© 2026 Lami and Pacukaj. This article follows the Open Access policy of CC BY NC under CC v 4.0.

Submitted: 28/06/2026 - Accepted: 22/07/2026 - Published: 28/09/2026

Social Pedagogies of Memory: How Political Discourse Shapes National Identity and Civic Engagement in Post-Communist Albania

Roland Lami[1], Sokol Pacukaj[1*]

Department of Sociology, "Alexsander Moisiu" University of Durrës, Albania
* sokolpacukaj@gmail.com

DOI: 10.26417/3dm525dt

Abstract

Historical memory represents an important dimension of contemporary politics through which societies interpret the past, construct collective identities, and shape citizens' understanding of history, belonging, and democracy. Within this context, the study examines how references to the past, particularly to the Second World War and the communist period, are used in the construction of political discourse and electoral mobilization in post-communist Albania. The study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, combining content analysis of the programmatic documents of the Socialist Party of Albania and the Democratic Party of Albania with discourse analysis of political communication as reflected in the newspapers Panorama, Tema, and Mapo during the period 2012–2024. The empirical corpus consists of 250 media articles, analyzed through a coding scheme based on eight discursive frames (four for each party), enabling the identification of both their presence and intensity. The findings reveal contrasting interpretations of the past. Socialist Party discourse emphasizes historical legitimacy, collective sacrifice, antifascist identity, and state-building continuity, while Democratic Party discourse focuses on anti-communism, victimization, Western orientation, and historical justice. The analysis further demonstrates that the intensity of these frames increases significantly during electoral periods, indicating that historical memory is strategically mobilized in competitive political contexts. Beyond elections, such narratives shape public understandings of identity, democracy, and belonging. Political discourse therefore functions as a form of public pedagogy through which competing interpretations of history are communicated and reproduced.

Keywords: Historical memory, Political discourse, Civic education, National identity, Collective memory, Electoral mobilization, Post-communist societies.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, "political discourse in Europe and beyond has undergone significant transformation under the influence of the rise of populist movements" (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017, p.526), which have intensified the use of history, national myths, and war symbolism as instruments of political communication. In this context, references to the past no longer function merely as commemorative elements, but as meaningful resources employed to structure political narratives and shape public perceptions. As Verovšek argues, "collective memory is a selective and functional process constructed in accordance with the needs of the present" (2016, p. 52), while Goodin emphasizes that "collective identities are formed through shared narratives that generate a sense of belonging" (2003, p. 55). In this sense, history and its symbolism become active mechanisms for the construction of collective identities and the mobilization of the electorate (Lieberman et al, 1995).

Beyond their political function, these narratives also contribute to broader processes of social learning by shaping how citizens interpret historical events, collective identity, and notions of belonging. Political discourse therefore represents not only a mechanism of mobilization but also an arena where meanings about the past and civic identity are publicly produced and transmitted (Barton et al.,2004).

In this perspective War symbolism emerges as a powerful discursive resource that adds a strong emotional and moral dimension to politics. Through the evocation of sacrifice, heroism, and the defense of the homeland, political actors construct narratives that portray politics as a struggle between good and evil. As Muller argues, "populism relies on a moral logic that divides society between a pure people and a corrupt elite" (2016, p.19), while Hawkins (2016, p. 311), highlights that populist discourses activate emotions and construct dramatic narratives that present politics as a state of ongoing crisis. In this way, war symbolism contributes to shifting the focus from programmatic debates toward the construction of antagonistic identities and the emotional mobilization of the electorate, making historical memory a central element of political competition.

Drawing on this theoretical foundation, post-communist contexts provide a particularly suitable setting for analyzing the intersection between historical memory and populist discourse, given the enduring role that the past plays in structuring political identities and electoral competition (Whitefield, 2002). Albania represents a particularly illustrative case in this regard, as the history of World War II and the legacy of the communist regime continue to serve as important reference points in contemporary political discourse. In this context, historical memory is not merely an

object of debate, but an active instrument for articulating political divisions and mobilizing the electorate (Campbell, 2012).

The persistence of these narratives highlights the broader social relevance of historical memory, as competing interpretations of the past influence not only political preferences but also collective understandings of history, identity, and democratic belonging.

Since the beginning of political pluralism in the early 1990s, the Albanian political landscape has been dominated by two main actors the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party which have consistently secured over 85% of electoral support. This dominance has produced a political system characterized by strong bipolar competition, where ideological and symbolic divisions are essential for political differentiation. Within this framework, references to the past, particularly to World War II and the communist period, have become a central component of the discursive strategies of these two parties.

According to Marku and Teqja (2023) the strategic use of historical memory by these dominant political actors must be understood within the broader context of Albania's protracted and incomplete democratic transition. Despite over three decades of pluralism, the political system functions as a hybrid regime characterized by competitive authoritarianism, patronage, and a persistent cultural legacy where the ruling party is strongly identified with the state itself. Because the country's initial democratization was driven more as a reactionary rejection of the communist past than a foundational commitment to liberal democratic norms, political elites have been able to manipulate democratic institutions to prolong their hold on power. Consequently, the discursive mobilization of historical memory serves not only as an ideological or electoral tool, but as a critical mechanism for elite survival within an unstable democratic environment.

This discursive strategy is deeply rooted in a historical and cultural duality where political actors continuously oscillate between formal Western integrative aspirations and Eastern political methodologies. Consequently, the invocation of Western democratic ideals is often accompanied by practical political behaviors, such as denigrating rhetoric, personal attacks, and zero-sum conflicts, that contradict these very ideals (Krasniqi, 2014). In this environment, historical narratives are wielded to resolve the tension between the image of a modern European identity and the reality of a transitional political culture

The party-centered configuration is also reflected in patterns of political participation and electoral engagement in Albania. Bërdufi and Pacukaj (2022), in their study of conventional political participation in Albania during 2011–2021, show that the main political parties, particularly the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party, remain decisive actors in structuring political inclusion, representation, and access to decision-making processes. Their findings are relevant for the present study because they indicate that political mobilization in Albania is strongly mediated by party

organizations, leadership structures, and electoral mechanisms. Therefore, the use of historical memory in political discourse should be understood not only as a symbolic or ideological practice, but also as part of a broader party-centered strategy of electoral mobilization.

More specifically, these two political actors have articulated distinct and often competing narratives about the same historical period. In the discourse associated with the Socialist Party, the National Liberation War is presented as a foundational moment that legitimizes historical continuity and the role of the state. In contrast, in the discourse of the Democratic Party, the same period is more often interpreted through its political consequences, emphasizing the need to distance the present from the communist legacy and to affirm the values of freedom and pluralism (Fischer, 1999; 2002). These narratives are not confined to the programmatic level but are reformulated and intensified in public and media discourse, contributing to the construction of political identities and electoral mobilization.

Through this process, political narratives also acquire an implicit pedagogical dimension, as they provide interpretive frameworks through which citizens understand historical experiences and their relevance for contemporary political and civic life.

2. Literature Review

The literature on populism has developed significantly in recent decades, shifting its focus from narrow ideological definitions toward understanding it as a distinct mode of political articulation. In this regard, Laclau and Mouffe's approach remains a key reference point, as it understands populism as a discursive process through which symbolic boundaries are constructed between "the people" and "the elite" (Thomassen, 2016). This perspective places emphasis not so much on ideological content, but on the ways in which meanings are produced and organized within political discourse.

Building on this perspective, a substantial body of literature conceptualizes populism as a discursive and performative practice (Destradi et al., 2021; Wodak, 2015), for instance, argues that populist discourses rely on the use of history and collective memory to legitimize contemporary political positions, while Urbinati (2019) understands populism as a style of communication that constructs narratives of crisis and foregrounds the emotional dimension of politics. In this sense, populism extends beyond ideology and manifests itself as a concrete mode of political articulation in the public sphere.

A related strand of scholarship examines how emotional attachments and cultural identities shape patterns of political support. Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that the rise of populism is linked to reactions against rapid social and cultural change, where feelings of insecurity and loss of social stability are often accompanied by a turn toward traditional value. Similarly, Mudde and Kaltwasser emphasize the moral

dimension of populism, describing it as a division between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite," a distinction that is strongly grounded in emotional and normative perceptions (Abromeit, 2017).

At the same time, studies on collective memory provide an important framework for understanding how the past is mobilized in political discourse. Halbwachs (1950) conceptualizes memory as a social process constructed within groups, while Assmann (2008) highlights its selective and functional character, arguing that it is shaped in accordance with the needs of the present. This implies that historical references are not neutral but mediated by political context and the interests of actors.

Nostalgia becomes analytically significant in this context, offering a valuable lens through which to examine how the past is interpreted and mobilized in political discourse. (Boym, 2001). The literature indicates that, in populist settings, restorative nostalgia is particularly salient, as it produces simplified and emotionally resonant narratives that reinforce collective identity and shared belonging (Manucci, 2021). However, the existing literature remains limited in examining the intersection between populism, war memory, and nostalgia in specific post-communist contexts (Jensen, 2021).

In the Albanian case in particular, this intersection remains underexplored, despite its significant role in structuring political competition and electoral mobilization. In this sense, the Albanian case offers an opportunity to test and extend the explanatory scope of these theoretical approaches within a post-communist context where historical memory remains an active component of political competition.

Beyond their electoral and political functions, these narratives also have broader social implications, as political discourse represents an important arena through which citizens encounter, interpret, and reproduce meanings about the past. In this sense, the construction of historical narratives by political actors can be understood as a form of public pedagogy, shaping collective understandings of identity, citizenship, and democratic belonging outside formal educational institutions (Seixas et al., 2013).

3. Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates the discursive conceptualization of populism with approaches to collective memory and nostalgia, with the aim of developing an analytical model for explaining political discourse in post-communist Albania. Within this outline, these concepts are not treated as separate domains, but as interdependent dimensions of a broader process through which political actors produce meaning and structure political competition.

Populism is conceptualized as a logic of constructing political boundaries through which antagonistic identities are produced. In the Albanian case, this logic, as argued by Kajsiu (2015), is reflected in the discourse of the two main political parties the

Socialist Party and the Democratic Party which, throughout the period of political pluralism, have articulated competing narratives about the past in order to construct the division between “us” and “them.” These divisions are not merely political, but also historical and moral, as each side claims a more authentic connection to the national interest and to the “legitimate” interpretation of history.

This boundary-making process is further amplified by a dualistic political discourse that consistently opposes a positive "Western" model against a negative "Oriental" or "Eastern" one. Political actors routinely employ derogatory historical and cultural labels, such as "sultan," "Anatolian," or "Orientalist", to frame their rivals as regressive and undemocratic. By doing so, they cross the boundaries of standard political critique to construct an antagonistic, exclusionary identity, treating the Western orientation not just as a geopolitical goal, but as a symbolic weapon against the "other" (Krasniqi, 2014).

Within this framework, collective memory is understood as a selective mechanism through which the past is rearticulated in accordance with present political objectives. In Albania, the period of the Second World War and its legacy have served as primary sources for this process. The Socialist Party has tended to construct a narrative emphasizing continuity with the antifascist tradition and its role in state-building, while the Democratic Party has interpreted the same period through a narrative highlighting repression and the need to distance the present from the communist legacy (Kajsiu, 2015). In this sense, memory does not function as a shared historical repository, but as a field of selection and reinterpretation that sustains political and identity-based divisions (Kajsiu,2005; Krasniqi, 2016; Biberaj, 2013).

Within this interaction, nostalgia is conceptualized as a mechanism that links memory to emotional mobilization. In Albanian as Biberaj (2013) argues, political discourse, it takes different forms depending on the ideological positioning of political actors. For the Socialist Party, it appears as a symbolic return to the values of antifascism and collective solidarity, whereas for the Democratic Party it is articulated through narratives of resistance to dictatorship and demands for freedom and pluralism. In both cases, nostalgia does not operate merely as a recollection of the past, but as a tool for generating emotional identification and reinforcing political belonging (Lammers,2023).

From this perspective, the study conceptualizes the interaction between historical memory, war symbolism, and populist discourse as a process linking discursive articulation with electoral mobilization. Drawing on this framework, Albania is treated as a case study through which it is possible to assess whether the mechanisms identified in the works of Assmann (2011); Boym (2001); Müller (2016); Laclau (2005); and Anderson (2006) regarding the use of historical memory and emotions in populist discourse are also present and operational in a post-communist context such as Albania.

This framework recognizes that political narratives about the past may also perform a broader socializing function by shaping how citizens interpret historical events, collective identity, and democratic values. Through repeated circulation in political and media discourse, these narratives contribute to processes of public meaning-making, where citizens encounter competing interpretations of history beyond formal educational institutions. In this sense, historical memory can be understood not only as a resource for political mobilization, but also as a form of public pedagogy that influences civic understanding and the transmission of collective narratives (Rüsen,2005).

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study is guided by two main research questions:

Q1: How do the Socialist Party of Albania and the Democratic Party of Albania use World War II symbolism in constructing political narratives during the period 2012–2024 in Albania?

Q2: What discursive frames are used by these two parties in articulating the past, and what political functions do they serve?

In line with these questions, the study formulates the following hypotheses:

H1: The Socialist Party of Albania and the Democratic Party of Albania employ different and contrasting discursive frames in interpreting the past, constructing antagonistic narratives in political discourse.

H2: The discursive frames used by the two main parties serve distinct political functions: in the discourse of the Socialist Party of Albania, they contribute to the production of historical legitimacy and political continuity, whereas in the discourse of the Democratic Party of Albania, they are used to delegitimize the past and construct political differentiation.

4.2 Research Approach and Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in constructivist epistemology, which conceptualizes political reality as socially constructed through discourse and symbolic practices. In this sense, the analysis seeks to understand how political actors produce meanings and construct narratives that shape voters' perceptions and behavior (Fairclough, 1992; Creswell, 2013).

The study applies a Critical Discourse Analysis framework to examine how historical references and symbolic narratives are constructed within political communication. This framework allows the analysis of how language, narratives, and symbolic representations contribute to the production of political meanings and identities.

Building on this perspective, the study employs two main analytical methods: (a) content analysis and (b) discourse analysis. Content analysis is used to examine party programmatic documents, with the aim of identifying key themes, concepts, and recurring patterns in the articulation of historical references and the symbolism of the National Liberation War. The unit of analysis consists of textual segments in which such references and concepts appear.

Discourse analysis, in turn, is employed to examine how these narratives are articulated in public communication. Drawing on van Dijk's (2008) approach, the analysis focuses on the structure of discourse, the construction of "us versus them" distinctions, and the use of language in producing political meanings. The unit of analysis includes media articles, interviews, and public statements by political actors as reflected in the selected newspapers. This method pays attention not only to content, but also to tone, context, and connotations, treating discourse as a social practice that constructs political reality.

The combined use of these two methods enables data triangulation and enhances the credibility of the findings. However, as a qualitative interpretive study, the analysis remains dependent on the researcher's interpretation and the selection of empirical material.

The analysis focuses on the discourse of the two main political parties in Albania the Socialist Party of Albania and the Democratic Party of Albania. The empirical data consist of two main sources: (1) programmatic documents and official party texts for the period 2012–2024, and (2) media materials published in Gazeta Panorama, Gazeta Tema, and Gazeta Mapo.

The selection of these sources was based on their relevance to political communication and their availability of systematically documented archives during the period under analysis. The selected newspapers were chosen because they represent established platforms within the Albanian public sphere and provide continuous coverage of political discourse related to historical narratives and electoral competition. These newspapers were selected due to their broad presence in the public sphere and the availability of systematically documented online archives over time.

The corpus includes 250 media articles (127 related to the Socialist Party and 123 to the Democratic Party) published during the period 2012–2024, primarily in electoral contexts and around historical anniversaries. Content analysis was applied to programmatic documents, while discourse analysis was conducted on media materials, allowing for a comparison between institutionalized discourse and its mediated representation in the public sphere.

The identification of key themes and narratives followed an inductive–deductive coding procedure. Initial categories were informed by the theoretical framework on historical memory, political discourse, and symbolic politics, while the analysis of

empirical material allowed the refinement and specification of the final coding categories.

Based on an inductive–deductive process, a coding scheme was developed identifying four discursive frames for the Socialist Party: (1) historical legitimacy, (2) collective sacrifice, (3) antifascist identity, and (4) state-building continuity; and four frames for the Democratic Party: (1) anti-communism and historical delegitimization, (2) victimization and persecution, (3) Western orientation, and (4) historical justice and rehabilitation.

The basic unit of analysis is the paragraph, and each unit was manually coded using a three-level scale (0 = absent, 1 = present, 2 = emphasized). This procedure enables not only the identification of the presence of discursive frames, but also the measurement of their intensity, allowing for comparisons across time periods and political actors.

The coding criteria were defined according to the conceptual meaning of each discursive frame, allowing the identification of recurring narratives and their intensity across different political actors and periods.

To enhance reliability, the coding scheme was applied consistently across all units of analysis, following predefined criteria for each discursive frame. Although the study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, efforts were made to ensure analytical consistency across the dataset. Due to the limited availability of systematically archived party documents, the analysis relies on available programmatic materials and publicly accessible media sources.

5. Results and Discussion

In the discourse associated with the Socialist Party of Albania, references to the National Liberation War are articulated through a stable semantic field that includes concepts such as collective sacrifice, liberation from occupation, antifascist values, alignment with the “right side of history,” and the establishment of the foundations of the modern state after 1944. To systematically analyze this discourse, a coding scheme consisting of four discursive frames was developed and applied to a corpus of 120 articles published in Gazeta Panorama, Gazeta Tema, and Gazeta Mapo during the period 2012–2024. The unit of analysis was the paragraph, and coding was conducted using a three-level scale (0–2), enabling the identification of both the presence and intensity of these frames.

The results indicate that the frame of historical legitimacy is the most prevalent (78% of articles), followed by collective sacrifice (65%) and antifascist identity (61%). The frame of state-building continuity appears in approximately half of the articles (around 52%), while anti-revisionism and selective nostalgia are present at lower, yet non-negligible levels. A comparative analysis shows that the intensity of these frames increases significantly during electoral periods. Specifically, the average coding intensity per article calculated as the mean value across all discursive frames

on a 0–2 scale ranges from 1.4 to 1.7 during electoral periods, compared to 1.1–1.3 in articles published around historical anniversaries. This trend is consistently observed across all three media outlets and suggests a more systematic and strategic use of historical memory in competitive political contexts.

At the thematic level, the category of sacrifice and historical legacy is articulated through formulations that present the National Liberation War as the foundation of the political identity of the left and as a continuous source of moral legitimacy. Similarly, the category of alignment with the "right side of history" frames this period as a normative political choice that continues to guide contemporary political positioning. Meanwhile, within the framework of historical continuity and state-building, the post-1944 period is depicted as a phase of institutionalization, constructing a linear narrative that links the past to the present.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings support the view that historical memory functions as a structured source of meaning and political resource. Rather than being a neutral repository of the past, it operates as a selective process organized around institutionalized symbols and narratives (Assmann, 2011). The dominance of the historical legitimacy frame suggests that the National Liberation War has acquired the status of a key reference point in collective memory, often mobilized to stabilize and reproduce political identity in changing contexts.

This process also has implications for civic education, as political narratives become part of the broader environment in which individuals, particularly younger generations, encounter and interpret historical knowledge outside formal educational settings. The political construction of memory therefore influences not only electoral preferences but also wider understandings of citizenship, social values, and the relationship between history and democracy.

In line with this, Foucault's understanding of discourse as a mechanism that produces and organizes meaning and power relations can be interpreted through Haugaard's (2022), discussion. In this sense, the prominence of frames such as antifascist identity and the implicit "us versus them" division indicates that discourse not only describes reality but also structures how political actors and audiences interpret it, creating symbolic boundaries between legitimate and delegitimized positions.

Framing theory offers a useful basis for interpreting this process, as the selection and emphasis of aspects of reality shape how issues are defined, understood, and evaluated in public discourse (Entman, 1993). According to Fuga (2011) perspective on communication, such narratives do not simply reflect reality; they participate in its construction by transforming historical references into meaningful symbols capable of generating emotional resonance among the public. References to the National Liberation War therefore function as recognizable cues that simplify political choices and activate affective and historical forms of identification. Their persistent use in media discourse represents an active instrumentalization of

historical memory through which political actors seek to generate legitimacy, reinforce collective identity, and influence electoral behaviour.

At the same time, the educational dimension of these narratives lies in their capacity to provide interpretive frameworks through which citizens make sense of political history. The repetition of certain symbolic references contributes to the normalization of particular versions of the past, demonstrating that political discourse functions as a complementary arena of historical interpretation alongside schools, cultural institutions, and other mechanisms of socialization.

In contrast, in the discourse associated with the Democratic Party of Albania, references to the communist past and the post-war period are articulated through a semantic field structured around four key frames: anti-communism and historical delegitimization, victimization and persecution, Western orientation, and historical justice and rehabilitation. Unlike the legitimizing narrative of the left, the discourse of the Democratic Party is characterized by a critical and delegitimizing approach to this historical period.

To analyze this discourse systematically, a coding scheme consisting of four discursive frames was applied to a corpus of 130 articles published in the same media outlets during the period 2012–2024. The unit of analysis remained the paragraph, and coding followed the same three-level scale (0–2). The results show that the frame of anti-communism and historical delegitimization is the most prevalent (72% of articles), followed by victimization and persecution (66%), Western orientation (64%), and historical justice and rehabilitation (59%). A comparative analysis indicates that the intensity of these frames also increases during electoral periods, with average coding scores ranging from 1.3 to 1.6, compared to 1.0–1.2 in non-electoral periods. This suggests a strategic use of historical narratives for political mobilization.

These findings also indicate that political narratives about the past operate beyond immediate electoral objectives. By framing historical experiences through concepts such as repression, injustice, freedom, and democratic transformation, political discourse contributes to the broader social process through which citizens interpret collective experiences and develop understandings of political values. In this sense, memory narratives function as informal mechanisms of civic education, influencing how concepts such as democracy, rights, and citizenship are publicly communicated and understood (Rüsen, 2004; Barton & Levstik, 2004).

At the thematic level, the frame of anti-communism is articulated through a critical reinterpretation of the past, where the post-war period is presented as the beginning of a repressive order (Taylor, 2017). The frame of victimization constructs a narrative centered on trauma and historical injustice, emphasizing the experiences of persecuted individuals and groups. Western orientation functions as a normative project that establishes a clear distance from the communist past, while the frame of

historical justice is articulated as a demand for moral and institutional redress (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Mihelj's (2017) argument on the politics of memory in post-socialist societies, where the communist past becomes an object of continuous renegotiation and reinterpretation in accordance with present political interests. Similarly, Western orientation can be understood within the broader framework of Europeanization processes, where references to Western values and institutions serve as tools for legitimizing political projects and constructing narratives of modernization (Borragán, 2006).

From the perspective of public pedagogy the importance of these narratives lies in their ability to transmit normative interpretations of the past. By emphasizing experiences of victimization, resistance, or democratic transition, political actors contribute to shaping collective historical awareness and influencing the ways in which different generations understand the relationship between past injustices and contemporary democratic institutions (Ricoeur,2004),

Regarding Western orientation, this element can be understood within the broader context of Europeanization processes and political identity formation in Southeast Europe. In the analyzed discourse, references to the West do not appear merely as a geopolitical alignment, but rather as a normative framework associated with the values of democracy, the rule of law, and institutional modernization (Lendvai,2007). At the same time, such references can also be interpreted as strategic instruments aimed at securing international legitimacy and support, particularly in hybrid or fragile democracies. "These references are employed to establish a clear contrast with the communist past and to articulate a future-oriented vision grounded in Euro-Atlantic integration" (Lami, 2020, p. 23).

In this perspective Western orientation functions as a source of political legitimacy, through which political actors position themselves as representatives of democratic transformation and societal progress. This discursive dimension is closely linked to the construction of political identity, where belonging to the "West" is articulated not only as a strategic choice but also as a symbolic marker of separation from the communist past (Scheuer, A., & Schmitt, H, 2009, p. 551).

This interpretation aligns with Vachudova's (2005) argument that Europeanization processes in post-communist countries are accompanied by the strategic use of references to Western institutions and values as tools for legitimizing political projects and constructing narratives of modernization and democratic transformation. From this perspective, discourse on Western orientation is not merely descriptive but performative, as it contributes to shaping political expectations and orienting public perceptions toward a particular model of development.

While the Democratic Party consistently articulates a frame of 'Western orientation' to distance itself from the communist past, reading this through the framework provided by Teqja and Borakaj (2014) reveals its highly performative dimension on the international stage. The alignment of domestic discourse with Euro-Atlantic standards is frequently driven by the need to secure external validation, as transitional states actively adjust their behavior and rhetoric to meet anticipated Western judgments in exchange for the prospect of EU membership. In this context, Albanian political actors utilize the rhetoric of institutional reform and regional stability not just as domestic policy goals, but as strategic tools to fulfill the normative conditions imposed by international frameworks, thereby securing vital external legitimacy for their political projects.

The analysis therefore indicates that historical narratives form part of broader processes of political socialization. Through media discourse and public debate, citizens are exposed to competing interpretations of the past that shape not only their political identifications but also their wider understandings of democracy, legitimacy, citizenship, and social belonging.

The examined discourse does not simply represent an alternative interpretation of the past, but rather a sustained process of instrumentalizing negative memory. The past is mobilized to delegitimize political opponents, construct political identity, and facilitate electoral mobilization. Consequently, unlike the case of the Socialist Party where historical memory functions as a source of legitimacy, in the case of the Democratic Party it operates as a mechanism of political differentiation and contestation. Also, the analysis reveals that linguistic nuances vary significantly depending on how the theme is articulated in the media and in relation to the political actors represented. In the case of the Socialist Party of Albania, references to the National Liberation War are constructed through an affirmative and inclusive linguistic register, employing formulations that emphasize “collective sacrifice,” “national unity,” “historical legacy,” and “antifascist values.” These expressions create a positive semantic field that presents the past as a source of pride and continuity, thereby producing an integrative effect within public discourse.

In contrast, the discourse associated with the Democratic Party of Albania adopts a more critical and conflict-oriented register, characterized by expressions emphasizing “repression”, “persecution”, “historical injustice” and the “legacy of dictatorship”. These formulations construct a negative semantic field in which the past is articulated as a traumatic experience and as a point of division among political actors. In this way, language does not merely describe the past but actively contributes to its delegitimization, and indirectly, to the delegitimization of actors associated with that period.

Cap (2019) argues that the repetition and organization of lexical patterns establish stable connections between language and ideological structures, making this mode of articulation recognizable and predictable to the audience. These linguistic choices

consequently construct an interpretive framework in which the communist past is represented as a period of injustice and historical deviation, whereas the present is portrayed as an attempt to address and correct its consequences.

Regarding the prominence of the four discursive frames historical legitimacy, collective sacrifice, antifascist identity, and state-building continuity in the political programs of the Socialist Party of Albania for the period 2012–2024, the analysis shows that these elements are consistently embedded within programmatic documents. These programs repeatedly refer to Albania's role in the antifascist struggle and present this period as a key moment in shaping both the country's state identity and its political orientation, linking it to democratic values and European belonging (Socialist Party of Albania, 2013, 2017, 2021).

Within these documents, historical legitimacy and antifascist identity are conveyed through formulations that emphasize Albania's alignment with the antifascist coalition and the significance of this experience in positioning the country on the "right side of history." References to shared contributions and the role of wartime generations reinforce a narrative of collective sacrifice, while institutional continuity is presented by linking this period to the consolidation of state structures and the development of the modern state.

These structures are not always articulated explicitly but are often embedded in a characteristic vocabulary that includes terms such as "antifascist values," "historical legacy," "European identity," and "Albania's international role." This mode of articulation suggests that references to the National Liberation War are institutionalized within programmatic discourse as symbolic resources contributing to the legitimization of the political project.

Programmatic narratives also have an educational dimension because they contribute to defining what forms of historical knowledge become socially significant. By selecting certain events, symbols, and interpretations, political discourse participates in the broader construction of collective memory and influences the civic frameworks through which citizens interpret national identity and democratic development.

In this context, references to the National Liberation War function not merely as commemorative elements but as fundamental components in the construction of political and state identity. The past is conceptualized as a moment in which the country clearly positioned itself within the antifascist alliances, serving as a reference point for contemporary political orientation and for articulating Albania's role in the international arena.

The four discursive patterns identified in the political programs of the Democratic Party of Albania are anti-communism and historical delegitimization, victimization and persecution, Western orientation, and historical justice and rehabilitation. These elements constitute a stable core of the party's programmatic discourse and

contribute to a broader narrative that distances it from the communist past and uses this distinction as a basis for political legitimacy.

Programmatic documents from this period consistently refer to the communist regime as a time characterized by the absence of freedoms, political repression, and institutional distortion, using this interpretation as a starting point for articulating a political alternative. Within this framework, the anti-communism and historical delegitimization frame is expressed through formulations that present the past as a historical deviation that must be overcome, while the present is structured as a corrective and democratizing project (Democratic Party of Albania, 2017; 2023).

Alongside this the frame of victimization and persecution is articulated through references to persecuted groups and historical injustices, emphasizing the need for recognition, rehabilitation, and equal treatment of victims of the regime. These elements are not presented solely as historical concerns, but as part of a broader moral and political obligation linked to the construction of a more just institutional order (Suddaby et al., 2023).

At the same time, the narrative of Western orientation is consistently present in sections addressing foreign policy and institutional development, where European and Euro-Atlantic integration is emphasized as a strategic direction (Kajsiu, 2005; Lami et al., 2026). References to the West are accompanied by a vocabulary highlighting democracy, the rule of law, and modernization, thereby creating a clear contrast with the communist past and presenting this orientation as both a normative and identity-based choice (Redžić & Everett, 2020).

The frame of historical justice and rehabilitation is articulated through references to the need to address the consequences of the past, including the rehabilitation of victims and the redress of historical injustices. In this case as well, the language employed is not merely descriptive but normatively oriented, presenting justice for the past as a precondition for democratic consolidation.

A key element is that these frames are not always explicitly articulated but often appear through a characteristic vocabulary including terms such as “dictatorship,” “persecution,” “freedom,” “European integration,” and “justice for victims.” This suggests that the programmatic discourse of the Democratic Party of Albania is structured around a critical memory of the past, which functions as a source of political differentiation and a mechanism for constructing oppositional identity.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that political uses of historical memory have implications that extend beyond electoral mobilization. Competing narratives of the past contribute to shaping civic interpretations of history and influence how societies understand identity, democracy, justice, and political belonging. The Albanian case therefore illustrates a broader phenomenon observable in post-socialist societies, where historical memory functions simultaneously as a political

resource and as a form of public education through which collective meanings are transmitted and contested.

These four frames constitute a central component of programmatic discourse, appearing consistently and forming a coherent interpretive structure that links the interpretation of the past to present political objectives. Consequently, references to the communist period do not function merely as historical elements, but as instruments for delegitimizing political opponents and constructing alternative narratives of identity and political development (Zubrzycki & Woźny, 2020).

6. Conclusions

This study examined how references to the past particularly to World War II are articulated and employed in Albanian political discourse, drawing on the analysis of programmatic documents and mediated discourse of the two main political parties, the Socialist Party of Albania and the Democratic Party of Albania, which have dominated the country's political landscape for over three decades. The findings indicate that historical memory does not function as a neutral repository of the past, but rather as an active source of meaning used in the construction of political narratives, thereby directly addressing the first research question (Assmann, 2011; Verdery, 1999).

Beyond their political function, these narratives also operate as forms of public pedagogy, through which interpretations of the past are transmitted, reproduced, and normalized within society. By shaping how citizens understand historical events, collective identity, and political values, political discourses contribute to broader processes of civic learning and the social construction of historical knowledge.

Within this framework, the analysis confirms that the two main parties construct distinct and contrasting discursive frames in their interpretation of the past. In one case, the past is articulated as a source of historical legitimacy, continuity, and collective identity, whereas in the other it is presented as an object of delegitimization, critical reflection, and political differentiation. This finding supports the first hypothesis and demonstrates that history is strategically mobilized to construct antagonistic narratives and delineate symbolic boundaries between political actors, consistent with existing scholarship (Laclau, 2005; Lamont, 2000).

Furthermore, the study shows that the identified discursive frames are not merely descriptive representations of the past but carry clear political functions. In the discourse associated with the Socialist Party of Albania, these frames contribute to the production of historical legitimacy and the construction of a narrative of state-building continuity. In contrast, in the discourse of the Democratic Party of Albania, they are used to delegitimize the communist past and to articulate a political identity grounded in differentiation and distancing. This finding is consistent with the second hypothesis and indicates that historical memory operates as a differentiated strategic instrument in political competition, in line with studies that show how references to

the past are selectively mobilized to construct political legitimacy and differentiation (Assmann, 2011; Verdery, 1999; Suddaby et al., 2023).

At the same time, the findings suggest that these competing interpretations of the past have implications beyond electoral competition. Through repeated exposure in media and political communication, historical narratives become part of the broader symbolic environment in which citizens develop perceptions of democracy, identity, legitimacy, and collective belonging. In this sense, political discourse functions not only as a mechanism of mobilization but also as an informal educational process that influences public understanding of history and civic identity.

An important finding concerns the dynamic dimensions of these frames. This suggests that historical memory is not merely an element of identity, but a direct resource for political mobilization, reinforcing voter identification and structuring political choices, as voters often rely on symbolic and affective cues in low-information contexts (Popkin, 1991; Zaller, 1992).

At the theoretical level, the study contributes to the literature on memory politics and political discourse in post-communist contexts by demonstrating that the past is not merely interpreted but systematically instrumentalized for the production of political meaning, consistent with scholarship emphasizing the strategic use of memory in contemporary politics (Assmann, 2011; Verdery, 1999; Suddaby et al., 2023). In this sense, the Albanian case illustrates how historical memory functions as a mediating mechanism between political identity and electoral mobilization, linking the symbolic and strategic dimensions of political competition. Furthermore, the study highlights the role of the media as a key arena in which these narratives are not only reproduced but also amplified and made accessible to broader audiences, thereby contributing to the diffusion and normalization of discursive frames (Couldry, 2008; Strömbäck, 2008).

From the perspective of social and civic education, the findings also demonstrate that political narratives about the past represent important mechanisms through which societies negotiate meanings of citizenship, responsibility, and collective identity. The Albanian case therefore provides broader insights into how historical memory can operate as an educational force within transitional societies, where competing interpretations of the past continue to shape contemporary understandings of democracy and social cohesion (Müller, 2002).

However, the study also presents certain limitations. As a qualitative interpretive study, the findings are influenced by the selection of empirical material and the researcher's interpretation. Moreover, the focus on three print media outlets does not fully capture the role of digital media and social networks, which constitute an increasingly important arena of political communication. In this regard, future research could expand the analysis to digital platforms and further explore the relationship between political discourse and actual voting behavior, in order to better understand the impact of memory politics on electoral decision-making.

Declaration of AI Use

The authors declare that AI-assisted tools were used only for language editing, grammar correction, and improvement of clarity. All ideas, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, arguments, and written content are original and were carried out by the authors. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its accuracy, originality, and academic integrity.

Funding:

This research was funded by the Scientific Research Grant of Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durres, Albania for the year 2026.

References

[1] Abromeit, J. (2017). A critical review of recent literature on populism. *Politics and Governance, 5*(4), 177–186.
[2] Assmann, A. (2008). Transformations between history and memory. *Social Research, 75*, 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2008.0038
[3] Barton, K. C., & Levstik, L. S. (2004). *Teaching History for the Common Good*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
[4] Bërdufi, D., & Pacukaj, S., (2022) Youth Political Participation in Conventional Forms in Albania 2011-2021. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *11*(3), 403. https://doi.org/10.36941/ajis-2022-0092
[5] Biberaj, E. (2013). *Albania and the Albanians: A study of a people in transition*. I.B. Tauris.
[6] Borragán, N. P. S. (2006). Post-communist interest politics: A research agenda. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society, 7*(2), 134–154.
[7] Campbell, A. L. (2012). Policy makes mass politics. *Annual Review of Political Science, 15*(1), 333–351.
[8] Cap, P. (2019). Discourse studies: Between social constructionism and linguistics. *Topics in Linguistics, 20*(2), 1–16.
[9] Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? *New Media & Society, 10*(3), 373–391.
[10] Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). SAGE.
[11] Destradi, S., Cadier, D., & Plagemann, J. (2021). Populism and foreign policy: A research agenda. *Comparative European Politics, 19*(6), 663–673
[12] Democratic Party of Albania. (2023). *Magnificent Albania: Political program*. https://pd.al
[13] Democratic Party of Albania. (2017). *Electoral promises for the 2017 parliamentary elections*. https://polifakt.al/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PREMTIMET-ELEKTORALE-2017.pdf

[14] Dunmire, P. L. (2012). Political discourse analysis. *Language and Linguistics Compass, 6*(11), 735–751.
[15] Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x
[16] Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse and social change*. Polity Press.
[17] Fischer, B. J. (1999). *Albania at war 1939–1945*. Purdue University Press.
[18] Fischer, B. J. (2002). *Albania 1943–1945*. Hurst.
[19] Fuga, A. (2011). *Mediamorphosis and the metamorphosis of communication*. Papirus.
[20] Goodin, R. E. (2003). Folie républicaine. *Annual Review of Political Science, 6*(1), 55–76.
[21] Halbwachs, M. (1950). *La mémoire collective*. PUF.
[22] Haugaard, M. (2022). Foucault and power. *Critical Review, 34*(3–4), 341–371.
[23] Hawkins, K. A. (2016). Chavismo, liberal democracy, and radical democracy. *Annual Review of Political Science, 19*(1), 311–329.
[24] Hawkins, K. A., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). What the study of populism can teach us. *Swiss Political Science Review, 23*(4), 526–542.
[25] Jensen, J. (Ed.). (2021). *Memory politics and populism in Southeastern Europe*. Routledge.
[26] Krasniqi, A. (2016). *Political parties in Albania (1990–2015)*. Institute for Political Studies.
[27] Krasniqi, A. (2014). Albanian Transition – The Contrast Between Eastern Mentality and European Identity. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, *1*(1), 62. https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv1n108
[28] Lami, R. (2020). *Internationals and partocracy in Albania*. UET Press.
[29] Lami, R., et al. (2026). The role of persons with disabilities in political decision making. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development, 13*(1).
[30] Lamont, M. (2000). *The dignity of working men*. Harvard University Press.
[31] Lammers, J. (2023). Collective nostalgia and political ideology. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 52*, 101–108.
[32] Lendvai, N. (2007). *Europeanization of social policy?* Edward Elgar.
[33] Lieberman, R. C., Ingram, H., & Schneider, A. L. (1995). Social construction. *American Political Science Review, 89*(2), 437–446.
[34] Manucci, L. (2021). Populism and collective memory. In *The Palgrave handbook of populism* (pp. 451–468). Springer.
[35] Marku, A., & Teqja, E. (2023). Transition to Democracy and the New Authoritarian Phenomena: The Case of Albania. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research and Development*, *10*(1 S1), 250. https://doi.org/10.56345/ijrdv10n1s137
[36] Mihelj, S. (2017). Memory and post-socialism. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 20*(3), 235–251.

[37] Müller, J.-W. (2002). *Memory and power in post-war Europe: Studies in the presence of the past.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[38] Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural backlash*. Cambridge University Press.
[39] Popkin, S. L. (1991). *The reasoning voter*. University of Chicago Press.
[40] Redžić, E., & Everett, J. (2020). Cleavages in post-communist Europe. *Politics in Central Europe, 16*(1), 231–258.
[41] Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
[42] Rohrschneider, R., & Whitefield, S. (2006). Political parties and European integration. *European Union Politics, 7*(1), 141–160.
[43] Rüsen, J. (2005). *History: Narration, interpretation, orientation*. Berghahn Books.
[44] Seixas, P., & Morton, T. (2013). *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.
[45] Scheuer, A., & Schmitt, H. (2009). European political identity. *European Integration, 31*(5), 551–568.
[46] Socialist Party of Albania. (2013). *Political program*. https://nasri.gov.al/dokumenta/programi_qeverise_2013_2017.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[47] Socialist Party of Albania. (2017). *Political program*. https://kryeministria.al/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/PROGRAMI.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[48] Socialist Party of Albania. (2021). *Political program*.https://ps.al/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Programi-i-Partise-Socialiste-te-Shqiperise-2024-2030.pdf
[49] Strömbäck, J. (2008). Four phases of mediatization. *The International Journal of Press/Politics, 13*(3), 228–246.
[50] Suddaby, R., Israelsen, T., Bastien, F., Saylors, R., & Coraiola, D. (2023). Rhetorical history as institutional work. *Journal of Management Studies, 60*(1), 242–278.
[51] Taylor, B. C. (2017). Media–security relationship. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 41*(1), 46–69.
[52] Teqja, E., & Borakaj, D. (2014). The stability pact: The way of the Western Balkan region during and after its mission. *Revista Shkencore Ndërkombëtare Diskutime, 1*(14), 72–78. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/295573038
[53] Thomassen, L. A. (2016). Hegemony, populism and democracy. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política*.
[54] Todorova, M. (2009). Remembering communism. *Social Research, 76*(2), 429–448.
[55] Urbinati, N. (2019). Political theory of populism. *Annual Review of Political Science, 22*(1), 111–127.

[56] Vachudova, M. A. (2005). *Europe undivided*. Oxford University Press.
[57] Verdery, K. (1999). *The political lives of dead bodies*. Columbia University Press.
[58] Whitefield, S. (2002). Political cleavages. *Annual Review of Political Science, 5*(1), 181–200.
[59] Zaller, J. R. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. Cambridge University Press.
[60] Zubrzycki, G., & Woźny, A. (2020). Collective memory. *Annual Review of Sociology, 46*(1), 175–194.