

From Burial Sites to Identification: The Albanian Case

Dr. Gentiana Sula

Chairperson, Authority for Information on
Former State Security Documents (AIDSSH),
Albania



Historical Background

- Under the communist dictatorship, executions, imprisonment and internment left many families without truth or graves.
- Information was concealed, fragmented or never properly recorded.
- For decades, relatives searched through memory, oral testimony and personal traces.
- The democratic transition opened the way for truth-seeking, but not all answers.

Memory became the first map.



Communist Repression and Human Rights Violations in Albania

Under Albania's communist dictatorship, repression was systematic and affected individuals, families and entire communities.



Political executions, deaths in custody and enforced disappearance.



Arbitrary arrest, political imprisonment and forced labour.



Internal exile, internment and collective punishment of families.



Suppression of religion, expression, association and freedom of movement.



State surveillance, informant networks and long-term social exclusion.

The regime did not only punish individuals — it reshaped families, memory and social trust.
The 'enemy' was often constructed from within the same society.



The Enemy Was Within

Why the Albanian case is socially difficult, not only technically difficult.

- Repression was carried out within the same society — by institutions, local officials, informants and neighbours.
- Victims, perpetrators, collaborators and witnesses continued to live side by side after 1990.
- Silence protected not only secrets, but also reputations and family narratives.
- Reappraisal may bring a painful fall from grace for established public and private memories.
- Identification therefore requires social courage as well as forensic science.

*The grave may be hidden in the ground.
The story may be hidden in society.*



Breaking the Silence

Public memory as part of the search for truth



2017

“Even Walls Have Ears”

An installation projected onto the former communist-era institutional landscape.

It brought suppressed memory into public space — where silence had once been enforced.

The search for the missing also requires a society to speak, remember and acknowledge.

AIDSSH National Approach



1



Archival research

Documenting cases and tracing institutional records.

2



Witness testimony

Collecting local memory and family accounts.

3



Site identification

Locating and marking suspected burial places.

4



Protection and cooperation

Working with municipalities and partner institutions.

5



Toward identification

Preparing the ground for forensic and scientific methods.

The goal is to move from memory and documentation to location, excavation and identification.



Why the Search Is Still Difficult

- Time has transformed the landscape of suspected burial sites.
- Urban development, dumping, erosion and vegetation may damage or conceal evidence.
- Witnesses are ageing and local memory may be lost.
- Archival clues must be linked with field verification and forensic methods.

Sites change faster than memory.



Progress and Current Priorities



410 cases

Missing persons recorded in the Albanian context of communist repression.



6 locations

Suspected burial sites identified.



4 remains recovered at Shpal

Linked to the 1973 Spaç uprising.



ICMP cooperation

Sustained collaboration for future identification work.

Marking and protecting sites is essential to prevent further destruction.

Each case requires legal protection, technical assessment and family-sensitive communication.



A photograph showing a large, messy pile of dry pine needles and plastic waste in a residential area. In the background, there is a building with a red roof and a palm tree under a cloudy sky.

ery.



- responsibility
-
- s, GIS & drones
- t and training



or block the move from archival
cation.

... ..



Albania: From Silence to a Search System



2015

Law 45/2015 establishes AIDSSH and opens a new institutional framework for access to former State Security records.



2018

Albania–ICMP cooperation agreement signed; ratified by Law 83/2018.



2020

AIDSSH's role on missing persons strengthened, including coordination and referral to law-enforcement institutions.



2022

AIDSSH and ICMP launch online tools for families; cooperation with State Police and work on national procedures intensifies.



2024

Six new suspected burial sites identified; 11 sites identified during 2022–2024.



2026

IDMS / Online Inquiry Center operational; about 410 cases recorded; 17 suspected sites under verification; ICMP confirms human remains at 6 sites.

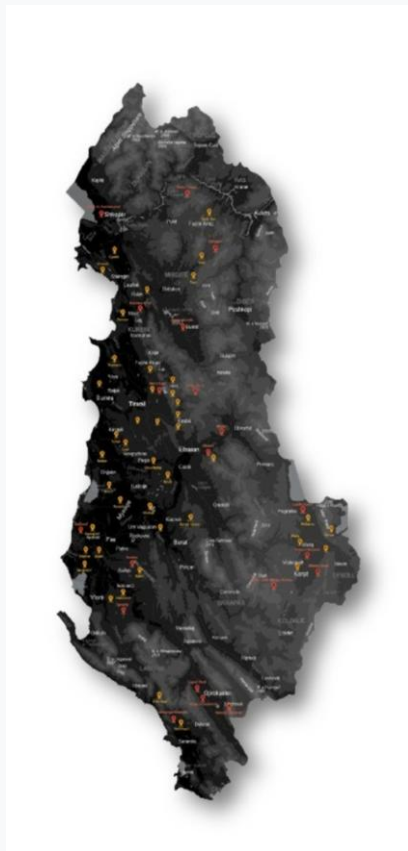


NEXT: move from documentation and site verification to coordinated excavation, forensic identification and return to families.

“The trajectory is clear: memory → records → sites → science → identification.”

From Hidden Sites to Public Memory

Mapping, protection and memorialisation



Mapping turns dispersed testimony and archival clues into a national geography of remembrance. Memorials — including the Shkodër memorial shown here — return names and stories to public space.

My Family Story

A story of absence, survival and memory across generations

Sulejman Mara



Mahmudije Mara



Sulejman Mara died in Burrel prison in 1954. His body was never returned and he still has no known grave.

Mahmudije Mara carried the absence, raised the family and kept memory alive through decades of silence.



The family survived and grew — I am one of the children in this photograph.

“It is late for the dead, but not too late for us, the living.”

What Albania Needs Next



Stronger inter-institutional coordination.



Non-invasive surveys, excavation and forensic identification.



Better protection of suspected sites from damage and informal use.



Continued international cooperation and exchange of best practices.



Sustained support for families and their right to know.

“Families have the right to know. Identification is both a human duty and a democratic responsibility.”