

# *Designing to solve housing problems during communist regime. Tradition, adventure and inovations*

---

**MSc. Arch. Enkeleida PRIFTI<sup>1</sup>**

---

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA,  
ENGINEERING AND ARCHITECTURE DEPARTMENT

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to define and evaluate architectural solutions from a typological point of view, about housing' construction in Albania during that period which signs the end of Second World War and the beginning of 1990s. This study points out some housing problems inherited from the late XX-th century, as well as influences and experiments that this typology endured during communist dictatorship regime. It gives some data of the mechanism that was created to develop construction of dwelling buildings, starting with creation of builders' schools, design institutes and up to the mechanism of implementation and distribution of houses. Summerises developments of that time in Europe and architectural styles that influenced designers and local builders. How architects and builders perceived housing and quality of construction during that time. What were the rates at which construction sector*

---

<sup>1</sup> Ms. Enkeleida Prifti studied Architecture at State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering of Saint-Petersburg, Russia. Audit to perform duties of an Energy Efficiency Auditor of Buildings. Has 20 years of architectural experience in construction companies, projecting, infrastructure design, design calculations, construction marketing, coordinator between building contractors and construction advertising services. Worked as architect for Albanian Constructors' Association for over 12 years. Experience as Pedagogue in Architectural University. Since 5 years works as Assistant- lector present at European University of Tirana. Have good key skills and competencies on developing specific goals and plans to prioritize, organize and accomplish work. Member of Ozon Action's Montreal Protocol Network for Europe and Central Asia. Able to alter architectural plans on the fly then communicate this to clients. High levels of creativity, imagination and vision. As a painter is the author of some exhibitions which are organized in Albania.

*responded to housing needs, based on demographic developments that took place after the Second World War. In conclusion, this study draws a panorama about quality of life offered by these dwellings during communist dictatorship period, consequences that we inherit since then because of typological solutions and quality of buildings due to construction materials that have been used.*

**Key words:** *architecture, housing typology, socialism, communism, building.*

## **Introduction**

This paper aims to identify main facts about developments that housing typology has undergone during its fortyfive-year journey, in Albania of 1945-1990. These developments are seen in the prism of comparison with developments of the same period that happened in some of the countries with influence towards Albania. It also points out some of the key milestones, which had their impact on housing developments of that period and yet are impacting subsequent developments.

The shape of a building is one of the important components when architects design. Concepts about architectural shape have always been discussed by various philosophers, historians of architecture and art, constructors etc. This has always been a matter of aesthetics and construction, which are objective and subjective at the same time (Ahuja, Tatsutani and Schaffer, 2009). Constantly we may find new ways of thinking in architectural design, and we see this during different periods in the history of architecture. Architectural design has been constantly generated and driven by specific factors of history. Even though changes have occurred in our 21-st century' societies, we still lack modern energy services that developing economies demand. On the other hand, dramatic increase of energy prices, and awareness about limitations on energy souces, have encouraged generations of ideas in finding new solutions for construction industry (Sue & Nicol, 2017).

Meanwhile the milestones of architectural developments in Socialist Albania are certainly closely and directly related to the developments related to "great socialist revolution" that took place in several countries. According to their propaganda, revolution unfolded with the socialist construction that took place under the leadership of the so-called "great" leaders Lenin and Stalin (Kolli, 1937). According to this philosophy, this would have been achieved with a gigantic cultural upliftment, which would bring economic prosperity to the beautiful homeland. For the builders of that time, this was a new, never-before-seen stage, with complex tasks, up to significant grades of moralistic honesty. They named it construction of socialist architecture in the new Albania, based on communist ideals. Each phase of this revolution in communist-socialist camp, (this included:

war communism, the era of restoration, period of reconstruction and completion period of construction of socialism in the country, which was the era of great Stalinist constitution), became the starting point for every Albanian builder of that time, within the country.

## Materials and methods

There are several methods and theories that architects use, but among the most important ones in these type of studies is firstly scientific research in history of architecture. The second is the method of finding contrasts to create a strategy and develop a critical view of a situation. This strategy is formed with specific techniques of data collection in scientific studies and books that are represented in technical manuals, research of projects in archives and observation of these constructions and developments in the field. Methodological practices of strategies and tactics are adapted from wider systems of scientific research and used by schools to stimulate the development of thinking (Groat & Wang, 2013).

The method and materials used to complete this study include three phases of work: first, the collection of data about projects of that time in Albania, using 'Construction Archive in Albania'; secondly is the direct observation of building examples belonging these years, within the country; in the east and west blocks; and last step is comparison of these data according to the respective building standards of different countries, belonging to the same periods.

**Field of study:** is the typology of apartment, design criterias used in Albania after the Second World War, until the change of systems in 1990's.

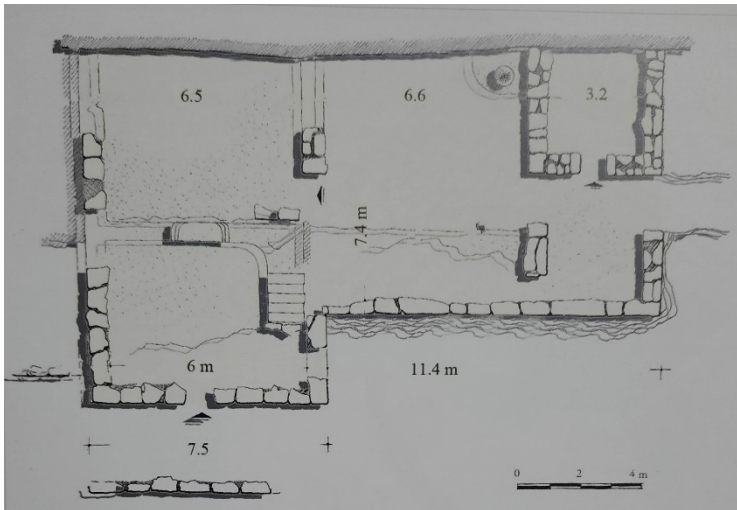
Dwelling presupposes a certain place in which the house is rooted in the earth. But precisely because of being stuck and staying in a certain location, dwelling is also the opposite of this. This is because city, territory, collective relations, random meetings and everything is the exchange of information and material goods between residents (Franchini & Righetti, 2003).

In Olympus, on the pedestal of the great statue of Zeus, there are seven couples who synthesize the basic myths of Greek culture. Zeus and Hera, Apollo and Artemis, Afrodite and Heracles, as well as other couples united by specific relationships. But, only one of these pairs, Hermes and Hestia, (Mercury and Vesta for the ancient Romans), presented a clear connection in terms of tradition transmitted from Ancient Greece to Rome (Ellen, 1908). This is because two deities were rarely depicted together, and Hestia barely appears in any mythic tales. And yet if this pair appears in the Greek pantheon of gods, it must surely have represented one of the central themes of human values. These are the gods of living together, or separated from the human dream, but who have their place

in the family, and coexist with it together with the desire for travel, movement and adventure (Vernant, 1969). According to Homer: “The two deities live in the beautiful abodes of men who live on the face of the earth, bound by feelings of mutual friendship.” But while Hestia stands still at the center of the earth, Hermes owns man’s space in the form of the traveling messenger (Vernant, 1969).

The deep structure of the myth helps us understand that the complexity of living moves between two polarities, which are at the same time complementary and opposite of each other. Between the house which is understood as the place of one’s privacy, and the city which is the place for social relations, there is a mutual relationship that is not so mechanical. The mutations that one undergoes are not transmitted directly to the form of the city, and vice versa. The house or the typology of the apartment, is more rigid in development, compared to urban developments and modifications. We notice this if we see developments that house has undergone by comparing it with the finds since antiquity, according to archaeological discoveries. It seems clear that we have no significant developments (Baçe, 2017). (Pic. 1)

**PIC. 1:** Floor plan of the apartment with fire house, in Çuka of Ajtoi



Studies on Modern style architectural movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century, show us that as far as it concerns the cell of apartment, the main focus was on problems of solar orientation; and also, in all hygienic-sanitary aspects that derive as well in aspects of distribution of indoor and outdoor areas. So the connections of these environments were made by the designer to create comfort. And these searches had led to some limited combination solutions: such as linear housing, tower housing, terraced housing, individual housing. The effort to classify different forms of living

and different objectives they support has represented a significant advance for recognition of dwelling typology (Franchini & Righetti, 2003).

Criticism related modern movement of the time has made a radical revision of the concept about this typology. Type of building that is no longer read as a fact in itself, but that enters within the urban laws, thus helping to define character of the city. At the same time, housing typology is inversely affected by the city. Urban rules encourage solutions that cannot be achieved within the given models. If we look very closely, the problem arises at the moment when, concept of using typology as an analytical-cognitive instrument, typology turns into an active design tool. Then analytical science of “typology” shows the needs, but is not sufficient to face complexity of spatial relations that come together to create between individual objects. This happens because the project is a synthetic process by nature, and requires presence of a higher theme or order, within which new parts of this game are located (Franchini & Righetti, 2003). The most important contemporary research on housing is no longer concerned with intervention in the consolidated city, nor with new urban additions, or historic areas, so much as with research of new territories created as a result of densities.

While in the eastern camp, from where the influence came towards Albania, criticism referred to modern developments as a result of capitalist relations system. According to that policy, the Russian architect or any other country, was seen as a designer whose duty was to satisfy orders of a private client. The architectural solutions that were made were to satisfy private financial interests, thus offering spectacular external solutions, obtaining architectural solutions with an aesthetic, but also economic effect, so that it became possible to use the building with an economic benefit.

The Russian architect and pedagogue Ivan Fomin, who started his career in early 1899 in Moscow and worked in the Art Nouveau style, once said: “Our architectural language is the decoration through which we convey ideology to the masses” (Kolli, 1937). After moving to St. Petersburg at the beginning of 20-th century, this architect became a master of Neoclassical Revival. Fomin developed a Soviet adaptation of Neoclassicism and became one of the key figures who contributed to early phase of Stalinist architecture, known as post-constructivism. According to critics of the former USSR, in pre-revolutionary Russia, activity of an architect was limited to the design and construction of private palaces and mainly so-called “profitable” houses. Only in very rare cases any designer was lucky enough to construct a building for a bank, or specific offices of private companies. As a result of the lack of creative perspective, due to the architect’s moral and material dependence on the arbitrariness and taste of a private client, they saw the activity of the architect as having degenerated into narrow professionalism, turning it into an “architectural business”, with inevitable and mutual cruel competition. Psychoanalytic methods

developed at the beginning of the 20-th century are considered pseudo-scientific, almost a part of didactic madness. The circles of architects of the time, state that this method used in architecture schools at the beginning of the twentieth century had a negative impact on practice. What was said in these methods, for example, was that it recommended “a special and continuous study of the formulation laws of artistic forms, of their elements, properties or qualities, based on the psychophysiology of perception. Architectural forms were created on the basis of imaginary relationships of psycho-technical and physical-mechanical factors. The avant-garde continued to develop in the early 1920s – despite everything and the revolution. Although a Latin proverb says: “When guns roar, the muses are silent”, in fact there was a powerful creative charge. Although it was an extremely destructive period with wars, creativity continued its course. This allowed the emergence of many new movements and schools (Kolli, 1937).

In this context, although there were no schools of scientific and critical thought for the field of construction, the data show us that, before 1945, Albania had a housing stock that recorded a figure of 40,438 registered residential buildings (Misja & Misja, 2004). This may have been less than 10% of those that may have actually existed, but it certainly testifies to construction diversity that existed at that time. There were still very early dwellings dating from the 16th-17th and 18th centuries mentioned and described by travelers of the time in these territories. The period from 1945 to 1990 is the time when Albania goes from a feudal economy to a centralized economy. This is the time when, of course, when the Italian-fascist ideological influence in urban planning and architecture comes to an end.

## **Architecture and construction in the period of recovery**

The centralized economic system and communist dictatorial system do not consider private property, which they begin to eliminate through the nationalization process. The basic motive of life became the collective life, and this became the motive of creativity in architecture and urban planning. Construction specialists will be guided by principles of Russian school and by conditions of an economy that operated on the principle of ‘economic saving’ (Aliaj, Lulo & Myftiu, 2003). Materials were used sparingly and work was done under the motto that not even a brick or a spoonful of cement was wasted. These crises that were propagandized as victories, and impossibility to build individually, consequently lead to the construction of the village, or the new socialist city, which in Albania was borrowed from the countries of the communist bloc. The projects that were imported from abroad, mainly from the former USSR, were projects of the type-model, communal houses, projects in urban planning were the type of cities-



gardens, cities-combinations, industrial-cities. Models of architecture, such as the avant-garde of the 1930s or others like these, were forbidden ideas for designers, and each project was processed and issued by the Institute of Designs. (Pic. 2)

**PIC. 2:** Apartment-type project, in the USSR



And yet one of the important sectors of the national economy was country building. Housing problems were sensitive and inherited also as a result of continuous and successive policy changes in the Albanian territories, since the beginning of the 20th century. These problems are highlighted by adventurous experiments, especially the cloned borrowings of the so-called political-economic system, which differed according to the constantly changing positions and diplomatic relations. This is where the agrarian reform of the time came in, which caused fundamental changes in housing from rural areas to important city centers. The only ones that remain intact in structure are the tower apartments (Thomo, 2021), while the largest Elbasançe-type apartment, 1-story, with two rooms and a kitchen, was proposed and became the typology of the village apartment. The privacy of living is destroyed along with the right to own private property. Collective life appears and along with it appear new rules and relationships, previously unknown by a large part of the population. In this period, construction of studio-type apartment, inside the dormitory, also appears newly. Almost all residential areas underwent changes in the organization of their existing zoning that they had in the cities, as well as in the villages. Meanwhile, new residential centers were also built from scratch. Farm-type villages were created because of the economy of cooperatives, or farms which were inherited from the Italo-fascist period. These farms also had some temporary dwellings, that were built for farmworkers (as an example we can remember those of Sukthi village), which continued to be used even afterwards and residents settled down to live there eventually. New cities were built, where new industrial constructions were concentrated, which are of interest for study. The construction of housing was very important and based on the socialist principles

of the time in study. Housing construction was mainly carried out by the state, but there was also a small percentage of housing construction with private funds, on land provided by the state, which the resident paid based on loans provided by the state bank, which they paid in installments that were withheld from their salaries.

Inherited from earlier times, in some cities existed apartments with gazebo and tower type. These were adapted to the villa style creating civic dwellings, which still exists in some neighborhoods (Misja & Misja, 2004). This apartment has a symmetrical floor plan. In the center there is a wide hall from which the interior rooms are connected. This salon has an aesthetic staircase that connects the floors between them. On the upper floor there are wide verandas overlooking a small courtyard surrounded by railings that allow decorated facades to be viewed from the street. This was a sign of prosperity and emancipation for the citizens of that time. Until the dictatorial system, this house-type was built as a result of influences and developments of Italian architecture. As a result of neoclassicism and rationalism, individual villa-type dwellings were built, and with the opening of new plots and new roads, housing for employees also appeared. These will be the first constructions that would undergo adoptions and changes as a result of the housing crisis, which the new Albanian state is facing after the Second World War. Nearly 62,000 homes destroyed by the war were rebuilt again; new homes were built, and from a fund of 187,610 homes in 1930, 185,000 new homes were built in the year 1970 (Aliaj, Lulo & Myftiu, 2003). Again, individual villas undergo transformations as a result of their nationalization. These dwellings undergo deformations of spaces, adapting them to accommodate two and sometimes even more unrelated families. (Pic. 3)

**PIC. 3:** View from villa of the Theodhosi family, Tirana 2013.

Before reconstruction, this villa was adapted to be inhabited by two or three families.

(View during the survey of the building by Ark. E. Prifti)



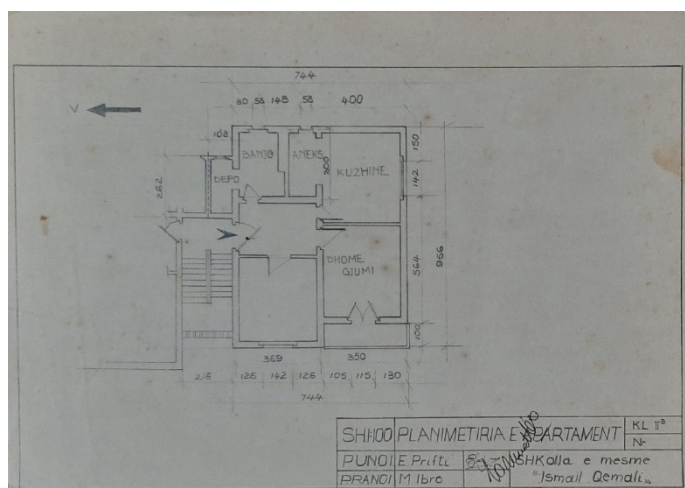


The first specialists of the 1950s-1960s educated in Eastern Europe tried to introduce spirit of modern architecture. They designed and built service areas for the community inside apartment building, bringing these with lower construction costs (Misja & Misja, 2004). The first social housing first appeared in Germany as a solution to social problems, that came as a result of political changes, but also technology and new industry that was emerging. A scheme that will influence Europe until the 60s, are 'apartments with balator' (with entrance from the balcony), or with gardens and terraces, illuminated sanitary services, which were built at low costs for the residents.

The first architects to graduate from the Polytechnic University of Tirana can also be called those who mark a new stage in Albanian architectural style and construction. The housing types actually come from design institutes of architects' association from the USSR. But even these very quickly suffer truncations in terms of spaces and functions. Some of the services inapplicable to the conditions of our weak economy are deleted from these projects.

The typology of Albanian dwelling within a century suffers big minuses in the typology. Functional environments that transform, as a result of the philosophy of a life as simple as possible. The prototype of the Frankfurt kitchen, designed by the Austrian architect Margarete Schutte-Lihotzky in 1928, was directly embraced by the socialist system as very compatible with their ideology. The author designed the kitchen keeping in mind the fact that the woman works many hours outside the home, and she has a social activity, and works in industry, etc. In this frame, there is not much time for a woman to waste inside a kitchen. This model was adopted, but even more truncated than the original; it comes in the form of an annex that was added to the living room. We do not have a central gas supply for cooking in the kitchen, electricity was not an allowed option, and the only option was a stove with a fireplace that was supplied with wood in winter and summer. The apartment has no dark storage for food. The sanitary node is only one and often with minimal equipment. Concept of a washrooms no longer exists, and certainly not for washing machines. There is no central heating in the bedrooms. Central heating was only in some cities with cold and long winters, such as in Korça. 'Musëndrat' (Thomo, 2012) (which are large closets in the walls, part of former Albanian dwellings), are no longer there, because one closet would have been enough for the whole family at that time, which did not have many clothes. Only in some apartments there is a laundry room, but it is often transformed into a storage function. (Pic. 4)

**PIC. 4:** Apartment layout; Silicate brick building, unplastered (four floors; with 8 apartments); Built in 1971, Laç-Kruje



Although not exact-copy, the Russian model of the apartment – communal was applied. This kind of apartment, where the apartment-room located inside a dormitory, and there are kitchens, bathrooms and showers shared with the community inside the dormitory.

The materials used reduced the quality and comfort inside these apartments. Communication in the transitional area does not include an elevator service or other services, which will continue to be missing in these apartments to these days. It was built mainly using ceramic bricks, silicate bricks and prefabricated panels. But external plastering was often missing due to the low cost with which it was built (Decision of Council of Ministers, Number 38).

## Conclusion and recommendations

It seems that today it is almost impossible to say something new about the history of Albanian architecture during the years of communist dictatorship and rather strange existence of socialist realism in architecture. But today, in construction and architecture, we still have traces of this period. One cannot speak of formation of an architectural style, nor of profound scientific thoughts. There was some experimentation with seismic shaking and for this purpose some populist houses and even some low-rise social buildings were built. Construction, as the part of the industry that carries the largest weight of the economy, in today's market needs improvements and developments in typology and technologies. Developments

of last century often prove to be an obstacle to development of innovative and ultimately more resilient construction solutions. Investment priorities must change and be modified to reward approaches that create a better climate design for new buildings. At the heart of new architecture should be the concept of important issues about climate and environment. The client must be aware of these contemporary issues, but also make efforts to improve legacy constructions, which can be intervened for improvements (Hellas, 2012). Consequently, studies in this field will also bring improvements to programs in architecture and builders' schools, providing information and results of scientific research, as well as improvement of research laboratories, investments that will be also valid for professional architects and engineers.

A problem still unsolved to this day is precisely population of the territory up to the most extreme borders of the country. The policies of populating these villages and new cities through propaganda in the name of the party in dictatorial system, proved to be ineffective and did not pass the test when country was opened for free movement of population. If more effort had been put into the idea of improving typology and materials, to really improve living outside the Capital, we would not have today these critical social and urban situations. Instead of oppressing population for military threats from outside and wasting reinforced concrete materials for prefabricated bunkers, we could have built better houses for living, better urban infrastructures, better interurban communication links could have

**PIC. 5:** Apartment in Stëblevë, Librazhd - inhabited until the beginning of 1992.  
Photographed in 2019.



been built. (Pic. 5) The population invested energy in work which was unpaid or underpaid, that was called voluntary work, in order to keep them busy and to not give them time to think about a better life, or privacy (let's not forget that in the 80s several families lived inside one flat, which was actually only for a small family with two or three members). Some of the families spent their whole lives living in wooden shacks, which served as housing while they moved from construction site to another construction site, building the 'new socialism'. These shack-dwellings did not offer even the minimum of thermal comfort in winter. Let's not forget that even the internees of the communist regime spent their whole lives in such barracks. All these testify to a form of persecution that was used against the population, but that was disguised as a sacrifice in the name of the party's ideals and for the construction of the homeland.

Lack of contacts with the world due to the isolation, left people without models to compare and understand if there was room for improvements in the dwelling, the conditions inside them, or even engineering achievements in their construction.

## Reference

- Ahuja, D., Tatsutani, M., & Schaffer, D. (2009). "Sustainable energy for developing countries", S.A.P.I.E.N.S, Vol.2/nr.1. 2.1/ 2009. pg. 2-16.
- Aliaj, B., Lulo, K., & Myftiu, G. (2003). Tirana the challenge of urban development, Gorenjski tisk, by arrangement with CETIS d.d. – office in Tirana.
- Baçe, A. (2017). Arkitektura në Iliri, pare si refleks i strukturës sociale dhe botës shpirtërore. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave.
- Decision of Council of Ministers, Number 38: Kushtet teknike të projektimit, Libri IV, Shtëpia botuese "8 Nëntori", 03/05/1978.
- Decision of Council of Ministers, Number 38: Kushtet teknike të projektimit, Libri V, Shtëpia botuese "8 Nëntori", 03/05/1978.
- Dusan, G., & Kljajic, M. (2013). Training Manual – Monitoring and Verification of Energy Systems.
- Ellen, J.H. (1908). Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion. Cambridge: The University Press.
- Franchini, A., & Righetti, P. (2003). Tipologie residenziali contemporanee. Manuale di realizzazioni europee degli ultimi vent'anni. Emanuela Boni, Laura Brambilla, Michele Gambero, pg. 10-222. Milano: Bertieri Arti Grafiche – Monza.
- Groat, L.N., Wang, D. (2013). Architectural research methods. – Second Edition, by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey, pg. 171-312.
- Hellas, R.T. (2012). Training book: Energy efficiency auditors for buildings. Volume I. HVAC systems. Edited by: Gerasimos Paizis, Michael Tornaris, Eleftherios Andritsakis, page 1 of 191. Tirana.
- Kolli, I. Ya. (1937). Zadachi sovetskoy arhitektury: Osnovnye etapy razvitiya sovetskoy arhitektury Moskva.
- Muka, A. (2001). Banesa fshatare dhe familja e madhe, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë. Instituti i Kulturës Popullore.

- Sue, R., & Nicol, F. (2017). "Running buildings on natural energy: design thinking for a different future." *Architectural Science Review*, Vol. 60, Issue 3: Special Issue: Running Buildings on Natural Energy: Design thinking for a Different Future. pg.145-149.
- Thomo, P. (2012). *Korça urbanistika dhe arkitektura*, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë.
- Thomo, P. (2021). *Vendbanime dhe banesa fshatare në Shqipërinë e veriut*, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë.
- Vernant, J.P. (1969). *Hestia- Hermes: The religious expression of space and movement among the Greeks*. SAGE Publications, pg. 1-143.
- Vladimir, M., & Misja, A.(2004). *Vështrim mbi situatën e banesave në Shqipëri. Analizë krahasuese*, Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë. Instituti i Ekonomisë.