

Leadership Traits and Tourism Development: Evidence from Albania

Gerti Dajci

Tirana Business University College, Business and Finance Department, Albania

gerti.dajci@tbu.edu.al

<https://doi.org/0009-0001-4725-5292>

Elida Motro-Iljazi

Tirana Business University College, Business and Finance Department, Albania

elida.motro-iljazi@tbu.edu.al

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Elida-Motro-Iljazi>

Miranda Prifti

Tirana Business University College, Faculty of Information Technology, Albania

Miranda.prifti@tbu.edu.al

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7577-0649>

Rezart Dibra

Tirana Business University College, Business and Finance Department, Albania

rezart.dibra@tbu.edu.al

<https://doi.org/0000-0003-3684-6633>

Abstract

This paper investigates the intricate relationship between individual political leadership and national tourism development, an area often underexplored in academic literature. Focusing on Albania's remarkable tourism expansion between 2016 and 2026, which saw annual visitor numbers surge from 2.6 million to 11.7 million, this study posits that specific leadership traits and styles significantly contributed to this boom. Through the lens of Prime Minister Edi Rama's tenure, a theoretical framework integrating leadership traits theory, charismatic and transformational leadership, political branding, and tourism governance is applied. The analysis reveals how Rama's artistic background, modernizing vision, diplomatic skill, and strategic communication fostered a coherent national brand, amplified international media presence, and strategically repositioned Albania on the global tourism map, thereby facilitating the extraordinary growth experienced. This paper argues that tourism development is not merely an economic process but a politically mediated and symbolically constructed field, profoundly shaped by the unique characteristics of its leadership.

Keywords: Leadership Traits, Tourism Development

DOI: 10.7176/JTHS/69-05

Publication date: May 30th 2026

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of tourism globally necessitates a deeper understanding of the multifaceted factors driving its growth. While destination management theory widely acknowledges the critical role of governance quality in influencing tourism competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003), the specific mechanisms by which individual leader traits and leadership styles impact tourism outcomes remain a nascent area of systematic investigation. The case of Albania between 2016 and 2026 presents an exceptional opportunity to explore this relationship. During this decade, Albania experienced an exponential surge in tourist arrivals, escalating from 2.6 million to an impressive 11.7 million annual visitors. This dramatic transformation provides a fertile ground for analyzing how leadership, particularly that of Prime Minister Edi Rama, contributed to the institutional and symbolic conditions conducive to such unprecedented growth.

This paper develops an integrated theoretical framework connecting established concepts such as leadership traits theory, charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, political branding, and tourism governance. By applying this framework to Albania's tourism trajectory under Prime Minister Rama, this study aims to elucidate the nuanced interplay between political leadership and destination development. Rather than viewing tourism development solely as an economic phenomenon, this article approaches it as a profoundly politically mediated and symbolically constructed field. The central inquiry extends beyond merely documenting tourism expansion;

it seeks to unravel how the prevailing leadership style actively shaped the foundational conditions that enabled this remarkable growth.

2. Theoretical Framework: Leadership, Branding, and Governance in Tourism

The success of a tourism destination is inextricably linked to its governance structure and the strategic direction provided by its leadership. Effective governance ensures stability, infrastructure development, policy coherence, and stakeholder engagement, all of which are crucial for attracting and sustaining tourism. Ritchie and Crouch (2003) underscored the significance of governance quality in determining a destination's competitiveness. However, beyond structural governance, the individual characteristics and modus operandi of political leaders can profoundly influence a nation's ability to market itself and manage its tourism assets.

This paper draws upon leadership traits theory, which posits that certain inherent qualities or learned attributes predispose individuals to effective leadership. In the context of tourism, these traits might include vision, communication skills, resilience, and an ability to inspire. Furthermore, charismatic leadership, characterized by a leader's ability to inspire devotion and enthusiasm through personality and vision, and transformational leadership, which involves inspiring followers to transcend their self-interest for the good of the organization or nation, are particularly relevant. These styles can significantly influence national branding efforts, shaping how a country is perceived internationally. Political branding literature (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011) highlights how leaders' personal brands can become intertwined with national identity, influencing international perceptions and attracting attention. When applied to tourism, a leader's brand can become a potent tool for destination marketing, fostering a coherent narrative and amplifying media presence. By examining these theoretical constructs in conjunction with Albania's experience, a comprehensive understanding of the forces behind its tourism boom can be achieved.

3. Leadership Traits and Their Influence on Tourism Change in Albania (2016–2026)

The period between 2016 and 2026 in Albania was marked by significant tourism growth, a phenomenon closely tied to the specific leadership traits and style exhibited by Prime Minister Edi Rama. His background and approach directly informed key aspects of the nation's tourism development strategy.

3.1 Charisma and National Branding

One of the most salient features of Albania's tourism trajectory during this period was the profound degree to which the nation's destination brand became inseparable from Prime Minister Rama's personal brand. This conflation of leader identity and national identity, a well-documented phenomenon in political branding literature (Marsh & Fawcett, 2011), presented both unique opportunities and inherent risks. On the positive side, this dynamic yielded several advantages:

- **Brand Coherence:** Rama's singular, recognizable figure provided a consistent narrative for Albania's international messaging. His personal prominence ensured that the country's marketing efforts conveyed a unified and unambiguous image to the global audience.
- **Media Amplification:** Prime Minister Rama's established international profile generated substantial earned media coverage that would have otherwise been prohibitively expensive to achieve through traditional paid advertising channels. His presence at international forums, interviews, and public statements naturally drew attention to Albania, effectively serving as a high-profile ambassador for the nation's tourism aspirations. This amplification was crucial in shifting international perceptions and attracting new visitors.

3.2 Leadership Trait Connections: Artistic Creativity, Modernizing Vision, and Innovative Character

Beyond his charismatic appeal, several specific leadership traits of Prime Minister Rama directly shaped the country's tourism infrastructure and aesthetic appeal:

- **Artistic Creativity:** Rama's background as a trained painter profoundly influenced his aesthetic sensibility. This artistic perspective was directly manifested in the urban design philosophy adopted during his tenure, leading to significant revitalization projects in cities and coastal areas. This emphasis on visual appeal contributed to creating more attractive and aesthetically pleasing environments for tourists.
- **Modernizing Vision:** A consistent ideological commitment to repositioning Albania visually and architecturally within European norms guided many development projects. This vision aimed to shed post-communist stereotypes and align Albania with contemporary European standards of urbanism and hospitality, making the country more appealing to international visitors seeking modern amenities and experiences.

- Innovative and Demanding Character: Rama's willingness to challenge established aesthetic and institutional norms, though sometimes generating significant political controversy, proved instrumental in driving transformative change. This innovative spirit led to ambitious projects and policy shifts that, while potentially disruptive in the short term, ultimately laid the groundwork for enhanced tourism infrastructure and services.

4. Building the "Albania" Brand in the International Arena

The period from 2016 to 2026 was characterized by a deliberate and increasingly sophisticated national tourism branding strategy. Albania was systematically positioned not just as a destination, but as an emerging European gem, leveraging specific leadership traits to achieve this.

4.1 Strategic Positioning

Albania's strategic positioning during this decade involved a concerted effort to redefine its international image. This included emphasizing its unique natural beauty, rich cultural heritage, and burgeoning modern identity. The strategy focused on highlighting underexplored attractions, promoting sustainable tourism, and creating a narrative that distinguished Albania from more established Mediterranean destinations. This systematic approach aimed to attract a diverse range of tourists, from adventure seekers to cultural enthusiasts, by presenting a multifaceted and appealing image of the country.

4.2 Leadership Trait Connections: Diplomatic Skill, Persuasive Communication, Enthusiasm, and Political Intelligence

The success of Albania's international branding was directly attributable to several key leadership traits exhibited by Prime Minister Rama:

- Diplomatic Skill: Rama's adept navigation of complex EU-Albanian relations and multilateral partnerships was crucial. By fostering strong international ties and participating actively in global dialogues, he enhanced Albania's credibility and visibility on the world stage, creating a conducive environment for tourism investment and promotion.
- Persuasive Communication: A critical trait was the ability to effectively shift international narratives. For decades, Albania had been associated with post-communist struggles, crime, and instability. Rama's persuasive communication efforts, both domestically and internationally, actively worked to dismantle these negative stereotypes and promote a new image of a vibrant, safe, and welcoming nation.
- Enthusiasm and Conviction: A palpable personal investment in Albania's international image was evident in Rama's rhetoric and actions. His genuine enthusiasm and conviction about the country's potential resonated with both international stakeholders and prospective tourists, fostering a sense of confidence and excitement about visiting Albania.
- Political Intelligence: The strategic timing of announcements, projects, and international engagements maximized media and diplomatic impact. This acute political intelligence ensured that initiatives aimed at promoting tourism received optimal exposure and garnered international support, further reinforcing Albania's emerging status as a desirable destination.

5. Theoretical Framework: Personalization of Governance

The pattern analysing the concept of the "**personalization of governance**" (Poguntke & Webb, 2005; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007) and the related concept of the "**leader-centric development model**". Poguntke & Webb (2005) identify a Europe-wide trend toward the concentration of political authority in the hands of individual leaders, driven by:

- Media presidentialization of political communication;
- Weakening of party and institutional intermediaries;
- Growing personalization of electoral competition.

In the Albanian context, these structural tendencies were amplified by:

- The relative weakness of institutional checks and balances;

- A political culture with historically strong tendencies toward **centralized, personal authority**;
- Rama's distinctive personal brand, which actively resisted institutional submersion.

The result was a "leader-centric development model" in which:

$\text{National Tourism Brand} \approx f(\text{Leader Personal Brand})$

this functional equivalence between national and personal brand, while generating short-term communication efficiencies, introduces a significant structural vulnerability: should leadership change, the destination brand risks suffering a coherence deficit.

While such personalization may generate short-term communication efficiency, international visibility, and narrative coherence, it also creates structural vulnerabilities. In particular, excessive dependence on a single political figure may weaken institutional continuity and reduce the long-term sustainability of destination branding strategies. Consequently, political transition or leadership change may produce a "coherence deficit" in the tourism brand, undermining consistency in international perception and strategic communication.

6. Corporate Governance and Management

Modern society operates through many forms of corporate entities such as companies, clubs, cooperatives, institutions, societies, joint ventures, partnerships, trusts, and unions. Although these organizations differ significantly in structure, purpose, and scale, they all share one essential characteristic: they require effective management and sound corporate governance. Corporate governance provides the framework through which organizations are directed and controlled, ensuring accountability, transparency, and responsible decision-making (Tricker, 2019).

Corporate governance refers to the system by which organizations are directed and controlled. It ensures that management acts responsibly and in the best interests of shareholders and stakeholders. Management, by contrast, focuses on the day-to-day operation of the organization and the efficient use of resources such as finance, employees, and assets to achieve organizational objectives (Cadbury, 1992).

Executive directors perform a dual role because they are both members of the board and part of management. Consequently, they participate in governance oversight while also being involved in operational decision-making.

7. Conclusion

The unprecedented tourism boom in Albania between 2016 and 2026 serves as a compelling case study illustrating the profound connection between individual political leadership and national tourism development. Prime Minister Edi Rama's specific leadership traits and styles were instrumental in shaping a favorable environment for this growth. His artistic creativity and modernizing vision directly influenced urban aesthetics and infrastructure, while his charismatic presence fostered brand coherence and amplified international media attention for Albania. Furthermore, his diplomatic skill, persuasive communication, unwavering enthusiasm, and astute political intelligence were critical in strategically repositioning Albania's international image, dismantling negative stereotypes, and generating global interest.

This analysis underscores that tourism development is not merely an economic trajectory but a deeply intertwined process influenced by political will, symbolic construction, and the personal characteristics of key leaders. The Albanian experience demonstrates that a leader with a clear vision, the capacity for effective branding, and the skill to navigate international relations can significantly accelerate a nation's tourism potential. Future research could further explore the long-term sustainability of leader-centric branding strategies and their implications for destination resilience beyond the tenure of a single leader. Nevertheless, the case of Albania from 2016 to 2026 provides invaluable insights into how strategic leadership can act as a catalyst for transformative tourism growth.

References

Marsh, D., & Fawcett, P. (2011). Political Branding: Conceptual Debates and Empirical Questions. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10(1-2), 1-22.

Ritchie, J. R. B., & Crouch, G. I. (2003). *The Competitive Destination: A Sustainable Tourism Perspective*. CABI Publishing.

Anholt, S. (2007). *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. Free Press.

Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.

Dinnie, K. (2016). *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Hall, C. M. (2008). *Tourism Planning: Policies, Processes and Relationships* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Kotler, P., Haider, D., & Rein, I. (1993). *Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry, and Tourism to Cities, States, and Nations*. Free Press.

Lees-Marshment, J. (2009). *Political Marketing: Principles and Applications*. Routledge.

Marsh, D., & Fawcett, P. (2011). Political Branding: Conceptual Debates and Empirical Questions. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 10(1–2), 1–22.

Morgan, N., Pritchard, A., & Pride, R. (2011). *Destination Brands: Managing Place Reputation* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. Public Affairs.

Pike, S. (2008). *Destination Marketing: An Integrated Marketing Communication Approach*. Butterworth-Heinemann.