A Critique of the Concept of Isolationism:
The Case of Albania

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Abstract:

The paper constitutes a theoretical analysis of the concept of 'isolationism' in the field of International Relations with a specific focus to the Albanian case. It reviews the epistemological debate among various traditions in IR, liberals, realists and constructivists about the structure-agency relationship, the continuity and change in international relations. This paper argues that the concept of isolation in IR has no meaning within the framework of the structure-agency debate rather it stands within the 'innenpolitik' approaches to IR. In the liberal tradition the isolation is considered as an "opt out" from the international system, a system which is constituted by states, international organizations and other non-state actors as its parts. In neorealist tradition the system is constituted by states as fundamental units and the structure as an independent unit. Speaking about Isolationism in this context makes no theoretical sense, because the unit cannot escape structural constrains. This paper states that Isolationism in IR is a relatively useful concept when we implement an inside-outside model of analysis, but it makes no meaning in the outside-inside model of analysis. Taking Albania's 'isolationist' foreign policy during communist regime as the case study, we conclude that 'isolationism' is a too broad concept to be used as theoretical tool and too complex to be considered as an empirical description.

Key words: Isolationism, structure, international system, foreign policy, Albania.

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INTRODUCTION

Albania's foreign policy between 1978 and 1991 is largely considered as an isolationist foreign policy. After Albania's rift with China in 1978, scholars were in need of how to describe Albania's foreign policy. Many scholars found the concept of 'isolation' as the most appropriate one. The studies on the policy of 'self-isolation' offer different interpretation about Albania's behaviour during this time. Berry Buzan sees this behaviour an *autistic* one, considering Albania as an inward oriented country, but he fails to analyse the causes of such behaviour (Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993, 341). Samuel Huntington considers Albania as a *torn country* located between two great civilisations (Western and Islamic) and as consequence its foreign policy as ambiguous (Huntington 1993). Bernard Tönnes in a systematic study about the origins of Albania's isolationism concludes that this isolationism is genuinely Albanian and it is related with the inward looking nature of Albania's nationalism. This culture – argues Tönnes – is largely due to Albania's scepticism and suspicion toward 'the others' (Tönnes 1980). Cultural interpretations of the 'isolation' as a political behaviour are articulated by Albanian scholars as well. Artan Fuga understands Albania's external behaviour as a process of differentiation from the other nations – a pattern that continues since national renaissance and is instrumentalised by communist regime during the period of 'great loneliness' (Fuga 2004). Helga Turku identifies the causes of isolationism to the nature of totalitarian political regime which because of his nature promotes the inward looking behaviour and suspicion toward international institutions. Narrative historians accounts for the causes of isolationist foreign policy, Hoxha's ideological dogmatism and the motivation of political and regime survival (Dervishi 2006; Duka 2011; Fischer 2010). Structural explanations which privilege local culture and ideology and mentalist explanations favouring motivations as the primary causes take the concept

"isolationism' for granted as an explanatory tool and an objective empirical fact. The fundamental reason contributing to this confusion is the melting down of the borders between the 'domestic isolation' related to the domestic nature of the political regime, and 'external isolation' which would mean a complete detachment of the state from its external environment. This lines of research face two basic obstacles: (i) the inability to theorize the concept of isolationism and; (ii) and the empirical emptiness of such generalisation.

Theoretical critique of the concept of 'isolationism'

Isolationism is a concept in IR used to describe the international behaviour of one state which chooses to cut off its relations with the outside world. IT has started as a description of the American Foreign Policy of different periods, but now has expanded as a descriptive and explanatory tool for many state behaviours. Different scholars have given different definitions about isolationism, but we hardly can say that exists a comprehensive theoretical definition of the concept of isolationism. Some scholars say that 'isolationism' is "a political strategy committed to minimal diplomatic participation in the international system" (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, and Roach 2008, 170). Eric A. Nordlinger in his well-received book sees 'isolationism' as national strategy for American foreign policy aiming to a restricted engagement of the US in international affairs (Nordlinger 1995). Other scholars give broader definitions. For Helga Turku isolationist foreign policy, broadly defined, is a "foreign policy that combines a non-interventionist military posture with an ideological, social, and political agenda of state-centric economic nationalism and protectionism" (Turku 2009, 6). The fundamental aim – according to Griffiths – of isolationism "is for a state to be more secure and less prone to external interference" (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, and Roach 2008). According to them, there are four factors which make make it possible for a state to pursue such a course of behaviour: (i) the

state does not see any threat of invasion or it is strong enough to defend its security without any need to form alliances; (ii) economic self-sufficiency which presupposes that the state has enough economic resources to survive; a political consensus or strong authoritarian rule to withstand domestic challenges to its foreign policy; an isolationist state should be geographically remote and have a better geographic position to pursue isolationism (Griffiths, O'Callaghan, and Roach 2008, 177). Helga Turku, who has developed one of the most comprehensive and broadest analysis of the isolationism focuses to the differences of isolationist policies taking into consideration regime differences of the countries which practice such policies. She develops a two-level analysis of isolationism and finds that unlike the modalities of isolationism manifested in the case of US foreign policy during the 19th and early 20th centuries, "isolationism in the case of North Korea, Burma, and communist Albania formed the sociopolitical basis of the regimes in power. Isolationism, therefore, was and continues to be the essence of the regimes as opposed to merely informing the foreign policy of the state" (Turku 2009, 7). In this case, isolationism is not just a form of external behaviour but the very essence of domestic political regime. "In addition to using isolationism as a means to "protect" the state and its respective populace from external influences, extreme forms of social isolationism have also been utilized to create "pure" ideological regimes" (Turku 2009, 7). Turku develops a great deal of analysis of the isolationist policies in different period of history by different units composing the international system. Her approach is flowed in two dimensions: first, she has an empirical account of what we call international system and how the units of this system interact with each-other; second, although she differentiates the domestic 'social isolationism' from 'external isolationism', she doesn't provide any link of how social isolationism causes a specific external behaviour. In an empirical perspective, although she is engaged in a comparative analysis of three different cases (Albania, Burma, and North

Korea) their similarities do not accumulate to an account of claiming that they constitute the cause for similarities in their external behaviour. She seems to believe that "states "opting out" of the global system" (Turku 2009, 7) is a state's free choice. This account of 'international system' is ideologically informed because considers international system as an observable entity composed by its units (states, international organisations and institutions, and interactions) but it does not consider the unobservable patterns which are produced by the interaction of the units and their position in the system. She develops the definition of Martin Wight who claims that in order to have orderly international relations there must be open channels of "communication" between states. "Thus, states must establish ties among themselves of a diplomatic, economic, and strategic nature. International relations premised on the modern states system are, therefore, comprised of two central states of affairs, that is, communication and trade" (Turku 2009, 33). This account reflects the usual error of an inside –outside approach, which neglects the operation of 'systemic forces' over the comprising units, an approach which blows the distinction between the system and the unit. The modern Westphalian nation-state order "makes a fundamental distinction between domestic political spheres characterized by institutional density, hierarchical relationships, shared interests, and strong collective identities, and an international political sphere characterized by a lack of strong institutions, few rules, conflicting interests, and conflicting identities" (March and Olsen 2008, 235). The study of International Relations has shown that the integration of different levels of analysis – including the system's level – is essential to understand not only the nature of the system but the behaviour of the states as well. As Robert Jervis puts it "we are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are

different from those of the parts" (Jervis 1997, 6). The systems approach in social sciences in general and in International Relations specifically is based on the belief "that structures are powerful and that the internal characteristics of the elements matter less than their place in the system" (Jervis 1997, 5). The most comprehensive theoretical development of the concept of system in IR is Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. "A system" – according to Waltz – "is composed of a structure and of interacting units. The structure is the system-wide component that makes it possible to think of the system as a whole" (Waltz 1979, 79). This structure is "defined by the arrangement of its parts. Only changes of arrangement are structural changes" (Waltz 1979, 80). Waltz's starting point is Durkheim's distinction between mechanic and organic societies. Durkheim distinguishes between societies of mechanic solidarity and organic solidarity, corresponding respectively to the anarchic order of international politics and hierarchic order of domestic politics. A mechanical society rests on the similarity of the units that compose it; an organic society is based on their differences (Keneth N. Waltz 1986, 323 - 324). Waltz elaborates the differences between domestic politics and international politics making thus possible an autonomous study of international politics. A domestic political structure – according to him – is thus defined, "first, according to the principle by which it is ordered; second, by specification of the functions of formally differentiated units; and third, by the distribution of capabilities across those units" (Waltz 1979, 82). The organisation of domestic political system is hierarchic where "parts of domestic political systems stand in relations of super- and subordination" (Waltz 1979, 88). The organisation of international political system is anarchic where "the parts … stand in relations of coordination. Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey" (Waltz 1979, 88). Waltz describes domestic political structures as institutionally organised whereas "international politics, in contrast, has been called 'politics in the absence of

government'" (Waltz 1979, 88). Waltz supposes that states are unitary, self-regarding units operating in a self-help system. He defines structure in three levels: (i) first, "according to the principle by which a system is ordered". This means that domestic political system is hierarchic whereas international system is anarchic and are "transformed if one ordering principle replaces another"; (ii) second, "by the specification of functions of differentiated units". This means that international system is composed of 'like units' which are states performing similar functions with their basic aim of surviving; (iii) third, "by the distribution of capabilities across units". This one is the observable and most important substantial variable of theory, which make it possible to verify it empirically (Waltz 1979, 100-101). According to this theory, states have their say in their foreign policy, but they cannot act as they wish because their behaviour is 'shaped and shoved' by international structure. This means that their position in the system is the most important factor informing their external behaviour. Theoretically, a state 'opting out of the international system' is just not possible, because as we have seen its very behaviour is constrained or allowed by international system. Although the observable empirical behaviour resembles 'isolationism', this behaviour is either constrained or allowed by international structure. Speaking about isolationism in this context is absurd; states cannot abstract from their external environment even if they choose to detach themselves from the institutional international system.

Albania's Case: Isolationism doesn't tell us anything

As we have seen, 'isolationism' as it is used in International Relations theory is not a theoretical category but an empirical generalisation to describe a certain structure of state's external behaviour. As such, this concept is useless in explaining Albania's foreign policy after the rift with China in 1978. Albania was an integral part of the 'international system'

understood as defined by Kenneth Waltz. Although largely unengaged with the international institutional framework – except UNO – its external behaviour is partly product of structural constrains and opportunities. This means that its foreign policy is determined by other states behaviour and its leadership perception of others intentions and actions. How this perceptions are informed – by ideology, local culture, leader's motivations – is clearly a different matter. The central question of Albania's 'isolationism' is why Albania followed this rout whereas its former ally, China, opted to integrate within the neoliberal institutional framework? This is partly due to their power and strategic position in international system. China found that the only way to alleviate it security concerns was to engage in a strategic triangle which would benefit its economical grow and guarantee her national and regime security. Its position within the strategic triangle (US-China-USSR) favoured this choice (Roy 1998). The seemingly opposite behaviour of Albania which opted for an inward looking foreign policy; was largely influenced by the same factor: its international position. Albania's external behaviour cannot be accounted by ideological dogmatism which is more an instrument rather than a cause; nor by its leadership motivations for political survival which is a political disposition and as such it doesn't tell us anything about causes of political behaviour. The causal mechanism starts with bipolar international system which provided opportunities for Albania to behave as she pleased within those systemic constrains. Enver Hoxha took the opportunity to cut any relationship with the outside world except limited bilateral relations facilitated by his complete control of the domestic political system and society. As Turku puts it "Hoxha's regime was able to use Albania's history of a perpetual struggle for independence to such an extent that it was able to "legitimately" justify Communist Albania's profound distrust of foreigners as a basis for state policy". Hoxha "utilized Albania's ancient and inexorable national struggle for independence, thus making the

case that the nation-state would be much better off as self-sufficient and united against any and all outside forces" (Turku 2009, 65). But this are the instruments used by Hoxha, not the cause itself. The results of those behaviours are a different matter. China went to became integrated and flourish economically; Albania suffered the most severe economic drama which exploded in the beginning of 1990s. Even in empirical perspective, the explanation of Albania's foreign policy as an isolationist one is flawed. Beyond the slogan of 'building socialism with our forces' which served as domestic political dogma, Albania's foreign policy during the period of the gradual collapse of the alliance with China and after it, shows a constant attempt of the regime to improve political and economic relations with neighbouring countries and western European countries. During this time Albania improved the strained political and economic ties with Yugoslavia and established diplomatic relations with Greece. It went to expand its economic relations with Germany and other European countries. The relationships remained cold with UK, USA and USSR. In this perspective, Albania's international relations were denser after the breakup of the relations with China than they were before. This is why 'self-isolationism' is an empty conceptual invention and even unrelated to empirical facts.

CONCLUSIONS

'Isolationism' as concept used in international relations and foreign policy theory is a descriptive metaphorical term rather than a theoretical category with explanatory abilities. In a theoretical perspective this concept doesn't make good sense because countries as composing units of the international system cannot escape the operation of systemic forces which 'shape and shove' their external behaviour. To whatever extent the state's relationships with the external environment can be limited, the state cannot be isolated from the 'system'. This is why any pretension to describe a certain foreign policy as

'isolationist' is e metaphor, not an empirical observation. This seems to be the Albanian case. After Albania's dissolution of the relations with China, a good deal of studies called this period as 'self-isolated foreign policy'. This observation is wrong on conceptual and empirical terms. In a conceptual perspective, Albania as a small and vulnerable country in security terms, was clearly exposed toward systemic pressures and opportunities. Its foreign policy developed in accordance with systemic incentives. Empirically, the description of its foreign policy after 1978 as an isolationist foreign policy is not supported by empirical evidence. Albania's bilateral relations with other countries are much denser during this period of time than before it.

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