

German in Albania: from the domain of the elite to contemporary mobility

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Abstract: The following study aims to study the evolution, historical and functional dynamics of the German language in Albania, starting from its early phases of confrontation and presentation among Albanians as a language of scientific prestige and elite education, to its contemporary role as a language of certification, study, employment and professional mobility. Based on multifaceted historical sources, press materials, audiovisual media, institutional documents, unpublished interviews, personal archival funds and the narratives of the protagonists or their descendants, the authors argue that German in Albania has managed to maintain a significant weight, although disproportionate in relation to its numerical extent. In its early stages, German was associated almost exclusively with Albanology and with the orientation of the elites towards centres such as Vienna, Graz and Berlin; during socialism it survived in forms of refined state and ideological control, especially in "Radio Tirana", in the field of translation and in specific trajectories of generational formation, while after 1990 it was reformatted as a language of convertible professional and academic capital. The authors' contribution also addresses the current challenges of German studies that are mostly related to student and youth pragmatism, the competition of certification models, the pressure of the labour market and the impact of artificial intelligence on teaching and translation. From this perspective, German in Albania is shown to us today as an almost endemic phenomenon and a truly significant case of the combination between cultural history, education and human mobility.

Keywords: German in Albania, German Studies, Education, Mobility, Translation, Radio Tirana

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1. Introduction

The stations covered by German in Albania do not simply constitute a history of learning a foreign language. They are related to Albanology, to the formation of elites, technical expertise, translation, ideological radio and print propaganda during socialism, as well as the certification, study and the labour market in the contemporary period. It is precisely this multitude of functions that thus transforms German into a "sui generis" case in the Albanian linguistic and cultural area. Theoretically, German can be treated unambiguously as a form of symbolic "capital", which in different periods has been converted into cultural, academic or economic capital (Bourdieu 1991) [1].

In its early stages, it was entirely the language of knowledge, universities and the intellectual elite, although Albania offered very little in this regard. During socialism, it managed to survive in controlled but very interesting and even important forms, especially in translation and on foreign radio. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1990, it was revitalised by acquiring new functions, related to study, certification, migration and employment.

This study argues that the shift from a language of cultural prestige to a language of structured mobility constitutes the main axis of the history of German in Albania. Thus, the article attempts to link the historical-cultural dynamics with those of education and the new sociolinguistic transformations of post-communist Albania. The educational reforms of the post-1990s and especially the competency-based orientation of the last decade have given foreign languages a new role in preparing pupils and students for a more open reality and more connected to the European labour market (Bushi 2024; Bushi and Neçaj 2024; Aliaj and Bushi 2025) [2-4].

2. From the beginning of the 20th century to the end of World War II

German did not penetrate Albania as a mass language of everyday use, but as a language of academic prestige and elite education. Centres such as Vienna, Graz and Berlin became important study spaces for various Albanian personalities and figures, while German-speaking Albanology gave German a special authority as a language that carried the flag for transmitting knowledge about Albanian and Albanians. Institutional sources of the Academy of Sciences confirm the study itineraries of Eqrem Çabej and Aleks Buda in the Austrian space (Albanian Academy of Sciences nda; ndb) [5,6].

In the 1920s, the orientation towards the German-speaking world also had a practical dimension. Mehdi Frashëri appeared in the pages of Austrian dailies of the time looking for Austrian specialists for roads, construction and electrical engineering in Albania (Plaka 2019, 20–21) [7]. In the same vein, Carl Hoffer described Albania as a state that relied on “mainly Austrian, German and Swiss” experts for administration and economic development (Plaka 2022, 18–19) [8]. These archival sources from the German-speaking press clearly demonstrate that the Germanic world was undoubtedly seen by Albanians as a reservoir of expertise, organisation, and state rationality, and “Germany” coming from the heart of Europe, as a symbol of precision, reliability and hope for a people and nation now awakened from a deep sleep.

It would be the reports of the geologist Ernst Nowack, published in the 1920s in the “Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde” in Berlin, which already treated Albania as part of a wider network of knowledge and promising German-speaking projects, describing in detail a country with modernisation plans, but also with strong financial and infrastructural limitations (Nowack 1924) [9]. On the other hand, the anonymous article “Frenezia e Botimeve”, published in the magazine “Fryma” in 1944, claims that before the dominance of Italian books during the occupation in Albania, “French, German or English books” were widely read, which leads us to the idea that German was also part of a wider economy of reading and translation among Albanians (“Frenezia e Botimeve” 1944) [10]. As World War II was drawing to a close, German in Albania could be briefly defined as the “language of elite cultural capital”, closely linked to Albanology, university life, technical expertise, and a special Central European prestige.

3. German during socialism: survival and refined surveillance

The dynamics of the German language in the period of Socialist Albania also constitute the most paradoxical phase of its history in Albania. On the one hand, the free orientation towards Austria and Germany was interrupted, and on the other hand, the presence of the German language did not disappear. It only faded, finding forms and ways of survival like never before, controlled within a supervisory system that was not at all elegant, but very refined: it rose in the connections with the German Democratic Republic, in literary translations, in practical publications and especially in the propaganda voice of “Radio Tirana”, in the political and ideological brochures and volumes of state entities.

In this respect, the case of Astrit Ibro is very significant. In the interview conducted by Armand Plaka on March 27, 2026, he recalls that he was sent to China as part of the first group of 45 Albanian students and, after a preparatory period in Chinese, studied German studies for three and a half years at Peking University. Returning to Albania, he began working at “Radio Tirana” in April 1978 (Ibro 2026) [11]. This trajectory clearly shows that education and training in German during socialism could take quite unusual paths, justified by ideological alliances and conditioned by the circumstances of the time.

According to Ibro, “Radio Tirana” broadcast in 21 foreign languages, and the foreign radio editorial staff had around 150 employees, while most of the material translated was official propaganda (Ibro 2026) [11]. This claim is reinforced by several well-documented external sources at the time. WWDXC documents the German program as part of a regular broadcasting structure (WWDXCnd) [12]. Archiv Bürgerbewegung Leipzig emphasises that German-language broadcasts existed since the 1950s and that from 1964 they reached up to four hours a day; the same source also confirms Astrit Ibro’s role in the German editorial staff since 1978 (Archiv Bürgerbewegung Leipzig eV) [13]. Along the same lines, a “Sonderdruck”¹ of 1971 in German, which contained speeches by former Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha proves that German was thus used not only as a transmission channel, but also as the language of direct circulation of Albanian ideological discourse. (archive.org)

But German during socialism was not just a propaganda language. It survived strongly through literary translation. Figures like Robert Schwarz and Afrim Koçi played a central role in bringing authors like Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Brecht, Thomas Mann and Remarque into Albanian. In this way, even under the conditions of a totally closed regime, German managed to maintain its function as cultural capital and a window to another world. Another important manifestation of this cultural capital is related to the “Kadare phenomenon”. In the German-speaking world, the reception of Ismail Kadare was decisively mediated by translators, such as Joachim Röhme, giving Albanian literature a stable presence in the German public space. From this perspective, German served not only as a language of propaganda or as a means of formation, but also as the language of the international circulation of Albanian literature and its symbolic legitimisation outside Albania (KultPlus 2022) [14]. Thus, during socialism, German emerged as a language of controlled survival: no longer a language of academic freedom as in the early phase, but not a dead language either; it continued to live on the radio, in translation, and in special forms that essentially preserved a significant core of limited cultural and professional capital, which time itself would dictate.

4. After 1990: pragmatic repositioning and transformation

With the decline of monism, German entered a new phase. It did not start from scratch, but relied on previous continuities: translators, teachers, radio workers, and specific academic profiles. However, the new political and educational framework gave it new functions. The television show “Të mësojmë gjermanisht – Alles Gute” undoubtedly marks a very significant episode of this phase. According to Astrit Ibro, after 1991 and the reduction of foreign languages on “Radio Tirana”, he took over the foreign language program and, with the help of the Goethe Institute in Munich, started this show with 26–28 lectures broadcast for about a year (Ibro 2026) [11].

This moment marks the transition from German as the language of ideological foreign radio to German as the language of public education and cultural openness. A series of reforms implemented in the Albanian education system after the 1990s aimed at

¹ From German: Special edition or publication

creating a more flexible system that was more aligned with European standards. According to Jonida Bushi, especially after 2014, the competency-based curriculum model gave foreign languages a greater role in preparing students for life and the labour market (Bushi 2024) [2]. Bushi and Neçaj note that after the fall of communism, foreign language teaching took on a central role in the educational transformation and that German became increasingly attractive to young people in the last two decades (Bushi and Neçaj 2024) [3].

At the institutional level, the Faculty of Foreign Languages at the University of Tirana became the main node of the re-institutionalisation of German (University of Tirana nda) [15]. At the same time, the writing of Brikena Kadzadej-Zavalani documents both the early stages of German in preuniversity education, as well as its expansion after 1990 (Kadzadej-Zavalani 2014) [16]. In the following decades, networks like PASCH, the Goethe-Institut exams and projects like “DEKRA Albania” turned German into an increasingly measurable language and more linked to concrete objectives: study, certification, migration and employment (PASCH-net n.d.; Goethe-Institut n.d.; DEKRA Albania n.d.) [17-19].

5. Current challenges: mobility, academic crisis and artificial intelligence

The current challenges regarding the German language, its learning and teaching in Albania mark a significant turning point. On the one hand, the demand for it remains high in the areas of certification, study abroad and employment, especially in relation to the German job market, and on the other hand, seen as a university discipline, German studies faces serious challenges. In her interview of March 29, 2026, Prof. Dr. Ema Kristo clearly defines this dilemma: the student profile has shifted from philological, literary and cultural interest towards a more pragmatic approach, where German is seen as “mobility capital”, that is, as a tool for employment, migration, certification, studies abroad or integration into the German-speaking labour market (Kristo 2026) [20].

The paradox - according to her - lies precisely in the fact that the demand for German as a practical competence is high, but this paradoxically does not automatically translate into enrollment in university branches of German studies, as many young people choose shorter and more direct paths, such as courses, certifications and professional training to achieve their goals. This narrative coincides with more complex developments in Albanian education. Aliaj and Bushi’s article on assessment in transition shows that the Albanian education system has gradually moved from traditional models towards more standardised and competency-based approaches, linked to a reformulation of the role of the teacher and the way of learning (Aliaj and Bushi 2025) [4].

Seen in this context, foreign languages have gained greater weight as applicable and verifiable competencies. A new aspect noted in recent years is the formal institutional equality of German in some higher education processes. The University of Tirana’s admissions guidelines for second and third cycle study programs have recognised German for years as one of the foreign languages valid for certification, alongside English and other EU languages (University of Tirana ndb) [21]. This shows that German is no longer treated only as a specialised language, but as a language with full institutional legitimacy in postgraduate education.

Logically, at the same time, a worldwide trend is also observed in Albania, where English is experiencing a much more massive expansion, especially after the pandemic; in digital communication, in media culture and in the educational orientation of the younger generation. It is here that the functional difference becomes clearer: English acts as a global language of everyday use, while German maintains a more focused and pragmatic profile, as a language of certification, structured study, professional mobility and integration into the labour market. According to Kristo, artificial intelligence should

not be seen only as a threat, but as a transformative factor that requires “a new kind of pedagogy”: less mechanical reproduction of knowledge and more critical thinking, cultural mediation, verification and quality control (Kristo 2026). This is especially true for university German studies, which risks being reduced to technical training for certification if it loses its philological, cultural and theoretical depth.

6. Conclusions

The evolutionary trajectory and dynamics of German in Albania show that the role of a foreign language is not determined only by its spread in numerical terms, but by the function it takes on in different historical periods. In its early phase, German was the language of Albanology, universities and elite education. During socialism it survived in controlled but not insignificant forms, on radio, in translation and in some specific academic forms. After 1990 it was reformatted as the language of certification, study, migration and employment. Nowadays, the spread of the language does not constitute a real challenge, while maintaining the balance between functional pragmatism and the academic mission of German studies makes it a very adequate dilemma. If the university manages to refunctionalize the philological heritage and connect it to current issues – translation, interculturality, technology, public discourse and the labour market – then German will continue to remain a language of particular importance in Albania. Otherwise, it runs the risk of being reduced to a mere technical instrument of multifaceted mobility in the service of several generations and individual interests, losing the cultural and academic depth that once made it important in the first place.

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