned the language by attending Catholic schools in the Land of Eagles. However, due to forced Italianization during the Fascist occupation from 1939 to 1943, the Albanian communist regime banned all references to ties with Italian culture after World War II (Saracino, 2025a).

However, the proximity between the two shores rendered futile the attempts by Enver Hoxha's regime to wage a 'war of antennas' to prevent Italian frequencies from reaching Albanian devices. Italian radio and television programs were expressly banned from the 1960s to the 1980s, but despite the risks, Italian radio and television broadcasting was widespread in a clandestine manner.

Italy, both consciously and unintentionally, closely influenced the reorganisation of the new Albanian media, thanks to the appeal of Italian programs, which, together with South American soap operas, were the most popular programs among the Albanian public from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Tens of thousands of Albanians chose Italy as their country of emigration, facilitated by having learned the basics of "television Italian" through passive listening, which surprised Italians when, in 1991, the Apulian coast became the first landing place for an unprecedented migration (Saracino, 2021).

In the 2000s, television pluralism became increasingly central to the Albanian economy. Television *tycoons* were helped and supported by the municipal administration of Tirana and the Albanian state, yet, or perhaps precisely for this reason, editorial independence in Albania is not excellent according to international rankings, both in the public and private media. In this sector, alongside state television, Top Channel and TV Klan stand out, which alone account for half of the Albanian television market.

These channels clone Italian programs such as “Striscia la notizia,” “Buona domenica,” “C’è posta per te,” and “Uomini e Donne,” or host increasingly popular Turkish TV series such as “Sultane Kosem,” “Muhteşem Yüz Yıl,” “Ezel,” “Ertugul,” and “Diriliş,” examples of the neo-Ottomanism increasingly present in the Balkan countries and which is about to enter Italian programming, as demonstrated by the increasingly frequent presence of Turkish fiction on Mediaset channels.

The essay in question analyses the cultural impact of television series and how, depending on age and cultural reference model, the choice of program to watch changes. Previous generations identify with the Italian television model, as demonstrated by the appearances in Italian of Prime Minister Edi Rama and the participation of the well-known Albanian presenter Alketa Vejsiu at the 2020 Sanremo Festival. Millennials and subsequent generations, on the other hand, are more influenced by Anglo-Saxon models, such as Albanian singers with millions of followers on Instagram and views on YouTube and TikTok, such as Dua Lipa, Bebe Rexha, Rita Ora, and Ava Max. This work focuses on the mutual influence between lifestyles, social, political, and economic models and their impact on national identity, as well as on the transition from the “Italian dream,” in vogue in Albania from the 1960s to the 2000s, to the pro-US “American Dream” and finally to a pan-Ottoman revanchism that winks at Turkish media products.

1. Italian “soft power” during the evolution of the Albanian television sector

Until the early 2000s, the evolution of the Albanian mass media and television appeared to be closely linked to a strategy of

cultural “soft power” carried out, albeit unintentionally, by Italian radio and television. Enver Hoxha’s totalitarian dictatorship waged a battle over frequencies for several decades, prohibiting citizens from following foreign cultural influences, defined by the regime’s entourage as ‘alien manifestations’. Nevertheless, thanks in part to the appeal of prohibition, Italian broadcast content was regularly rebroadcast and, from the final stages of the regime onwards, cloned by Albanian state television (Fevziu, 2016).

This phase of clandestinity faded in the 1990s when a phase of “*subtle Italianization*” began, during which not only were formats and languages in vogue on Italian television—both public and private—used, but Albanian state television and the numerous newly established local broadcasters dreamed of replicating the successes of Rai Mediaset by blatantly copying them (Centorrino, 2006).

This teeming whirlwind of television anarchy grew out of all proportion until the economic crisis of 1997, which caused the Albanian economy, recovering after forty years of communist autarchy, to collapse suddenly. In 1998, Albanian politics, having recovered from the winds of civil war the previous year, attempted to align itself with European legislation in key areas of its legal system, including the mass media. The green light was given to the liberalisation of the television sector: in addition to the public broadcaster RTSH- *Radio Televizioni Shqiptar*, 31 national broadcasters and several local channels complied with the new legislation. These are very interesting figures for a country with almost 3.5 million inhabitants, with approximately one broadcaster per 100,000 inhabitants. Television, like radio and the press in the past, became a fundamental tool for influencing public opinion, and for this reason, new entrepreneurs chose the small screen to facilitate a rapid political rise (Saracino, 2020).

Albanian *tycoons*, following in the footsteps of Silvio Berlusconi, the prototype of the *self-made* man who has become the subject of a secular cult in Albania, with streets, urban legends, and bars named after him, spared no expense and invested huge resources, sometimes linked to businesses that were not always above board. The new law also sought to curb the extreme xenophilia of national programming by requiring the use of the Albanian language to stimulate the production of formats and fiction (Gritti, 2001).

However, this restriction has been violated on numerous occasions, and there have been many instances of pirated broadcasts of *home-made* recordings of Italian television series or South American soap operas which, as confirmed by Albanian television executives, are the preferred television programs of the new audience in the Republic of Eagles. The penetration of foreign television into Albanian customs can be seen in the names chosen for babies born in the decade 1990-2000, among which there are several names of television characters and soap opera characters that have been transliterated into Albanian, such as: Marjo, Sindi, Mateo, Mariana, Ornela, Karen, Kassandra, Elvis, Isaura, and even Ronaldo.

As the years passed, from the early 2000s onwards, the mass media sector became increasingly central to the Albanian 'new economy'. Television entrepreneurs were helped and supported by the municipal administration of Tirana and the central government, which encouraged the transformation of numerous disused premises from the old regime into *studios* for these new forms of media, a phase described by one of the protagonists of that season, the current Prime Minister Edi Rama:

I am proud to have given some media owners, Klan, Top Albanian Radio and Top Channel, News 24 and Gazeta Shqiptare, the opportunity

to rent large state-owned premises to carry out their activities and radically transform the Albanian media world, turning the fourth estate into a power exercised through an ideal infrastructure for Albania (Rama, 2018).

In this new phase, talk shows grew in popularity on television schedules, benefiting both from their low cost and, above all, from their success with audiences across Europe. In the 2000s, talk shows played a very important role in redefining the actors of this new society, promoting self-esteem and changing social status: television open to the public became established and was perceived as a kind of quick tool for social redemption (Casetti, Di Chio, 1997).

In recent years, the Italian model is no longer the example to follow, but there are still several examples of “silent Italianization” in Albanian television: *Fiks Fare*, a satirical news program broadcast on *Top Channel* since 2002, is a faithful reproduction of *Striscia la notizia*. The two programs share the same set design, stage presence, and news research, pursuing the style of satirical *infotainment*. Antonio Ricci’s program has been the favourite evening program for years, not only in Italy but also in Albania, to such an extent that, by presidential decree in 2015, Ezio Greggio was granted Albanian citizenship for “merits in the dissemination of television culture” in Albania, and on that occasion, the Italian presenter was a guest on the “daughter” program *Fiks Fare*. The *Striscia*/Mediaset program model (you decide) became further emulated with: *Stop-Emission Investigativ*, broadcast on *Top Channel*’s private competitor, *TV Klan*, and in the early 1990s, another show followed the format of the Fininvest group’s flagship network: *Letër nga populi* (*Letters from the People*), a satirical column hosted by comedian Philip Chako on *Tv2000* (Carelli, 2014).

Another program from the Fininvest galaxy that has been emulated several times is Maria De Filippi’s *C’è posta per te*, which is available in Albanian on two different channels and in two

different formats, one of which is *Dua të të bëj të lumtur* (I want to make you happy) on *Top Channel* and “*Kam një mesazh për ty*” (There’s a message for you), a segment within the program “*E diela shqiptare*” (Albanian Sunday) broadcast on *TV Klan*. Maria De Filippi, like her late husband Maurizio Costanzo, is very popular with Albanian viewers. Costanzo was among the first to explore the history of the Albanian people and share it with the Italian public, inviting singer Sherif Merdani, who was persecuted by the regime for his “bourgeois music,” to appear on the *Maurizio Costanzo Show*. This invitation to artistic collaboration between the two countries was continued by Maria De Filippi, who, with *Amici*, contributed to the success of several Albanian dancers in Italy, such as Kleidi Kadiu, Leon Cino, and Anbeta Toromani. For these reasons, in December 2005, the producer and presenter was awarded a medal of recognition by the President of the Albanian Republic, Alfred Moisiu, in recognition of her important contribution to the promotion of Albanian art and artists and, consequently, the positive image of Albania in television programs with a large public impact (Saracino, 2018).

Maria de Filippi is perhaps the latest Italian television personality, along with Raffaella Carrà, Pippo Baudo, Maurizio Costanzo, and Mike Buongiorno, to have won the hearts of the Albanian people. Strong personalities from a period when television was the centre of recreational activities, an era that has now come to an end, television presenters appear close to the lives of viewers in their daily lives (Menduni, 2008).

Even today, Albanian viewers, especially those of older generations, remain attached to historic Italian programs such as the Sanremo Festival, won in 2018 by Ermal Meta, an Albanian singer-songwriter who became a naturalised Italian citizen and one of the best-known symbols of integration between the two countries. The Albanian presence was repeated in the following edition with the

co-hosting of TV Klan's leading *anchorwoman* Alketa Vejsiu. In her Eurovision monologue, the presenter recalled the significance of Italian television for a generation of Albanians:

Once upon a time, there was a country where listening to the music of Baglioni and Celentano made you an enemy of the people and could land you in prison. It seems absurd today, but that's how it was if you lived during the dictatorship. If you were blonde, you were suspected because Carrà was blonde. That was the price you had to pay if you lived in those dark years. And today I am here to say thank you to Italy for keeping our dreams alive during that era. [...] You never abandoned us when we needed you and took ships to reach the coast opposite. Thank you, Italy, for lighting our way with your art, beauty, and music. And thank you, Sanremo, because for all of us who dreamed of you across the sea, you are not only the temple of Italian song, but also an example of integration.

Italian television is still perceived as a more reliable form of mass media than the national one. News, even if reported in Italy, still has a different relevance than news provided only by local media. It is therefore no coincidence that Prime Minister Edi Rama, during his 13 years as Prime Minister, thanks to his extensive knowledge of the Italian language and his theatrical personality, has often sought and obtained the attention and approval of the Italian media.

For example, during the 2019 protests that culminated in the resignation of opposition MPs from the Democratic Party and their demand that Rama step down as prime minister for corruption, he found time to spend 24 hours in Italy to explain his point of view "in Italian to the Albanians," to the "Albanians of Italy" and the "Italians of Albania" by participating in *Porta a Porta* and two other programs, one on Mediaset and one on La7, as if to emphasize his authority in the country defined by the president himself as the first

partner: «To date, we have an economic exchange with Italy amounting to €2.6 billion per year. Albania exports around €1.2 billion per year to Italy».

A political and media journey that sparked Albanian public opinion and talk show debates for weeks on end. Not to mention the virality of the video of Prime Minister Rama himself filmed at Tirana airport during the Covid-19 emergency in 2021, announcing the dispatch of doctors and nurses to support the Italian state. A speech that echoes the rhetoric of closeness between the two states and cultures, recalling how: «That place has been our home ever since Italy and our Italian sisters and brothers saved us, welcomed us, and adopted us into their homes when Albania was in immense pain».

The relationship between Rama and Italian television continues today, with idylls such as that expressed by the prime minister towards his Italian counterpart Giorgia Meloni, considered the main sponsor for Albania's entry into the European Union by 2030, and disagreements, as in the case of the critical investigation by the Rai3 *Report* program entitled: *(Hot)Spot Albanese*, which aired in April 2024. Giorgio Mottola's lengthy report focuses on the Italy-Albania Agreement for migrant reception centres, criticising the high costs of the measure and the benefits for the Albanian elites linked to the Albanian socialist government. Edi Rama says he is very disappointed by the accusations made by Sigfrido Ranucci's program and, above all, by the accusations of favouritism, corruption, and the definition of "narco-state".

Despite the attention shown towards Italy by the current Albanian ruling class and by a generation that is no longer young, the presence of Italian-led journalistic groups now appears out of context and unprofitable, as was successfully the case in the decade 1996-2006 with the experiment of the Apulian TeleNorba Shqiptare (Grasso, 2006).

For this and many other reasons, such as the legal dispute between the broadcaster and the Albanian government over certain licenses and tax payments, *tycoon* Francesco Becchetti's *Agon Channel* experiment proved unsuccessful in 2013, lasting only one year. Not even the pharaonic 'purchase campaign' of Italian and Albanian professionals, such as Simona Ventura, Alessio Vinci, Enzo Ghinazzi - Pupo, and Antonio Caprarica, saved the broadcaster from bankruptcy. Nothing innovative is remembered about this experience, except for the formats copied slavishly from the originals (Pagani, 2016).

'*Agon*' means dawn, but this experiment, which was intended to be a reworking of the Italian television model in Albania, turned out to be nothing more than a sad sunset. Italian productions are currently lacking on Albanian television, apart from a few collaborations between Rai and its Albanian counterpart, Rtsh, but the Italianisms invented in the 1990s remain. There are several "*Italian-sounding*" terms, such as announcing, which becomes "*anunçoj*," or investigating, "*investigoj*," and many other words derived from television news programs that have become cases of perfect diglossia: the word is used in everyday life, but does not exist in the dictionary, which contains the words '*parashtroj*' and '*lamjëroj*', which are disappearing like so many words swallowed up by neologisms extrapolated from the language of the web age, English, which is replacing the long hegemony of Italian (Saracino, 2025b).

With the explosion of social media and the internet, even Albanian private television stations are beginning to choose their programs carefully, and for this reason, when channel surfing among Albanian stations, it is not difficult to come across colourful talk shows with very heated tones. At almost all hours of the day, there are so-called expert debates with authoritative guests discussing a specific topic, led by a moderator (Menduni, 2018).

Among these commentators was more in the past than now—Fatos Lubonja, an Albanian intellectual and one of the most famous political prisoners of the communist regime, who explains the reasons behind his decision to transform his activism into media commentary:

I found myself working as a commentator on Albanian television, but for me, working in TV is not very enjoyable. I used the metaphor of *Jurassic Park* to describe my relationship with television. Since 1997, with the advent of private television, various tycoons have taken Berlusconi as their mentor and started creating television stations. Clearly, at that time, they were builders who often used television to obtain concessions for other businesses. But we intellectuals saw it as a liberation, since state television was on the government's side. Private television stations gave us space, and as an intellectual, I believed I was important because I could write and speak, but like the scientists in *Jurassic Park*, we thought we could create dinosaurs and then control them. But then the dinosaurs grew up, they had the money while we only had a small salary, and they took the licenses and built. As interests grew, the role of the entrepreneur waned. I was one of the few in Albania to oppose the war in Iraq, and because of my position I was censored. In Albania, private television has prevailed, where the owners are often oligarchs with economic interests, such as Dritan Hoxha's Top Channel. I had a contract with News 24. I don't say everything, as Pasolini said, but at least I can say what I think (Saracino, 2026a).

In this slow decline of widespread Italianness, it is the expat—over 30,000 people, including retirees, entrepreneurs, professionals linked to Italian investments, and university students—and above all the passion for Italian soccer that keep the dim flame of Italian-language mass media alive.

In the numerous cafés of Albania, the country with the highest number of bars per capita in the world, the secular-religious ceremony of soccer is celebrated every day and Serie A is still watched. But while in the distant past, the Italian league was the

only one followed thanks to radio and satellite dishes, now it is just one piece of the puzzle in programming schedules increasingly focused on the Premier League, La Liga, and the Bundesliga, and the language of broadcast is almost never Italian.

Gone are the days when Milan was one of the most popular teams in Albania. It was 2009 when controversial oil magnate Rezart Taçi lived the dream of every Albanian, becoming a sponsor of the Milanese team and managing to organise the Taçi Oil Trophy in Tirana for three years, inviting Milan for two years in a row and Real Madrid the following year. The final between the Albanian national team and Ronaldinho, Inzaghi, and Shevchenko's Milan remains alive in the collective imagination, with half the stadium cheering on Ancelotti's team.

There are several reasons why Milan has won the hearts of Shqipëri fans: starting with the red and black colours of the national flag, through to the factor of Berlusconi as president—whose sentimental attachment to Albania is well known—and because it was the most successful team when Albanians emigrated to Italy in the early 1990s. Soccer was as necessary for Albanians as it was for Italian migrants, since the choice to support a city's team is perceived as a first sign of acceptance of *zoën politikon*: a clear act of identification (Ortoleva, 2008).

However, it seems romantic that sports news programs still feature mini-reports on the most representative players of the Albanian national team who play in Serie A, with personal *highlights* of various players such as Djimsiti of Atalanta, Hysaj of Lazio, Ramadami and Berisha of Lecce, and Ismajli of Torino. In this case, the 'exclusive' is reserved for national team players and not for other Albanian players who have chosen to play for Kosovo or Switzerland, who are nevertheless followed with great interest by football fans.

The link between mass media and soccer has always been strong, which is why when Albania wanted to improve the results of

its national soccer team, when it was still Italian-speaking and Italian-loving in terms of television, it turned to Italian professionals seen on television watching Serie A passionately. The first person to be called upon as technical commissioner was former 1982 world champion Giuseppe Dossena in 2002, but his experience was very brief and the results were unsatisfactory. The case of Gianni De Biasi, coach of the Eagles from 2012 to 2017, is different. He left an indelible mark, managing to take the national team to the European Championships for the first time in history, receiving honorary citizenship “for sporting merits brought to the nation.” The Italian wave continued until 2022 with a succession of coaches such as Panucci and Reja, but with modest results. Currently, even in the world of soccer, the desire for internationalisation in the country of the Eagles has led to a de-Italianization, focusing on the figure of Sylvinho, a Brazilian coach trained in England, demonstrating how the Premier League is currently the most attractive league, where Chelsea star Armando Broja plays (Saracino, 2023b).

Moreover, even the most notable corporate acquisitions in Albania in recent years are reminiscent of the Premier League. In fact, City Football Group, which also owns Manchester City, after coming close to purchasing the nation’s most successful team, Dinamo Tirana, has begun the process of building an academy to contribute to the growth of local football (Galleri, 2024).

2. The internationalization of Albanian cultural models and consumption

Since the 2000s, Albania and the entire Balkan region have been undergoing a phase of strong internationalisation of the entire entertainment sector, with various linguistic and cultural consequences.

The price of this new wave is being paid above all by the spread of the Italian language and the slow end of its media and cultural hegemony over the Land of Eagles. A gap in interests has emerged between the different generations. Generations up to *the millennials* watched cartoons in Italian thanks to the ubiquitous satellite TV dishes that dotted the entire country, while those born in Generation Z and Alpha have their first memories of cable Smart TV or smartphones in English or their national language. This change in entertainment models is evident in current television programming. While Italian emulation-cloning programs have Albanian titles without paying any copyright fees to the brand owners, the names of international formats that have reached Albania retain their English names to highlight the global recognition of shows such as X Factor, on air since 2015, Big Brother Albania and Vip, since 2008, and most recently Albania's Got Talent.

The end of Italy's omnipresence on Albanian screens is not a bolt from the blue but the result of a gradual replacement that began in the 2000s for purely economic reasons. When the pirate retransmission of episodes of Rai and Mediaset's biggest hits, such as *La Piovra* and *Cento Vetrine*, was banned, private broadcasters found a solution to fill their morning and early afternoon programming by purchasing cheap but very long South American *telenovelas* with over 200 episodes, such as *La Schiava Isaura*, '*Kassandra*', '*Rosa Selvaggia*' and '*Anche i Ricchi Piangono*'. The ubiquitous soap operas, in some cases not even dubbed in Spanish but only subtitled, sparked an increase in interest in the language, as demonstrated by enrolment in Spanish courses in high schools and universities in Albania during that period.

With the end of the decade-long rebroadcasting of *telenovelas*, the Albanian television world needed to replace these products with other series that would attract large audiences and be

affordable, choosing Turkey as its partner, with which it had already had relations with the state broadcaster since the 1990s, as the then director of state television, Eduard Mazi, recalls:

Our relationship with Turkey was purely technical, with exchanges of programs. Our broadcasts and fiction were aired by them, and we aired theirs. It should be noted that before the advent of Erdogan, Turkish television was secular, not linked to politics and television, and there were no ‘propaganda’ series such as those that subsequently took hold in the Balkans and Albania (Saracino, 2021).

According to a 1995 survey on foreign television channels watched via satellite by Albanians, while 76% watched Italian television, 4% of Muslims watched Turkish television to reconnect with their Islamic roots. Five Turkish channels have been available via satellite since the 1990s (Polovina, 2002).

Twenty years later, Albania is part of a massive media campaign by Ankara to carve out a cultural role for itself through *entertainment* and the creation of a new *mainstream* culture. The highly competitive prices offered by Turkey for *soap operas 2.0* mean that broadcasters across the Balkans prefer to buy rather than produce locally. The spread of the Turkish series is the result of a *soft power* strategy to spread the cultural model of the ‘neo-Ottoman’ establishment, embodied in the early 2000s first by religious leader Fethullah Gülen and later by Turkish leader Recep Erdogan (Hendrick, 2013).

Turkish director Ayşe Böhürler, who is close to the Turkish government, defines Turkish TV series as part of a “space-specific” culture that cannot be easily exported to non-Muslim countries. Even though they try to use middle-class characters to create humour that can appeal to all viewers, they do not forget moral values, honour killings, and revenge. A medium on the border between modernity and tradition, it re-presents Turkish history and

mythology, managing to find a cultural niche in the increasingly American-driven media world. The new Turkish mainstream culture manifests itself as a cultural power on a regional scale, with Albania as its northernmost point in the Balkan area, reaching Bulgaria, Romania, and Macedonia, as well as the Asian or Turkish-speaking republics of the former USSR, the Middle East, and even Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova (Martel, 2010).

The prices of these entertainment products, which are not of secondary importance, are kept down thanks to financial support from Turkish entrepreneurs who look with interest at the Muslim communities of the entire Western Balkans, an interest that is more political than religious, aiming at a new Pan-Turkism in the Balkans (Cimbalo, 2012).

The success of these series is significant: they are Muslim in terms of location and storylines, but at the same time modern and the product of an Americanization of the sector with a Turkish filter. In fact, the initial Gülenist proselytising project has very quickly transformed into a new bond of a strictly economic, political, and cultural nature that is also attractive to European countries such as Italy and Germany and to platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime.

TopChannel and TV Klan have chosen to invest in these entertainment products, which have been hugely successful with audiences, but it is not known whether the public has perceived the neo-Ottoman propaganda message of the TV series or whether they are more passionate about the romantic intrigues and dramatic revenge often present in the plots of these soap operas. The Turkish TV series that have conquered the European market and Albania since 2010 can be divided into two types:

- *Ottoman historical series*, steeped in Turkish nationalist epic, which arrived mainly during the first phase and were more closely linked to an attempt at 'television proselytism';

- *-modern romance dramas*, new soap operas with passionate plots set in a perfect, hyper-technological Turkey (Saracino, 2023a).

To my question, “Do you like them because they talk about the common identity of the Ottoman Empire or because of the intriguing stories?”, a taxi driver who was watching a Turkish series subtitled in Albanian on his smartphone in Tirana traffic, in defiance of traffic regulations, replied, “Sometimes I don’t understand, but I love them!”.

However, this relentless economic and technological progress has a downside: editorial independence in Albania is lacking in both public and private media, partly due to the lack of effective self-regulation mechanisms, despite the latest 2025 ranking showing improvements ahead of the country’s entry into the European Union. Albania ranks 80th out of 180 countries in ‘Reporters Without Borders’ (RSF) world press freedom index, an improvement of 19 places from 99th in 2024.

However, there is a chronic risk of a ‘television bubble’: many broadcasters are not economically sustainable and survive thanks to the support of the political establishment and the Balkan business elite, with owners investing in other sectors and using the media only as a tool to pursue commercial interests or amplify their personal visibility (Dragomir, Thompson, 2008).

While the transitions in the television sector appear gradual and easier to analyse, the situation is different for other types cultural consumption, such as the transformation of musical taste, where there is intense cross-fertilisation between cultures, the Albanian diaspora, and the success stories of artists and musicians around the world have played an important role in this internationalisation of culture, events that are constantly reported by the national media, generating admiration and emulation (Halili, 2013).

The music world has changed a lot in recent times. In the space of two decades, there has been a shift from an immoderate passion for Italian singers such as Albano Carrisi, whose concert in 1989 was perceived as the beginning of the end of the communist regime, and especially Adriano Celentano, whose fan club in the 1990s had over 60,000 members who for years wrote petitions to have him as a guest in Albania, in search of a spirit of musical belonging. Over the years, Italian-Albanian singers such as Anna Oxa and Ermal Meta, whose victory in Sanremo was greeted with great joy by their compatriots, have enjoyed and continue to enjoy great success (De Cesaris, 2018).

The replacement of Italy and Italian as the *lingua franca* has also had consequences for the musical tastes of the younger generations. First and foremost were the iconic Albanian pop stars, either born in Albania or of Albanian origin, with millions of followers on Instagram and YouTube views, such as Dua Lipa, Bebe Rexha, Rita Ora, and Ava Max. Dua Lipa is the most emblematic figure of this new generation of *Albanian pride*. The pop star, born in London to Kosovar parents, has shown sincere closeness to her origins, to the point that her Instagram posts of her holidays in Albania have been shared by the official channels of the Albanian government and agencies promoting the region. In 2018, the singer created the Sunny Hill Festival, based in Pristina but also with stops in Tirana, which quickly became the biggest music event in the Albanian-speaking area. For contributing to ‘the *role of the artist in spreading the fame of Albanians internationally through her music*’ – as stated in the presidential citation – Dua Lipa was granted Albanian citizenship in 2022, in an official ceremony marking the 110th anniversary of Albania’s independence from the Ottoman Empire. This was not only a symbolic act but also a political one towards the pop star’s other homeland, Great Britain, which since Brexit in 2020 has made it much more difficult for Albanian citizens to enter the

UK for work, sending the message that limiting access to migrants means losing talented people who could be useful in the future.

A key date for the new Albanian music scene is August 4, 2017, when Spotify became available in the Land of Eagles following numerous requests from the local community. This liberalisation led to a Copernican revolution for Albanian independent music with the emergence of numerous outsider phenomena capable of growing and contaminating Albanian-language music with various international genres such as trap, reggaeton, and urban pop. Dominating this ranking of new idols is Dhurata Dora, an Albanian singer born in Germany with 15 million streams, mixing Balkan sounds and reggaeton, followed by Noizy's Balkan trap/drill, whose lyrics also address the theme of diaspora identity—with similarities to what is happening on the American continent with the Bud Bunny phenomenon—with 12 million listeners. The podium is completed by the R&B trap of Butrint Imeri, also a Kosovar from Germany who chooses to sing in Albanian, whose sounds are reminiscent of the Italian Mahmood or the Belgian Stromae.

Albania can currently be defined as a multilingual society, with a young community in line with the reality of globalisation, as demonstrated by the desire to migrate not only out of necessity but also out of a desire to discover other places. In this new global Albania, the use of English is spreading very rapidly, while Italian, as in other Balkan countries, is increasingly becoming a niche phenomenon and is no longer popular (Saracino, 2024a).

3. The importance of interviews as sources for reconstructing a social history of the media in Albania

In order to obtain the most accurate historical reconstruction of the changes in the mass media over the last thirty years in

Europe, and in particular in countries such as Albania or the former Yugoslavia, where television archives are not fully accessible, the contribution of interviews and television and radio sources is necessary, desirable, and fundamental (Saracino, 2026b).

Thanks to the careful use of oral sources, the latest international studies on Albania, and a thorough analysis of newspapers, past television schedules, and web broadcasts, it has been possible to adopt a transdisciplinary approach to interpreting the evolution of the mass media in a territory, avoiding a neo-colonial view of events.

Starting from the Cold War period and using journalistic expressions commonly used when talking about Italy and Albania, it is possible to distinguish different phases of intermittent media interest between the two countries, characterised by periods of high involvement and moments of lukewarm attention.

1. The 'War of the Antennas' in Socialist Albania and Italian indifference to the last 'bulwark of Stalinism in Europe' (1970-1990);
2. The "Mass Exodus" from Albania in 1991 and Italy's rediscovery of solidarity with the "Front Country" (1991-1996);
3. The pyramid crisis in Albania and the transition of the mass media (1997-2007);
4. Italy from media partner to strategic ally for entry into the European Union (2015-2025).

Despite the silence imposed by the hermetic closure during Enver Hoxha's 40-year socialist dictatorship, from the end of World War II to the mid-1980s, the cultural interconnection between the two realities never completely subsided. However, this incredible censorship, combined with Italy's lack of interest in a reality considered peripheral and uninterested in dialogue, has not

facilitated the emergence of transnational studies on the evolution of the mass media in Albania, except in the last decade.

To make a comparison between the poetic and the naturalistic, this enduring connection between the two countries is similar to the waves that separate the two shores of the Adriatic: sometimes overwhelming and impetuous, at other times so faint as to make the sea seem like a placid lake. For this reason, the aim of recent studies has been to fill in the gaps of those forty years, but in order to obtain unpublished accounts and narratives of that period of clandestine Italianization, which is little present in national archives, the use of oral sources has been a necessary step for much field research.

Comparing interviews and statements, it seemed almost impossible not to come across references to the advent of radio and television frequencies from Italy. These fragments of entertainment, which had a dual function, served as a 'training school' for professionals in the radio, television, and film industries and, for the post-1968 Albanian generation, known as 'Liceo 73', represented an alternative model of 'sentimental education' and attention to beauty and freedom (Bazzocchi, 2004).

Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the historiographies of the two countries paid little attention to the connections between programming schedules and rebroadcasts, which were seen as a sociological or cultural phenomenon rather than a difficult historical issue to be explored, partly because the task of reconstructing the media relationship between the two countries is not easy due to the aforementioned periods of lack of documentation.

It is precisely to fill this gap that oral sources and interviews with the protagonists of this story are fundamental, as their responses are necessary to obtain answers that in some cases are even unpublished, increasing the scientific nature and objectivity of the studies and research projects conducted by the author over the

last ten years, in collaboration with various Italian universities such as Roma Tre University and the University of Foggia, and research institutions such as the Gramsci Foundation of Puglia and the Albanian Film Archive. For the success of this work, 24 interviews were conducted with individuals of different genders, ages, nationalities, and professions. The words and episodes chosen by these witnesses are invaluable for a humanistic investigation that is extremely useful for understanding the last fifty years of the history of a country “so close yet so far away” as Albania, a reality rich in ideas for innovative research.

The interviews form the narrative core for retracing the four stages of media interest outlined above, weaving together authoritative voices from the past and present in a human mosaic that illuminates the complexities of Albanian history.

For the first phase, dedicated to the communist dictatorship, direct testimonies of extraordinary depth were chosen, selecting diplomats and writers such as Ylljet Aliçka and Ylli Polovina, as well as dissidents such as Fatos Lubonja. These testimonies, often unpublished and deeply personal, overcome the silence imposed by the dictatorship – such as clandestine listening to Italian radio (*Per voi giovani*, programs by Renzo Arbore) and stolen television viewing (neorealism, RAI variety shows) that shaped an entire generation, influencing graphic, journalistic, and cultural styles despite the risks of Sigurimi surveillance. Aliçka evokes the emotional impact of Albano and Romina’s concert in 1989 as a potential revolutionary spark, Polovina illustrates in detail the Albanians’ infatuation with Rai, while Lubonja describes her father Todi’s transition from RTSH director to the IV Plenum as the culmination of a fleeting opening towards the West. Among the witnesses of the regime, the late Saimir Mailoku deserves a special mention. His detailed description of his long and incomprehensible imprisonment will remain with me for the rest of my life. These

figures, witnesses capable of piecing together the fragments of the past, offer not only precise historical data, but also intimate experiences, independent reflections, and personal thoughts that help retrace all the stages of repression up to the transition to the contemporary era, offering the public an empathetic and multidimensional access to collective memory (Maloku, 2020).

To understand the period of Albania's rapprochement with Maoist China in the 1970s, the interview with Ylli Pepo, an Albanian filmmaker who was one of the few in the world—along with Bernardo Bertolucci—to have reached China during that crucial period, proves to be fundamental. Pepo provides unpublished details on the cultural exchanges, aesthetic influences, and geopolitical dynamics that shaped Albanian cinema under Hoxha, offering a rare and privileged perspective (Manca, 2019).

The interviews in the second phase focus on the post-regime transition and Italian attention to Albania from the 1990s to the present day, interweaving the voices of academics, institutional representatives, and cultural figures who have marked the bilateral dialogue. Among the interviewees are Diana Kastrati, who as an Albanian student at the University for Foreigners in Perugia went from feeling stigmatized as an Albanian in Italy in the 1990s to becoming the architect of the rebirth of the Italian department at the University of Tirana, and Nevila Nika, who reorganized the Albanian State Archives with minimal resources and almost single-handedly after the fall of the regime. Alongside them is Ardian Vehbiu, who followed a reverse path, going from being a lecturer in Albanian at the University of Naples to working as a translator from Italian and Albanian in the United States, without ever losing interest in the Albanian situation and carrying out fascinating analyses on the evolution of relations between the two countries (Vehbiu, 2013).

As for the second phase, key figures who contributed to shaping bilateral cultural dialogue were interviewed to testify to

Italy's commitment: the educationalist Franca Pinto Minerva, who recalled the academic Bari, welcoming to the massive arrival of Albanians in the 1990s, with interventions in support of teaching and educational integration; Natale Parisi, who revealed the details of the operation that led to the creation of Tele Norba Shqiptare and the beginnings of the Gramsci Foundation of Puglia's commitment beyond the Adriatic; Giovanni Cimbalo, professor of history of religions at the University of Bologna, who was tasked with drafting the Albanian religious concordat; Livio Muci, one of the first Italian publishers to discover and translate Albanian literature; and Father Daniele Bertoldi, a key figure in the establishment of the only Italian-language university outside Italy, 'Nostra Signora del Buon Consiglio'. These testimonies show how Italy has established lasting and fruitful cultural relations, transforming the migration emergency into a solid bridge of shared knowledge and academic cooperation.

The third phase of interviews is dedicated to leading figures in the world of media and culture, highlighting their crucial role in Albania's transition: Carlo Bollino recounts the pioneering *Gazeta Shqiptare* (1993), the first foreign newspaper in Albania with an 'Italian' style, which innovated crime reporting and historical analysis despite a 48-hour logistical delay, covering the period from the pyramids to the present day; Edmond Budina evokes theater, Italian fiction, new Albanian cinema, and dual cultural identity; Eduard Mazi recounts the rebirth of Albanian television; Roland Sejko recounts the background behind the decision to give a voice to the forgotten protagonists of the *Vlora* ship that arrived in Italy in 1991, an operation that succeeded with the film *Anija- La Nave*, winner of the 2013 David di Donatello award for best documentary.

The interviews in the final phase are dedicated to bridge citizens, emblematic figures who embody the living link between Albania and Italy: Olti Buzi of Albania News, co-founder of the online

newspaper that reports on the Albanian community in Italy and promotes a balanced view of Albania to Italians; Besmir Rjolli, for whom theatre represents a form of emancipation for a generation of Albanians who now have their own space in Milan's Slow Mill centre, a hybrid cultural space dedicated to slow living, performing arts, and artist residencies for Balkan artists; Paolo Rago, who came to Albania thanks to the Community of Sant'Egidio for a mission of peace and collaboration in the field of education, and went on to devote himself to Albanian history and help reconstruct it through three books published by Laterza; Edon Qesari, an internationally renowned intellectual educated in Italy, with a deep understanding of the dynamics between Italy and Albania; and Arber Agalliu, video storyteller for Albania News, a pioneer in documenting stories of the Albanian diaspora through innovative formats on YouTube and social media, the architect of a new bond with the Arbëreshë and the latest artists to arrive, with reports that blend historical memory, popular culture, and current migration issues.

These stories intertwine with those of sensitive filmmakers such as Stefano Grossi (*Più forti dei Ciclopi* dedicated to Fatos Lubonja and *Rotta Contraria* on Albanian call centres), Fabrizio Bellomo (*E per te canterò tutta la vita* on the figure of Anna Oxa and the power of voices) and Anulloje Lingjin, completing a vivid fresco of cultural exchanges that have given new life and breath to Albanian creativity.

Name	Profession	Name	Profession
Arbër Agalliu	Journalist	Eduard Mazi	Television journalist
Ylliet Aliçka	Diplomat/writer	Livio Muci	Publisher
Fabrizio Bellomo	Artist and Director	Nevila Nika	Historian and Archivist
Father Daniele Bertoldi	Missionary and Teacher	Natale Parisi	Relations between Puglia and Albania
Carlo Bollino	Director of Report TV	Ylli Pepo	Director
Edmond Budina	Director	Franca Pinto Minerva	University Professor
Olti Buzi	Albania News	Ylli Polovina	Diplomat/writer
Giovanni Cimbalo	University professor	Edon Qesari	Historian
Stefano Grossi	Film Director	Paolo Rago	Aid worker/researcher
Diana Kastrati	University professor	Besmir Rrjolli	Slow Mill Milan
Fatos Lubonja	Militant Journalist	Roland Sejko	Director
Saimir Maloku	Survivor of the regime	Ardian Vehbiu	Journalist Writer

These 24 entries, integrated with transnational historiography and contributions from the press, TV, and the web, avoid neo-colonial views and present the research as open and participatory, consolidating the central thesis that there has been a shift from a long period of involuntary Italian *soft power* to an equal relationship between the two nations. I make no secret of the fact that I have

developed a relationship of deep respect and friendship with some of these 'living sources', but this has never affected the historical rigour of the interviews: this is the unique advantage of recounting contemporary events, getting to know the stories up close and, in a certain way, becoming part of them.

Conclusions

Albania is geographically and culturally close to Italy and, since the slow and inexorable implosion of the socialist bloc to the present day, has found itself repeatedly at the centre of Italian media attention. Over time, an often-unbalanced connection has been established between Albania, which has sought a model to follow in Italian media, and Italy, which observed its neighbour first with curiosity and 'exotic' for Italian journalism, then with fears linked to the consequences of the migration emergency, and today with a new tourist and economic perspective.

Italy has not realised its role in the Balkans, not perceiving itself as one of the other major powers and not exploiting its equidistance between the different nations to intervene in Albania on an equal footing. This mistake has also been repeated by the Italian media, which for a long time has viewed the Land of Eagles as a problem to be solved rather than as a kindred people (Cornero, 2009).

It is fundamentally for this reason, in addition to global geopolitical and economic dynamics, that it is now paying the consequences in terms of influence: as Dritero Agolli, one of Albania's leading writers, stated, for Albanians, Italians are now too similar, a film they have already seen, and so they are looking elsewhere, towards new goals and new partners (Caiazza, 2008).

Even the narrative of Albanians' familiarity with Italian, after initially being hailed as a valuable credential and an excellent promise of integration, becomes a pitfall in the long run. The image of the refugee who speaks fluent Italian, on the one hand, increases the pride and prestige of Italian culture in Albania, but on the other, is interpreted as an offence to the linguistic integrity of the host country.

For this reason, the Italian media emphasises linguistic differences, such as names—often unrecognisable, distorted, transformed into tongue twisters—whose difficult pronunciation “*by speakers is always accompanied by a smile that asks for solidarity from the audience.*” Albanians have not forgotten the sketch “Strisha la Berisha” where, in defiance of all current *political correctness*, Antonio Ricci’s program parodied the non-original versions of his program, with the presenters dressed in two Eastern European-style jackets, the studio abandoned, and the showgirls transformed into “Valone.” Not to mention the association between Albanians and crime, which was very common in the 1990s and 2000s, with the anti-Albanian demonstrations of the Northern League or one of the most violent cases in Italian crime news, the Novi Ligure case, when an Albanian citizen was initially blamed without the possibility of reply. The same applies to the equation of Albanians with Muslim fundamentalists in the days following September 11, 2001, with Albania described as an outpost of Islam on the borders of Europe, without taking into account that Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Sunnis, and Bektashis have coexisted peacefully in Albania for centuries (Vehbiu, Devole, 1996).

In this complex mosaic, the Albanian media issue represents a complex intertwining of Italy’s enduring cultural proximity, Anglo-Saxon Western influences, and the rise of a new Turkish influence, configuring Albania as a schizophrenic Euro-Mediterranean periphery, suspended between involuntary *soft power* and new

global hegemonies. From communist clandestinity – with pirate retransmissions and cloning of RAI programming despite Hoxha’s bans on ‘alien manifestations’ – to subtle post-1991 Italianization, marked by 31 private broadcasters emulating Mediaset’s formats such as *Fiks Fare* or *Stop*, the Italian legacy now persists in symbolic awards, linguistic Italianisms, and shared rituals such as Sanremo or Serie A.

However, it succumbs to an economically unsustainable oligarchic television bubble, where *tycoons* have used the media for extra-editorial interests. Millennial internationalization – with low-cost Turkish series such as *Kosem*, *Ezel*, and *Ertuğrul* on Top Channel and TV Klan exploiting the Ottoman legacy filtered through Americanization, eroding local Albanian production – and EU disenchantment mark an epochal transition, in which Albania, from a laboratory of forbidden Italian dreams to a crossroads of media Pan-Turkism, challenges the Belpaese to transform its Adriatic proximity from an exotic narrative to an equidistant strategic partnership.

It will be precisely the common European horizon that offers the prospect of a new, equal interconnection between the two shores of the Adriatic. In 2014, Albania was granted European Union candidate status, marking an important step towards European integration. (Bregu, 2016).

Official negotiations began in 2022 and were accelerated in 2024. The EU Commission praised judicial reforms, the fight against corruption, and human rights, with efficient technical screening despite regional challenges. 2025 has been called a “turning point” by Minister Majlinda Bregu, with consultations on 12 EU recommendations to maintain momentum. Currently, the Rama government aims to conclude negotiations in 2027 with the achievable goal of entry in 2030, as promised by Brussels.

By joining the European Union, Albania hopes to shake off the stigma of being perceived as a constant periphery: the periphery of the European Union, the periphery of the Western capitalist cultural model, the periphery of neo-Ottomanism. To assert a new centrality, the Albanian government has recently played the card of political stability, presenting itself to EU countries, the United States, Turkey, and the Gulf monarchies as a growing economic reality in which it is worthwhile to invest, using the triumphant numbers of the tourism boom as a calling card—to the point that Jared Kushner, son-in-law of US President Donald Trump, has shown interest in the Albanian island of Saseno, announcing a mega-investment for a €1.4 billion luxury tourist resort—or examples of technological innovation. In fact, Albania made the front pages of global newspapers in 2025 thanks to the appointment of Diella, the world's first AI-generated prime minister, to oversee public procurement and fight corruption. Originally a virtual assistant on the e-Albania platform, Diella is tasked with managing tenders in a neutral manner, with the aim of making processes 100% transparent by 2030 to facilitate entry into the EU. But despite the bombastic announcement, by 2026 the first investigations are already underway against Diella's managers for attempting to tamper with the AI's neutrality.

The impact of television series risks not only strongly influencing today's consumption patterns, but also being a vehicle for political and cultural messages that are very different from one another, yet always capable of influencing viewers in a schizophrenic programming schedule that oscillates between pro-Islamic Turkish soap operas and the ostentatious Westernisation of reality shows and talk shows (Saracino, 2024b).

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