

# ICOA1487: HERITAGE-MAKING AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS IN ALBANIA: SPAÇ PRISON AS A SITE OF DIALOGUE

## Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

**Session 1:** Heritage as Peace Builder, Tying and Benefitting Community

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 09:55 – 10:10

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**Abstract:** Today, more than 25 years after the fall of Albania’s Communist regime, the country is engaged in a struggle over how to deal with its Communist past. For decades, Albania had not taken the steps that many other transition countries have gone through: opening the secret police files; initiating a truth and reconciliation commission; undertaking a concerted effort to find and identify the bodies of those who had forcibly disappeared; or reinterpreting the art and artefacts of Albanian Communism through a reflexive gaze. Within this context, sites of memory, such as Spaç Prison, have taken on a particularly important role in shaping the discussion over memory and heritage-making for Albania’s recent past.

Originally a mine, Spaç Prison developed into a notorious political prison and forced labour camp, modelled after the Stalinist gulags. It is the only such site to be listed as a protected cultural heritage site in Albania. The current presence of a mining company at Spaç Prison adds to the complexity—raising tensions between the original purpose of the site (plus the region’s need for economic development) and its history as a place of persecution. Underlying these tensions is the recognition that heritage-making involves a constant struggle over whose stories and pasts are acknowledged and how.

Since 2014, the NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders–Albania (CHwB-Albania) has been engaging as wide a range of stakeholders as possible in a long-term process to develop Spaç Prison into a place of dialogue. This dialogue and human rights-based approach recognizes that the conservation, interpretation and adaptive reuse of a site are all reliant on how the site becomes ‘heritage.’ Our paper demonstrates how the heritage-making processes surrounding sites of persecution/atrocity/memory such as Spaç Prison have important implications for the promotion of human rights and democratic ideals in Albania today.

**Key words:** *rights-based approach, reconciliation, democracy, heritage-making*

## Background

Today, Albania is engaged in a struggle over how to deal with its Communist past. In the last 25 years, the country has not followed in the steps of many other transition countries: opening the secret police files; initiating a truth and reconciliation commission; finding and identifying the bodies of those forcibly disappeared; or reinterpreting the art and artefacts of Albanian Communism through a reflexive gaze.<sup>1</sup> Only decades later are some of these measures starting to be taken, such as the creation of an institute to manage the opening of the files of the former secret police.

Within this context, historic sites take on an important role, as the physical reminders of what took place during the former regime. However, for the most part, Albania has not actively preserved sites of persecution linked to the former regime.<sup>2</sup> Communist Albania held a total of 23 prisons and 48 internment camps.<sup>3</sup> And nearly all of them are rapidly crumbling to dust. Of all the former prisons and internment camps, only one has been listed for protection as a ‘second-category monument’: the infamous Spaç Prison.

Spaç Prison, also known as ‘Re-Education Unit 303,’ was a combined prison and labour camp in mountainous north-central Albania. Spaç was considered by many of former prisoners as the ‘last Gulag’ in the heart of Europe because of the inhumane working conditions in its mines. However, the revolt of May 1973—when prisoners briefly took over prison to demand democracy and human rights—earned Spaç a lasting place in Albanian collective memory. Since its closure after the fall of communism in 1990, several former prisoners have fought to keep the history of Spaç alive, in order to preserve the site as a memorial to those who suffered there. In 2007, the Albanian government declared the site a protected ‘monument,’ though this designation was not accompanied by any investments for conserving or interpreting the site.

## Jumpstarting Dialogue

Cultural Heritage without Borders-Albania (CHwB-Albania) is the independent offshoot of a Swedish organization founded in 1995. CHwB’s motto is “We restore and build relations”— which highlights both the human and heritage components of the organization’s work. CHwB’s mission is “to promote cultural heritage as both a right in itself and a resource.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the organization works to uphold the right to participate in cultural life (as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and sees cultural rights as reinforcers of other human rights. CHwB also promotes heritage as a resource— supporting economic, social and democratic development. A human rights-based approach to heritage recognizes the need to negotiate common ground for preserving and developing heritage resources and to ensure that communities engage with their heritage on their own terms. In the end, the process of heritage-making

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<sup>1</sup>(Bogdani, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>(Eaton and Roshi, 2014)

<sup>3</sup>(ISKK, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup>(CHwB-Albania, n.d.).

becomes more important than the technical conservation, interpretation or adaptive reuse itself. It is this process that serves as a jumping off point for supporting democratic ideals, such as justice, transparency, openness and civil debate.

CHwB-Albania began working with Spaç Prison because of its potential to promote democracy and human rights—both through its preservation as a historical site, and, more importantly, the process of getting there. In 2014, CHwB-Albania sought to bring together different actors and build momentum through the project “Dialogues for Spaç,” a series of stakeholder workshops funded by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience and the Government of Sweden. The dialogue structure “create[s] a space that allow for a deeper understanding of self and a deeper understanding and respect for the ‘other’”<sup>5</sup> — a crucial step toward breaking the culture of silence that has surrounded the communist period in Albania. These participatory workshops were meant to jumpstart the discussions on how to turn the ‘suspended’ heritage of Spaç Prison into an active place that facilitates dialogue on both the history of communism in Albania and contemporary issues facing the country.<sup>6</sup> The series included representatives from local and national governmental institutions, civil society organizations, former prisoners and students. The workshops culminated in the production of the “Spaç Action Plan,” laying out a series of steps to take in order to preserve and promote Spaç Prison as a site of memory.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after the “Dialogues” project concluded, a private mining company established its presence at Spaç. This has added to the complexity of the stakeholder terrain. It has also raised tensions between the economic usage of the site and its history as a place of persecution— lending a sense of urgency to the process of defining Spaç Prison’s role as heritage site. To move this process along, CHwB-Albania launched two projects in 2017 to both *preserve* and *activate* the site: 1) emergency structural interventions to keep the semi-ruined site from collapsing further; 2) a series of on-site focus group sessions.

### **Methodology of the focus groups**

The goal for these focus groups was to engage some of Spaç Prison’s future audiences in the site’s preservation, assessing their needs while raising awareness about the site. In the end, the overall objective of the focus groups was to answer the questions: “How do people experience Spaç as it stands now? And what do they want see there in the future?”<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, developments in Albania are not typically accompanied by such a process. Recently, several high-profile projects created new exhibitions out of communist-era spaces. Yet, these projects often followed closed-door practices that limited the diversity of input into their creation. As a result, these efforts sometimes seem like an attempt to commoditize the recent past, resulting in a wasted chance to engage in an open dialogue with the public. In reaction to this, CHwB-Albania wanted the concept for a museum or historical site at Spaç to be as open and inclusive as possible.

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<sup>5</sup>(Prince Claus Fund, n.d.)

<sup>6</sup>(Patrimoine Sans Frontieres, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>(Billaci, Eaton and Petri, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>(CHwB-Albania, 2017).

The six focus groups held thus far were formed with the intention of complementing the previous “Dialogues” workshops. These focus groups included history teachers; foreign tourists; museum professionals; tour operators; and university students with diverse backgrounds, coming from the US Embassy Youth Council; or from the fields of cultural heritage management and archaeology. Each session combined two elements: a tour to Spaç Prison, led by a former prisoner; and a facilitated discussion. Before and after the visit, focus group participants also filled out a short questionnaire, which was used to assess the impact of the tour.

### **Whose story? Whose site?**

When analyzing the results of the focus group discussions, it became clear that participants were very interested in the *way* that visitors engage with the site. Across all focus groups, the number of remarks that touched on interpretation and/or education at the site outnumbered the combined mentions of the site’s administration, management or physical conservation. While all focus groups saw Spaç as a symbolic memorial for victims of communism, the making of such a place will need to draw on very different groups of people, each with their own stories of persecution. This also reveals that, for focus group participants, the end goal of working with Spaç is not just its preservation as a heritage site, but how that process positions the site to speak to future generations. It is not enough to conserve the physical characteristics of the site. The site’s story, above all else, needs to be preserved.

If the preservation of Spaç Prison revolves around telling its story, then that raises other questions. Whose story will be told? Who will tell it? And how? Focus group participants understood how contentious these questions are, especially in Albania. Members of the history teachers’ focus group in particular were determined that the interpretation of Spaç should “be built upon the basis of true facts and lived experience and not on the basis of gossip (...) Politics should not enter at all here.”<sup>9</sup> This latter reflection was echoed by the students of cultural heritage management, who sought to minimize political interference at Spaç, out of concern that efforts there could be hijacked for political gain.

### **Confronting the past; looking to the future**

Awareness of the political situation in Albania, where political expediency often takes the place of measured social benefit, ultimately shaped the perspective of several focus groups. They felt that the history of Spaç was too important to be used for political gain. Some participants felt that future staff for the site should be neither emotionally connected to its history nor politically motivated. According to them, “the decision cannot be left to those who were inside, or to those on the other side. It should be another hand, a new generation that has nothing to hide...”<sup>10</sup> In a country that never went through the process of identifying or holding accountable the perpetrators of injustice under the former regime, the desire to find those with “nothing to hide” points directly to the young generation, those born in the 1990s. Members of that generation agreed: “Our parents have a lot of complexes with that period (...).

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<sup>9</sup> History teachers focus group (CHwB-Albania, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Tour operators focus group (CHwB-Albania, 2017).

They are very subjective because they lived it themselves. They have a lot of emotion, while we are cooler.”<sup>11</sup>

While it is widely agreed that the history of Spaç is important, its role *as heritage* is still very much in the process of formation. Part of CHwB-Albania’s goal is to ensure that the heritage-making processes surrounding Spaç Prison encourage critical reflection on the state of human rights and democratic ideals in Albania today. In several instances this has happened. “Why are we in the condition that we are today?” asked one participant, who answered the question by laying blame squarely on the social, economic and cultural legacies of the communist period. Perhaps because of this former history, mused a law student, “people are still afraid of confronting the state.” This fear is something that can be passed down from generation to generation.<sup>12</sup> Another participant in the same focus group reflected that violations of human rights happened very openly under the communist regime. But, today, even though it may happen differently, human rights are still being violated. This participant felt that people in Albania should be taught what their rights are and how to defend them — an essential part of any healthy democracy. The fact that young people are making these historical, cultural and political connections between the past and the present is a hopeful sign for the democratic process in Albania — all the more so when considering that they neither lived through the communist period nor have had much formal education about it.

Overall, the focus group discussions were meant to shed light on what the site’s audiences want to see at Spaç Prison. In every focus group session, participants envisioned Spaç as an important place to tell the story of Albania’s difficult past. They saw it as an important site for confronting the social traumas that have been passed down from the communist period. But, they also imagined Spaç as a site that looks to the future. They saw at Spaç the potential for promoting democracy and human rights, addressing contemporary issues and fostering good citizenship. One of the young students from the university focus group perhaps put it best. She said that even in the very harsh conditions of communist Albania, “there were courageous people that took the initiative to come out against that regime because their rights were not being respected. Regardless that they were in those conditions, they still believed and had hope. And this gives us the strength today, in the moment that rights are being violated, not to stay silent.”<sup>13</sup> The strength to speak up, to take initiative, is a powerful legacy that Spaç leaves behind today and one that Albanians should draw on to promote democratic ideals.

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<sup>11</sup>University students focus group (CHwB-Albania, 2017).

<sup>12</sup>University students focus group (CHwB-Albania, 2017).

<sup>13</sup>University students focus group (CHwB-Albania, 2017).

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*Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) 1948, (resolution 217 A), adopted 10 December 1948.

# **ICOA1487: CONSTITUER DU PATRIMOINE ET DES IDEAUX DEMOCRATIQUES EN ALBANIE: LA PRISON DE SPAÇ EN TANT QUE SITE DE DIALOGUE**

## **Sous-thème 02: Le rôle du patrimoine culturel dans la construction de la paix et de la réconciliation**

**Session 1:** Le Patrimoine En Tant Que Constructeur De Paix, Communautaire De Types Et De Bénéfices

**Lieu:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 09:55 – 10:10

**Auteur:** Jonathan Eaton, Mirian Bllaci, Nedi Petri, Lejla Hadžić, Elena Mamani

**Résumé:** Aujourd'hui, plus de 25 ans après la chute du régime communiste albanais, le pays continue à s'interroger sur la façon de faire face à son passé communiste. Pendant des décennies, l'Albanie n'a pas pris les mesures que de nombreux autres pays en transition avaient engagées : ouvrir les dossiers de la police secrète ; créer une commission sur la vérité et la réconciliation ; entreprendre un effort concerté pour retrouver et identifier les corps de ceux qui ont été mis à mort ; ou réinterpréter l'art et les artefacts du communisme albanais à travers un regard objectif. Dans ce contexte, des sites de mémoire, tels que la prison de Spaç, ont joué un rôle particulièrement important dans le débat sur la mémoire et la construction du patrimoine relevant du récent passé de l'Albanie.

Originellement une mine, la prison de Spaç est devenue une prison politique et un camp de travaux forcés notoires, calqués sur les goulags staliniens. C'est le seul site de ce type à être inscrit sur la liste des sites du patrimoine culturel protégé en Albanie. La présence actuelle d'une société minière au sein de la prison de Spaç ajoute à la complexité des tensions entre la vocation initiale du site (sans compter les besoins de développement économique de la région) et son histoire en tant que lieu de persécution. Sous-jacente à ces tensions, s'ajoute la prise de conscience de ce que la fabrication de patrimoine induit un débat permanent : quels récits choisir, les passés de qui doit-on reconnaître et comment les décrire?

Depuis 2014, l'ONG Patrimoine culturel sans frontières-Albanie (CHwB-Albanie) a invité un large éventail de parties prenantes à participer à un processus à long terme visant à transformer la prison de Spaç en un lieu de dialogue. Cette approche, fondée sur le dialogue et les droits de l'homme, reconnaît que la conservation, l'interprétation et la réutilisation adaptative d'un site dépendent de la façon dont le site devient «*patrimoine*».

Notre présentation démontre en quoi le processus de constitution d'un patrimoine concernant des sites de persécution/atrocité/mémoire, tels que la prison de Spaç a d'importantes implications dans la promotion des droits de l'homme et des idéaux démocratiques en Albanie aujourd'hui.

**Mot clés:** *Approche fondée sur les droits, réconciliation, démocratie, création de patrimoine*