

The Urban Policies of Suburban Areas in Tirana City-Region, Albania

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Abstract

This article contributes to the geography of urban transition and to the expansion of knowledge of the post-socialist city. There are different 'transition stories' yet to be revealed about urban development patterns, processes and politics in particular countries. By focusing on the case of Tirana, this article provides an example of such multiple local 'transition stories' of post-socialist urban development and its associated politics. The article highlights the uneven experiences of post-socialist urban transition in Albania, drawing attention from the private property rights perspective and livelihood strategies. The findings are based on the case study of residents and newcomers/migrants¹ in the outskirts of the Tirana city region, showing how livelihood strategies and struggles over property rights in urban and peripheral urban spaces of Tirana can shed light on geographical knowledge of local experiences of transition economies in the context of neoliberal urbanism. This paper contributed to the limited literature on the politics of urban development in Albania during the *post*-socialist transition period.

KEYWORDS: livelihood, *post*-socialist city, property rights, semi-structure interviews, suburban areas, Tirana city region.

INTRODUCTION

Albania offers an excellent example for comparative urban studies in post-socialism. As an Albanian researcher, I have some concerns with respect to applying wider 'Eastern European' models of *post*-socialist transition to Albania uncritically. However, this article offers a discussion of how *post*-socialist transition and consequent forms of urbanism and urban life evolve in the context of Tirana city region, Albania. Urban scholars are increasingly turning their attention to processes of post-socialist urbanism in the former communist states of Eastern Europe (Milanovich-Pichler, 1994; Smith and Stenning, 2006; Sykora, 1994, 2006). These transitional economies are experiencing processes of economic globalization and neo-liberal state restructuring similar to those in the West, but with social, economic and political outcomes that differ markedly due to the institutional legacy of Albanian state central planning. The work of Sykora (1994, 1996) represents a newly emerging viewpoint among some European scholars that that warrants further examination of examples of the post-socialist city on their own terms within a given national-specific context. Rather, there are different trajectories of urban transition across and within the former communist countries of Europe (Sykora, 1994, 1999). Many cities in transitional countries have inherited similar forms of housing and infrastructure provision and urban development from the previous communist regime. However, there are important differences in the

¹ Throughout Albania people living on the fringe of the big cities are frequently referred to as 'migrants/newcomers'. During the course of research it became apparent that this term was not entirely accurate description. This qualification is being fully descriptive of their particular situation. Accordingly, the term 'migrant' is used.

ways in which the recent decentralization and deregulation of urban development has impacted on, and activated, suburban land development interests and processes. There are different ‘transition stories’ yet to be revealed about urban development patterns, processes and politics in particular countries. A case in point is the process of suburban development in the capital city region of Albania, Tirana, which exhibits some unique regulatory conflicts as it moves towards an ostensibly more liberal, free-market and decentralized urban development system. This article aims to contribute to the limited literature on the politics of urban development in Albania during the transition period. It forms the context for the empirical analysis of local transition stories in Tirana city region, examined from the perspective of property rights and livelihood strategies.

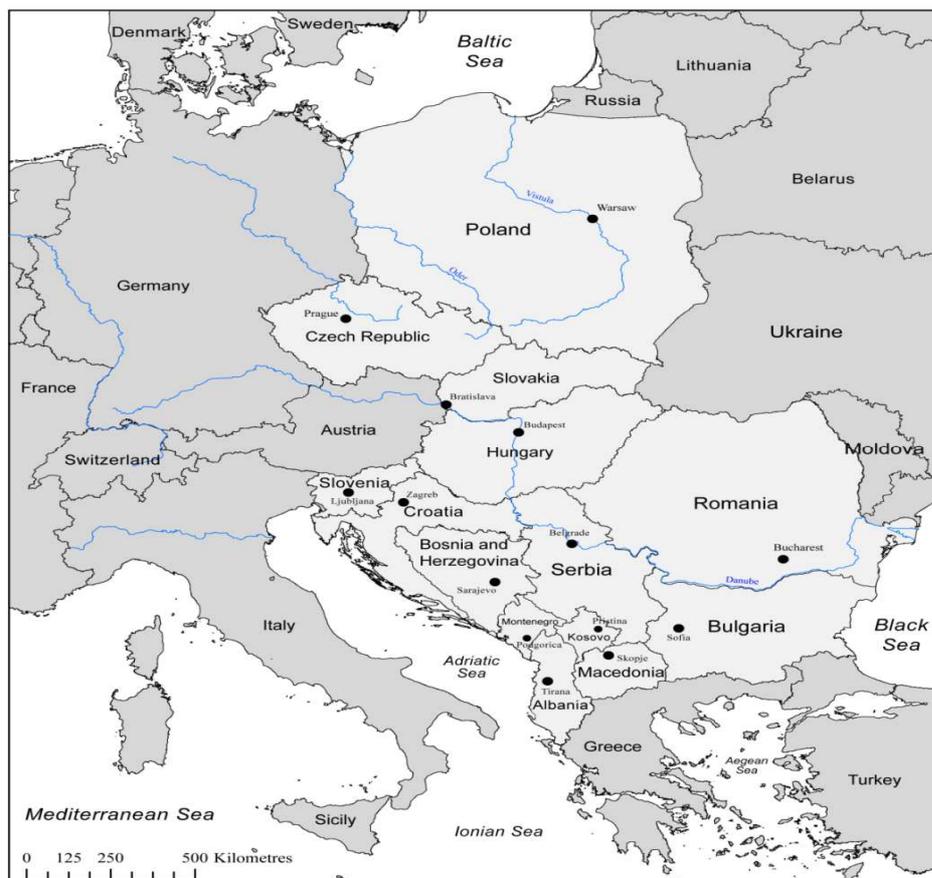


Figure 1. Political-Administrative Map of Central and Eastern Europe (Source: Adapted from http://europa.maps/index_en.htm and author's calculation)

The following section reviews the experience of East European transition economies before and after 1990, trying to identify common patterns and differences between Albania and other post-socialist countries in urban development politics.

Patterns and Processes of Urban Development in Central Eastern Countries before and after Communist Era

Eastern European urban policies passed through several phases in the socialist era. In the early 1950s there were no explicit urban policies. The planning system in socialist countries was more a political category than an economic one. The early 1960s witnessed the introduction of the first regional and urban strategies in Eastern Europe.

The strategy was used to limit the expansion of large towns and to encourage the development of small and medium-sized towns (Turnock, 1989; Enyedi, 1990; Szelenyi, 1996). By the 1970s, the state still played a dominant role in the urban planning regarding the approval of urban plans (Eskinasi, 1995). As a consequence of this, local urban authorities had the task of coordinating development but had no decision-making power with public participation being reduced to a largely symbolic involvement. Since the late 1980s, most Eastern European cities have experienced dynamic processes of change in order to establish market economies. Their inability to adapt in a flexible manner to the world markets are, I argue, related to certain restrictions and unclear regulation of property rights and the failure of the planning system.

Past studies of East European cities have tended to emphasize the distinctiveness of the socialist model of urban development (Murray and Szelenyi, 1984). Under communist rule land reforms were implemented, enterprises were nationalized and governments moved to control all aspects of economic and social life through programmes of nationalisation (Turnock, 1989).

The former socialist cities differ considerably from their western counterparts in one important respect: most of their largest cities are not oversized outliers (Enyedi, 1990). Rather, they tend to be smaller than predicted by the rank-size rule. This reflects the legacy of the central planning where privilege of living in the capital was strictly regulated and the movement of population was highly restricted. The same attitude was followed in Albania (Blejer *et al.*, 1992; Felstehausen, 1999; Aliaj *et al.*, 2003; Bertaud, 2006; Abitz, 2006; Andoni, 2007; Kornai, 1992).

Even though Central and Eastern European countries considered themselves as socialist countries, they have experienced different pathways of urban development. The level and structures of urbanization varied greatly between and within the countries of Central and Eastern Europe depending on geographical, historical, ideological, and political factors (Enyedi, 1990; Milanovich-Pichler, 1994; Eskinasi, 1995; Andrusz *et al.* 1996; Sykora, 2009).

Before 1990, Albania had some of the lowest quality and overcrowded housing in the South Eastern Europe (Tsenkova, 2005; UNDP, 2005; Childress, 2006; Abitz, 2006). Since the early 1990s most European and Southern Cities have experienced dynamic processes of changes to establish market economies. After 1991 the housing market's boom in Albania also increased the demand for housing. Rapid growth of new buildings in the outskirts of the main cities and uncontrolled alterations of the existing buildings has been characteristic of the new urban forms in Tirana city region during the transition period (Felstehausen, 1999; Aliaj *et al.*, 2003; Bertaud, 2006; Andoni, 2010).

International migration has been one crucial issue of the socio-economic changes in post socialist countries, but the Albanian case is a particularly extreme one. The rapid out-migration resulted from an agrarian crisis and rural unemployment associated with the collapse of communism. Albanian citizens' unique response to the stresses and opportunities of the new order was mass emigration. This happened to a degree quite unmatched elsewhere in other transition economies. According to the World Bank estimation, Albania was defined as 'a country on the move' (World Bank, 2006; 1997). From 1991 to 2008, around one third of the total Albanian population migrated (35% of the total labour force) (Felstehausen, 1999; ISTAT, 2002; Bertaud, 2006; Andoni, 2007; Agorastakis *et al.*, 2007; Vullnetari, 2007; Szelenyi, 1990).

Like many other Balkan countries, Albania also witnessed large scale domestic migration, mainly from remote villages to the main cities, especially along coastal

areas and the capital city, Tirana. As a result of massive rural/urban migration, between 1990 and 1994, the built-up area in Tirana grew at an unprecedented rate (Agorastakis *et al.*, 2007; Bertaud, 2006; Andoni, 2007, 2010). The Albanian transition introduced new patterns of land ownership and occupancy.

The major growth in post-communist metropolitan areas is concentrated in the suburban zone. As we know Sykora's work is largely based upon empirical studies in Check Republic cities for example Prague and Brno and investigate how the former socialist city of Prague is being changed "*through rapid commercial and residential suburbanisation that takes the form of unregulated sprawl and is fragmented into numerous locations in metropolitan areas around central cities*" (Sykora, 2006). However, there has been little discussion about politics of urban spaces around metropolitan cities. These rapid changes of suburbanization are having different effects in different post socialist cities entitling property rights.

Post socialist cities are a central part of the debate that contributes toward a growing appreciation of the complexity of the transition process. It has been well recognized in western urban theory that private property plays a key role in land development and in interurban competition (Bertaud, 2006). How the politics of the living space matters in terms of fostering local geographies of property knowledge is crucial in understanding the post-socialist city. Despite a growing critical interest in post-socialist cities and urban development there is still limited work on the politics of urban development around suburban areas.

These connecting concerns are of particular interest in the Tirana city region, Albania. In promoting economic competitiveness and livelihood strategies, entitling property ownership has emerged as a key issue in the transition process. It is therefore important to observe how different actors' strategies develop at an intersection of private property and suburban land development. The research on which this article draws is a series of 59 semi-structure interviews designed on five categories, in order to reveal particular characteristics of suburban and peripheral development, focusing on how property ownership influences citizenship in local government and urban politics: Newcomers (migrants) - people from different parts of Albania who settled down illegally in Kamza and in the Tirana city region; Residents - people who settled in Kamza before 1990 and acquired state land from Land Law 7501; Ex-owners - people, whose properties were expropriated during the Agrarian reform in 1976; Officials - local and national public sector officials and academics; Developers - people included in private sector activities in the construction sector.

The interviews and semi-structured interviews were conducted with these different categories of participants (migrants, residents, ex-owners, local officials) examined the conflicts emerging around suburban development in the Tirana city region. Such conflicts were investigated through the lens of property rights and how attempts to regulate the suburban areas influenced public participation and local government fiscal and infrastructural capacities. The semi-structured interviews and participant observation address what new pressures are being created in Tirana city region due to property and land development. These pressures formed a new kind of tension and conflict associated with the development of new suburban spaces. Questions have been raised about politics of urban living space entitling property rights. I begin by giving an overview of Albania's transition story before focusing on one of the case study area of Kamza, which is situated in the north of the Tirana city region.

Albania's Transition Story in the Context of the European *post-socialist* Transition

The fall of the communist system in 1990 and the establishment of a new Albanian government was characterized by a serious dislocation of economic order, aggravated by widespread vandalism, destruction and theft of public and state property. The 1976 Constitution had imposed a complete ban on private property, including private plots in rural areas and since 1990 the population of Albania became increasingly more mobile. Private property has more significance for people in Albania than in other socialist countries because of its near total abolition in 1976. After 1990 Albania experienced difficult transition due to complete lack of reforms prior to 1989. This was due to the hermetically sealed and strictly communist regime. The massive rural migration towards urban areas increased urban population from 35.8% in 1990 to 44.5% in 2004 followed by chaotic and disproportionate development along coastal and central cities of Albania (INSTAT, 2002; UNDP, 2005; Aliaj *et al.*, 2003; Bertaud, 2006; Andoni, 2007). Figure 2 below shows the main migration flows in Albania after 1990. Consequently, illegal construction building has been rapidly expanding and the beginnings of the suburbanisation process represents a new phenomenon for Albania.

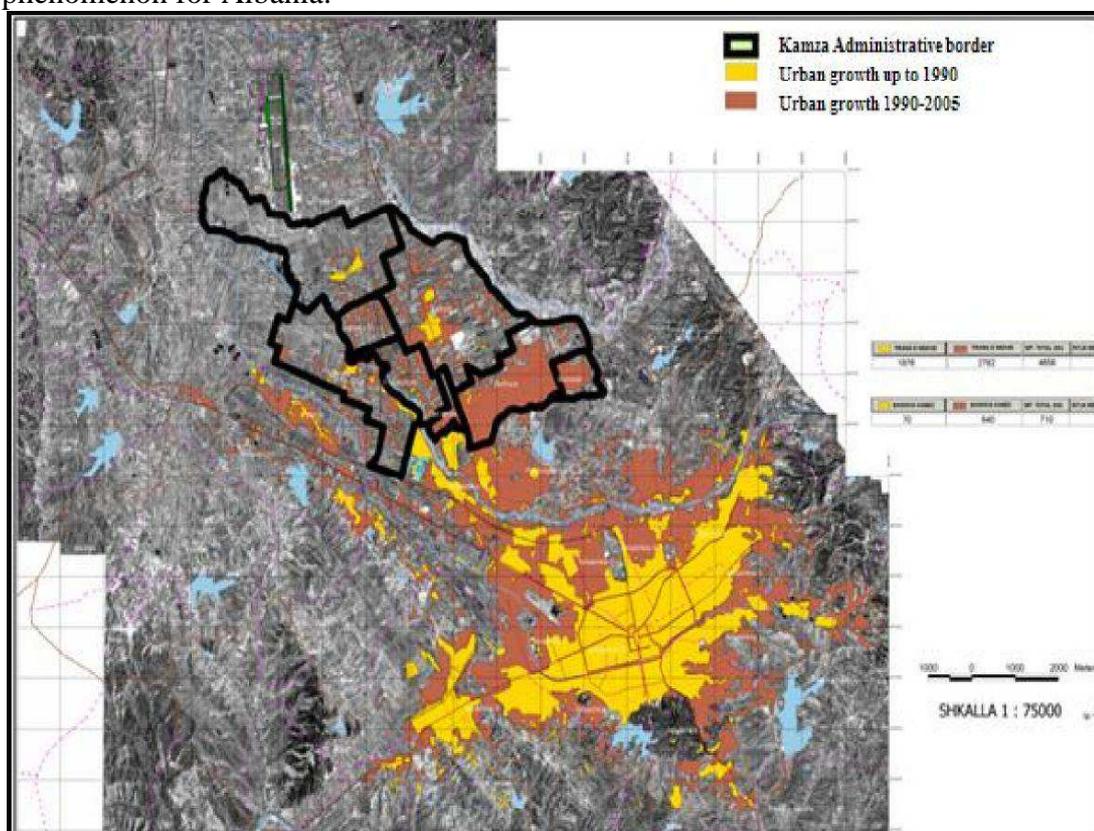


Figure 2. Tirana Expansion 1990-2001, including Kamza Case study in north-west
(Source: Co-Plan, 2004)

The internal migration reflected on the de-populating of some areas while over-populating other regions. According to several sources and data sets (INSTAT 2002, 2003, 2004; World Bank, 2006; Berxholi, 2005; Andoni, 2010), the most serious population loss was observed in the north and north east rural areas, as well as in the south and south east rural ones, particularly remote villages in high up mountainous areas. The regions that have gained the most in terms of total population are lowland areas interior to the coast, such as Tirana, Durres, Lezhe, Vlore and Fier. Between 1998 and 2002, the rural population fell by 15 per cent (INSTAT, 2004) while urban

areas, especially Tirana, grew disproportionately (Felstehausen, 1999; Aliaj *et al.*, 2003; Berxholi, 2005; Bertaud, 2006; Vullnetari, 2007).

One characteristic of the *post*-socialist city is huge and growing disparities in rates of urbanization due to internal migration. In some countries, there is only one major metropolis which serves all central functions, for example, Budapest, Prague, Tallinn, and Riga. In other countries there are several large cities, such as in Poland, Lithuania, and Slovakia (Altrock *et al.*, 2006; Smith, 2007). In the Albanian case there is only one city: Tirana, which serves all central functions, leading to 41% urban growth between 1993 and 1999 (Agorastakis *et al.*, 2007).

Some urban change is associated with the redistribution of population between cities. While major cities lose population through migration, small municipalities gain from it. In the Czech Republic, for example, out-migration has occurred in suburban areas, especially around Prague and Brno. Moreover, housing construction has contributed to booming suburban areas, especially around the capital city of Prague. In some districts of Prague, the rate of housing construction is nearly three times higher than the national average (Sykora, 2006). Similar patterns can be found in Albania. At district level, in Albania, the population fell drastically. In only nine out of 36 districts was there positive growth, and most of these were in the Tirana city-region. Internal migration has mainly resulted in the enlargement of Tirana and the centre-coastal area of Albania (Aliaj *et al.*, 2003; Abitz, 2006; Andoni, 2007).

The period since 1990 has seen the fastest rate of urban growth around the Tirana city region, where attention focuses on pressures to regulate private property in new informal suburban settlements surrounding the older urban centre. Despite urban reforms, the recent periods has witnessed out migration and inter migration, increasing disparities of urban growth, the proliferation of informal settlements on the fringe of main Albanian cities followed by insecurities in livelihoods, environmental degradation and lack of democracy in the political process. I now run to the Kamza case study to elucidate Albania's transition story further.

Kamza Case Study

Over the last two decades, during the transition period the private property issue has shifted from being perceived as having a marginal impact on interurban living space to being an important constituent of a wide range of land development processes and local livelihood activities resulting in the production of new suburban spaces around the Tirana city region. Kamza offers a prevalent example of this study.



Figure 3. Collage of views from the Kamza case study area. Photos by Mele (2014)

Kamza is a unique example of a typical suburban area, revealing changes from informal settlement to a more formal one. Kamza is located 7 km north west part of Tirana city with an area of 21.7 km square. After the upheaval of the early 1990s, in 1996 Kamza changed status from a former state owned farm to municipality due to rapid demographic changes. From 1989 to 2009 Kamza population grew from 6 900 to 90 633 inhabitants.

Most of the new development in the Tirana city region is occurring at the edge of the central city. Within the existing urban areas authorities are working with inadequate infrastructure and social facilities. Many parts of the urban region have hardly foregone any capital investment during the last decades and are severely unable to manage new growth pressures. The high housing demand of overcrowded urban and rural dwellers and pressure from rural-urban migration has led to a construction boom. Kamza, a new suburban area during transition can be considered a useful example of transition to regulation of property and land development in post-socialist countries with a single urban core.

Private Property and Livelihood

Post-socialist scholars, like Sykora (1998, 2009), Smith and Stenning (2006), Sjørberg (1992), Pickles & Smith (2005) have offered a descriptive model of the *post-socialist* city. Yet, the story of Tirana's life and context is not like that of a post-socialist city like Prague. Tirana is a busy and vibrant city and has its own 'fuzzy' model. Rather than a smooth transition to universal private property occurring, property rights at the suburban fringe are constantly made, remade and unmade by actual livelihood practices, as the following quotes affirm:

"When I moved to Bathore I asked one of my former neighbours [who] settled here a few years ago. He had some extra land and gave me 500 sq. metre ... In the very first year I built on my own a simple portable house. I went back to my village, brought my family back and all together built the new concrete house, while living at the hut. I provided enough money from my part time work in construction and some loans by my relatives. Step-by-step it took around one year to build the house" (Male migrant, Bathore, May 2008).

"All my community left the village and we had no other chance. We moved to Kamza in 2006 and rented a house for Old Lek 70 000. I and my husband are running the shop together. We rent the shop along the sideway for Old Lek 350 000. We can't afford to sell new stuff but we sell secondhand clothes. I have seven children. I married two daughters since 16 years old, because we could not feed them anymore. One of my sons collects cans in the morning and in the afternoon goes to school ... [but] people don't prefer secondhand clothes and this month we can't even afford the rent" (Female migrant, Kamza, May 2008).

Neoliberalism's emergence in Albania developed in relation to a series of political, economic, and social conflicts. For example, internal migrants used property rights as a stake for securing livelihood strategies in the city. In this way, neoliberalism offered a way out of poverty.

"The newcomers settle in Kamza area, especially in Bathore (one of its units) with no infrastructure and urban planning. Bathore area was a hilly agricultural zone with open free lands. The houses were widespread with such a high speed and followed at that time by several conflicts. I have some concrete examples. 2-3 households have their houses close to each others. Some others have their houses a bit further and all of them have a common narrow lane. One day one of the households blocked the entry

way, leaving the other houses without access to common lane (Ex-owner, Kamza, May 2008).

In the Tirana city region multiple stories are activated and circulating during the period 2006-2009. Residents and migrants struggled to make claims on private property and livelihoods. Specifically, recent migrants through self-regulation and later through legalisation exercised their property rights and at the same time garnered knowledge of such rights. The findings in this research not only confirm the complex ways in which property rights in transition urban economies of the Tirana city-region relate to the survival mechanism, but also concern the underpinning role of property knowledge in shaping livelihood strategies in Tirana.

Most migrants explained in detail the main reasons they moved in the fringes of the Tirana city region and how they provided title from the legal owners. To some extent, these suburban areas have produced an interconnected geography between remote northern, central and southern areas. Consequently, Kamza is useful as a case study site to explore and compare migrant experiences with residents and local officials, the forging of local and national identities, the impact of migration on the built environment, and the place of informality in economic circuits.

Because of the free movement of population and unregulated land development, the suburban zones of Tirana have taken on a totally new character. Agricultural land uses have given way to housing and building. However, for many people 'property rights' is still considered an abstract concept. While private property is an important precondition for exchange in capitalism, exchange occurs in different particular places. The abstract idea of property rights is grounded in different knowledge practices in urban and suburban areas of Tirana. Such practices utilize access to livelihood strategies. Within the research there is evidence of some everyday strategies to survive, including jobs in construction, emigration and retail.

More recently, migrants have started to realize that something was wrong and missing in their landscape and neighbourhood. Securing title to property was important. Yet having a shelter and a piece of land was not enough. They wanted to mobilise their properties via participation in urban land development. They are conscious that awareness of the rules and regulations will help in growing use and exchange of their property.

One male migrant continued: *"After 2000 our attitude about property started to change. Before we used to build a house in an empty land and we hardly asked 'what's next'. Recently, we started to understand that if our land is not registered officially and get a title of it we can't have access on land transaction, infrastructure, electronic post, etc."* (Male Migrant, Tirana's suburb, March 2009).

With 'what's next' the migrant explained that in the past they did not pay attention to rules, nor asked for any existing planning regulations nor went to urban offices to obtain information about the respective area's zoning plan. Before 1990, for at least four decades, property rights used to be an abstract idea. However, after 1990, during the transition period, property rights are being mobilised and the different categories of migrants, residents, and local officials use it as a stake and got themselves involved in the land and property market. Furthermore, the development of 'local knowledge' of property is gradually shaping their understanding(s) of livelihood.

Albania: Regulation of Suburban Spaces

Albania introduced an extreme case where land was ultimately 'owned' by the state. After 1990 the free movement of population and unregulated land development has meant that lands in the suburban zones of Tirana – once collectively owned by the state -- have

taken on a totally new character. Agricultural land uses have given way to private housing and other variously regulated or unregulated building activities. As expected, new suburban spaces of re-regulation reflect the interaction of Albania's inherited legal and administrative structures with new pressures of land development under a free-market system. Specifically, the migrants or newcomers in Kamza area have either through self-regulation or later through legalisation of exercised property titles, garnered knowledge of property rights. Variations in the nature of strategies of livelihood and associated survival mechanisms are treated under the rubric of property rather than something else. Migrants were settled in small groups (often of close kin) in relation to construction and survival mechanism. Thus self-regulation and property knowledge in practice have informed livelihood strategies in the Tirana city region. The fieldwork suggested that each of the different actors were operating in slightly different surroundings – economically, socially and politically. This necessitated that they designed different strategies and approaches that would best suit their economic, social and political needs.

Urban infrastructure provision and the development of the urban living space in the Tirana city region require that land occupation be legitimised. Such documentation would form the basis for a property market. It would create an exchange value and allow families to mobilize their asset to satisfy other needs. It would also encourage responsible citizenship. For example, it would encourage people to invest in the property; to maintain the cleanliness of the area and to pay for local infrastructure (and its maintenance). They would become 'stakeholders' and part of the urban growth characteristic as in Western countries.

The boom in the new construction increased the Kamza municipal revenues. In the last four years new high-storied buildings represented a new form of land management. During this period there have been a considerable number of new construction permits and property tax contributed to the budget of Kamza. However the new buildings were not being fully sold out due to the decline in demand and pressures of the market. The new system of addresses, which promotes property tax, was to be implemented, where the municipality intends to register and legalise many properties (Kamza Bulletin, 2007, 2008, 2009).

Improvement of the basic public services such as construction of the sewage, power and water supply system, as well as road, environmental and educational infrastructures, are the major priority objectives of the Kamza municipality (Kamza Bulletin, 2008). Figure 4 below shows some of the changes in construction and road system in Kamza during the last four years.

Based on Kamza Bulletin (2007, 2008) there were an increased numbers of small businesses subject to taxation in 2009. But unlike reports from Kamza Municipality Bulletin, several local officials insisted that Kamza showed a decrease in tax revenues of the small revenues, no statistics on employment issue and no implementation of illegal building's legalisation.

The local officials not only know very little about different policies and strategies. Some of the officials in Kamza municipality insisted the officials of Kamza municipality are restricted to information from the Tirana district or central political levels.

The formal structures of both levels of government and fiscal capacity to deal with local demands are not well defined for services, especially at the urban fringe of Tirana. The interview analysis focused on migrants, residents, and local officials verified the pressures in Tirana region's urban development. The fragmentation of urban governance is one consequence of the fragmented property rights, which has

characterized Albanian politics in the transition period. In terms of managing the politics of the urban living space, Kamza has still not developed a common agreement with Tirana Council.

In discussing '*ordinary urbanism*', Robinson (2006) focuses on understanding processes that are affecting cities in quite divergent economic and cultural contexts, which allows us to build an account of diverse urbanism rather than e.g. '*neoliberal urbanism*'. Albania has moved, variously, from a country at the centre of international imperial networks, to being occupied, to being isolationist and now re-emerging to be part of a new South European Axis. The analysis of urban change in the Tirana city region shows how patterns in transitional economies cannot always be explained by well-known theories that have been applied in other post-socialist context. In many cases, a different political and socio-economic background, historically and socially different context modifies the form of manifestation of certain processes and their impacts, which produce spatial structures. Previously, little or no empirical research has been done on post socialist suburbanisation in Albania.

Migrants and small scale developers were encouraged to conduct their strategies in peripheral areas where illegal housing was under construction and the newcomers/migrants tended to be spatially concentrated. In the Tirana city region there is not suburbanisation of new rich, young (middle class) people seeking a green alternative of urban society. Many seminal studies (Brenner 2004; Leitner and Sheppard, 1999) have attempted to unravel the top-down impacts of neoliberalism on urban livelihoods and interurban development dynamics in the western urban context. Unlike suburban, '*edge cities*' in North America and Western Europe, suburbanisation is not the result of large scale private development (Jonas, 1991, 1999; Jonas and Wilson, 1999). Instead the '*edge city*' in Tirana represents an informal settlement created out of fragmented property rights. The compact character of the former socialist city is being changed through rapid commercial and residential suburbanisation that takes the form of unregulated '*sprawl*'. New construction of suburban residential districts is fragmented into numerous locations in metropolitan areas around central cities. From occupying a privileged position under state socialism, Tirana has experienced dramatic and far reaching changes in the post-socialist era. The appearance of the '*fuzzy edge city*' is mainly related to the political, economic and social institutional causes of transformation from centrally planned into free market economies (Carnobell and Gerxhani, 2008). More than two decades after 1990, there is still not a clear definition of suburban area or '*edge city*' in Albania.

CONCLUSIONS

The collapse of the communist system resulted in processes of urban transformation in central and Eastern Europe. This paper has brought together scholarship of western countries and Eastern Europe to exchange and advance ideas and findings concerning the problems of transitional countries in the face of urban transformation. It is increasingly apparent that post-socialist urban change is not a simple evolutionary process leading from a known point of departure (i.e. state socialism) to an expected destination. The development of cities in the region is variegated, and this stem from the particular paths of economic reform chosen during transition, differences in residential preferences, urban '*transitions*' and not least, the structures inherited from the previous socialist era.

Much less attention has been paid; however, to how well this agenda is being adjusted to bottom-up contestation to local level in the post-socialist city, especially with respect to the Tirana city region. Over the past twenty years, the political, social and

economic issues to emerge in the Tirana city region reflect a highly ‘particular’ and localised neoliberalism. Albania has shown its own way of adjusting to post-socialism urbanism.

The paper informs a discussion of property rights knowledge and contributes to debates concerning how we understand the changing of (sub)urban forms and politics of the urban living place in the Tirana city region as an example. The transition story of Albania is, not of course, a peculiar one to post-socialism. A unique part of East European post-socialism, Albania with its complex and complicated history is only one remarkable story, showing how the suburban living place is involved in this ‘transition’ or post-socialist neoliberalism process.

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