

## Sweet Conspiracy: Review of Artan Hoxha's *Sugarland*

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**Abstract:** *Sugarland: The Rise and Fall of the Albanian Sugar Complex*, by Artan R. Hoxha. New York: Berghahn Books, 2023. 256 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$120.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-78920-756-6; \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78920-757-3.

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Artan Hoxha's story of Maliq-swamp, sugar combine, and then a town—invites a revisionist thesis worthy of our house methodology: communist Albania did not merely imitate the capitalist sugar complex; it reverse-engineered it as a tool of rule.

In this reading, sugar becomes a low-cost political technology. Cheap to grow or import, easy to warehouse, infinitely mixable into rations, pastries, and hooch, sucrose let the state centralize scarcity and then theatrically relieve it—one saccharine queue at a time. If opium was famously the religion of the masses, sugar was the more practical liturgy: a daily, edible promise that the Party still had the means to sweeten the lives of those it suppressed. The regime's longevity owed less to ideology than to glycemic governance.

The plot begins, fittingly, in mud—both literal and figurative. Hoxha wades through a swamp of images, now casting Maliq as internal colonization, now as frontier myth, then as the conveyor by which central power reaches the periphery. From our conspiratorial vantage, these are not competing frames but footprints of a single maneuver: seize land, regulate flows (water, beets, labor), and retrain appetites. The Soviet-gifted combine of the late 1940s was more than a factory; it was a shrine to socialist developmentalism, a machine-priesthood that manufactured peat and beet into calories and consent.

Sugar offered a triple dividend. Economically, it promised a substitute for volatile grain imports, while preferential trade—Cuba, COMECON—often kept sugar comparatively cheap and stable. Politically, it enabled monopoly—a single choke point across import, production, and distribution. Socially, it standardized taste around a manageable addiction.

Hoxha's narrative also shows that every government would, and in effect did, make the same sugar bet. Across regimes—from monarchy to Italian patronage to Stalinist autarky—the instrument keeps returning: central projects that reorder land and diets at scale. This is intentional convergence, not coincidence: the governing class repeatedly selects sugar because it is cheaper than proteins and vegetables, easier to ship than fresh produce, and more pliable than grain in the politics of queues. Post-1990s privatization and the combine's collapse do not break the pattern; they merely pivot it. The state shifts from producer to importer, preserving a choke point over a sweet commodity central to the national diet—only now the state is captured by new elites, the oligarchs (Ferro & Co.), who pull the same lever for new rents and a new fast-food diet.

Here the book's strongest materials—drainage schemes, forced labor, col-

lectivization, the expert/peasant tussle—read as evidence of a “sweet discipline.” The agronomist calibrates sucrose; the planner calibrates desire; the peasant ferments nicely underneath. Calories arrive wrapped in Party messaging (*Karamele Zana*): modernization, self-reliance, progress.

One can quarrel with the author’s scatter of metaphors (frontier, shrine, machine, factory) and the lack of a single analytical spine, but even the metaphor pile-up unwittingly maps our thesis: sugar was the master metaphor because it was the master lever. And lever meant leverage over regions, rations, and reputations.

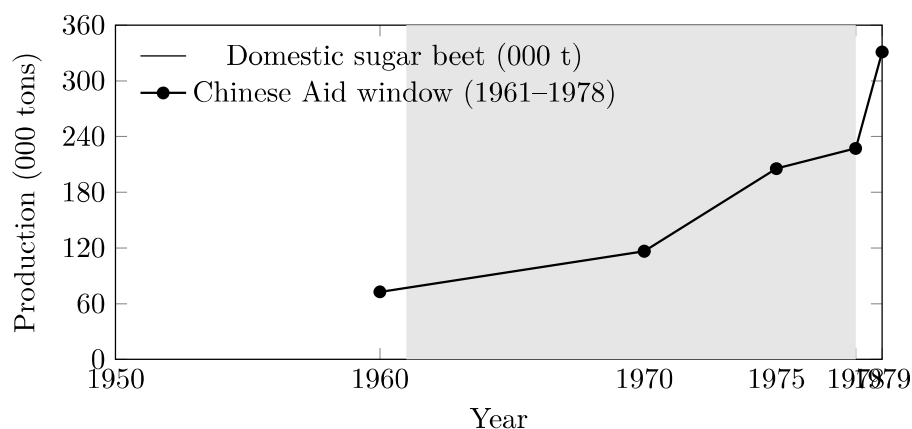
Did it work? The book is thin on time series for consumption, imports, and dietary substitution—precisely the gaps a serious conspiracy loves to exploit. But we can nevertheless gain the insight that the regime maintained the theater of provision even when agriculture underperformed, swapping legumes and dairy for saccharides and cushioning decline and discontent with candy and alcohol. Not prosperity—pacification by pastry and raki.

And after 1991, the costumes change and the script remain. The combine’s ruins are leased to a politically connected seafood magnate; Sugar Town becomes Fish City – another concessionary miracle of modernity. The sugar monopoly migrates to the docks of Brazil and Durrës.

Hoxha’s account omits crucial data needed to understand the broader context of the agricultural economy, let alone the sugar industry. Without such information, the narrative is not really about the Maliq swamp, nor about the sugar industry itself.

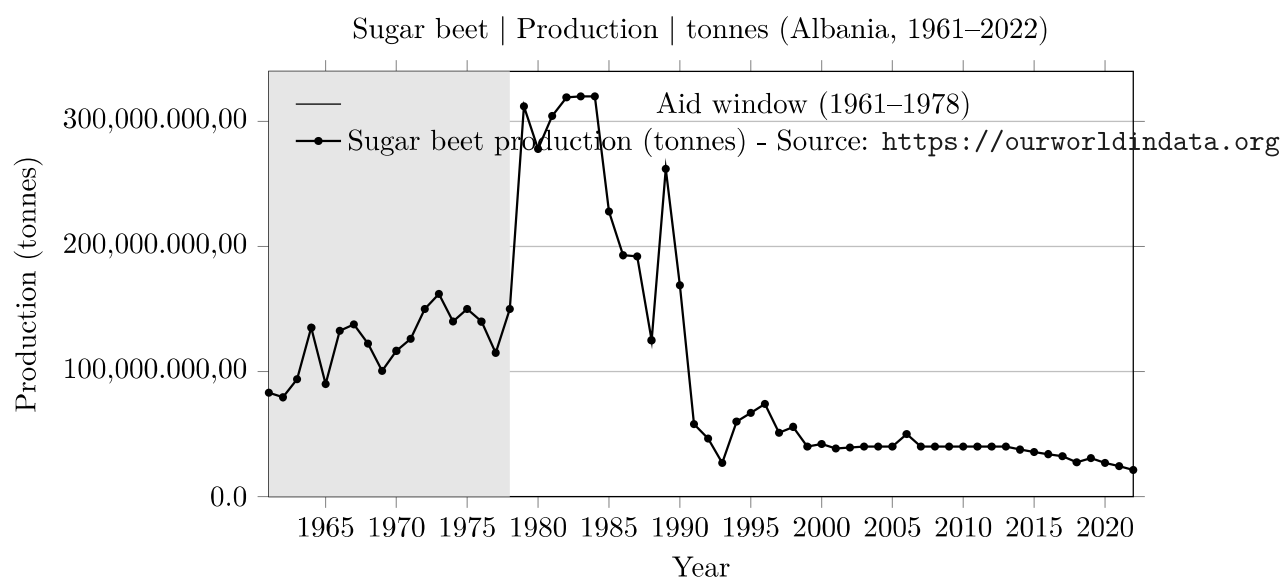
Between 1960 and 1979, sugar beet production in Albania quadrupled, supported by Chinese machinery and agronomic inputs. The official narrative portrayed this as proof of socialist ingenuity and self-sufficiency.

Sugar beet production – *Statistical Year Book (1979)*, AQSH 495, Folder 110

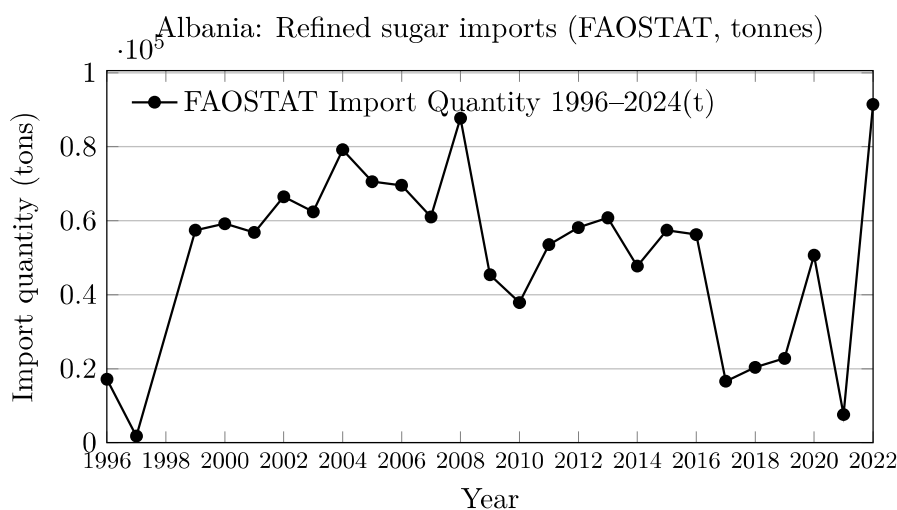


Between 1991 and 1993, as domestic sugar-beet production collapsed, Albania received over 55 thousand tonnes of sugar in food aid from the World Food Programme (WFP).<sup>17</sup> This brief “sweet relief” illustrates how quickly the logic of aid replaced that of production. By the late 1990s, the flow had nearly ceased, overtaken by private imports and the emergence of the Durrës sugar monopoly.

<sup>17</sup>1991:20,807 T, 1992: 22,346 T; 1993: 12,735



By 2000, imports exceeded 50,000 tonnes per year, signaling the demise of the once-proud sugar-beet agricultural complexes of Korça, Pogradec, and Elbasan. The sugar market, like much of the post-socialist economy, was soon captured by a few powerful families and their front companies.



Today, the Albanian sugar market is effectively a *quasi-monopoly*, dominated by a single firm, **Ferro & Co**, located in Durrës. The company operates at the intersection of two lucrative sectors: sugar imports and the notoriously opaque construction industry.

Its former competitor, **Sucralba**, also based in Durrës, began losing market share after the political shift of 2008. *Sucralba* had originally been established as a joint venture with an Italian firm notorious for industrial failures: the very enterprise that, in the 1990s, attempted to revive the Mussolini-era sugar plant of Littoria (Latina, Lazio), inaugurated in 1936, and left behind tons of asbestos and other toxic residues. The company eventually defaulted in 2018—coinciding with the arrest of its main shareholder, an Albanian politician

from Durrës, involved in the recent waste-management scandal. The parallels of the waste-management scandal with Albania's 1930s reclamation of the Maliq swamp are striking: both projects combined state propaganda, foreign "expertise," and environmental disaster. The latest scandal repeats the same structural logic: a concession to a shell foreign company tied to local politicians, designed with no productive rationale except the systematic extraction of public funds.

The other three main importers and processors—**Bloja Sh.a.**, **Atlas Sh.a.**, and **Agro Blend**—are under investigation for fiscal fraud. The latter is led by a long-serving mayor, exemplifying the blurred line between enterprise and elected office. All three companies have been fined by the Competition Authority for price manipulation and restrictive market practices in the flower market.

From the state-run factories of the 1970s to the monopolized import terminals of today, Albania's sugar economy narrates the country's political metamorphosis. In this reframe, Sugarland is less a case study of modernization gone awry than a manual of affective statecraft. Sugar's very cheapness is the feature: it lets authorities perform abundance at a discount, smoothing discontent with reliable spikes of pleasure. Now it can be cocaine or crack, meth or methadone, but the principle holds: addictive commodities are the opiates of the masses because they are also the instruments of rule. The state that can sweeten lives can also discipline them.

Despite its theoretical clutter, wayward comparisons half a world away, and lack of true witnesses rather than his grandma or the last factory manager, Hoxha provides the scenes and props to stage this sugary argument. Where it lists frontier, we read accretion of control. Where it itemizes instruments—reclamation, collectivization, regionalization—we see dosage forms of self- and collective-discipline. Where it laments the post-1990s destruction of capital stock and the dissolution of cooperatives and the common good, we see the great pivot from central planning of domestic produce to ports of imported goods and dependence subsidized by the transport of drugs through the same routes. And where it ends on the industry's demise, our conspiracy file concludes that where industries die, addictions adapt. In Maliq, the saccharine regime now smells fishy—just like the captured state.