Zu den Reiseberichten

2023: Tirana, Albania

(17.- 23. September 2023)

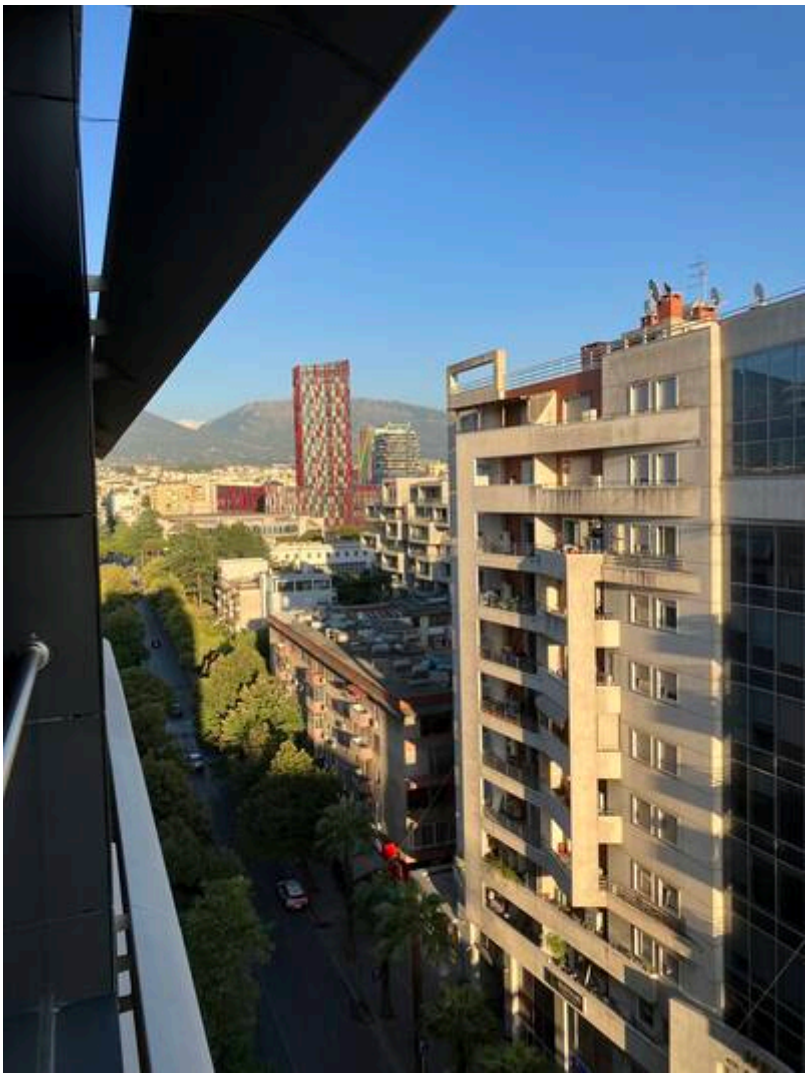


17 September, on the plane

On the way to Tirana, I try to eavesdrop on my questions for this trip within myself. Albania is a small country that is not part of the EU, but has been a candidate country since 2014. Accession negotiations started on 19 July 2022.

In 1991, a communist dictatorship that had lasted 45 years and was one of the most extreme in Europe, the regime of Enver Hoxha, collapsed in Albania. In 1991, a traumatised, impoverished and isolated-backward country was released into a democratic future. The Hoxha period was, I think, a complete antithesis to what for me constitutes the ideal of „the West“. I wonder if I could make that ideal my motive here. To what I am looking for, as a reality or as a longing - or perhaps what I cannot

find and what is evident in its absence. What is the promise of the „West“? Can it gain a foothold in a society that in 1991 consisted almost exclusively of perpetrators and victims of a brutal authoritarian system? How did or does the transformation from there to a subsidiary society take place? Is there even a prospect of this? How does one see the real, inert, complacent West from Albania? Is there also that bitter disillusionment here that I keep encountering in the East of the West? Are they perhaps beginning to see the alternative to the West in the authoritarianism of China, Russia or Turkey as the lesser evil to Western hypocrisy?



18 September, Breakfast terrace of the Boheme Hotel



At the dinner table yesterday, a conversation started between fellow travellers. A woman from Poland, in Germany for 6 years, and another from Frankfurt an der Oder, in Berlin for 20 years. The young Polish woman talked about her country, which she had left. She would like to understand why Poland became like this, so right-wing. If she understood, maybe she could change it. The two women puzzled over this subject together with a kind of perplexed resignation. The German woman, who fled the spiritual confines of Frankfurt an der Oder as soon as she could, suggests that it is because of Poland's religious tradition. To the people's attachment to the Catholic Church. Perhaps she means to say that getting used to submission to a higher authority and its secular representation blocks people's path to themselves.



In their conversation, there is a longing for what I will call „the West“ for this journey. With the expectation that if people were shown this West and had the chance to go there, they would of course do so immediately and joyfully. The Polish woman seems to be in a state of gruelling bewilderment that her compatriots are behaving differently. As if, in an incomprehensible masochistic fit, they were taking back a hard-won freedom for themselves.

I recognise „my West“ in the longing of the two women. But I have a doubt. I find the ideal of „the West“ also encompasses an understanding of the human desire for order, security and the

preservation of traditions. For me, I realise, the „West“ includes not only unconditional freedom from all heteronomy, but also respect for what people consider part of their identity. Or rather: that is also an aspect of Western freedom.

19 September, Tirana, Hotel Terrace

Construction is underway in Tirana. The old city centre is pushed aside by ambitious, towering spires. The city administration is trying to gradually legalise or demolish the many illegal buildings and conversions. Since 2016, there has been a land register that can also be viewed online. Online, i.e. anonymously available to anyone and everyone. There are no more gatekeepers who can be paid for access to information. This seems to be a principle in the attempt to push back corruption in Albania. A mammoth task, a fight against a many-armed octopus.



You have to imagine the Albania of the Hoxha era like a North Korea in Europe, the mayor of the city is quoted as saying. There was no private property, no rights of individuals vis-à-vis the state. That is why today there is no „trust in the state“ to build on, to rebuild. The ideals of the West have no tradition here, they are being re-established. One of Albania's big problems is emigration. How can it be prevented without forcing people to stay? Participation and co-creation are a key, the representatives of a youth organisation under the umbrella of the UN tell us. The UN and the EU have also taken up the cause of „participation instead of receiving benefits“. Young people should feel that they can change and influence society. They should have the feeling that everything will not just stay the way it is and that their forbearance will be bought with handouts.

In democracy, everything takes a long time and Albania has no time. There are hardly any rules in the face of capitalism, and even the judiciary and legislation were for sale. That time is over now, so hope people here whose vocation includes hoping. The politicians and other shapers of the future. At the Ministry of Justice, the two deputy ministers of justice, Klaijdi Karameta and Adea Pirdeni, explain their tasks on the frontline of the fight against corruption. They are among those who have returned from studying abroad. You have to believe in upheaval before it can become reality. The own population may not believe in it yet, but still they want to convince the European Union that Albania is on its way to becoming a European model country. The EU's requirements for the candidate country are tough, much tougher than they were for Bulgaria or Romania. The EU does not want to get itself another problem case. While Hungary and Poland are questioning the separation of powers in their own

countries, in Albania it is being painstakingly brought out of the baptism with far-reaching judicial reforms. More than 50 % of the judges and prosecutors have been suspended as unworthy or unsuitable. Some of them are now in prison. Albania is a huge construction site with huge visions that want to and are allowed to crush what has gone before. There is no other way, they say.



Albania is an old country and an old people with an old language and culture. Everything goes back to the prehistoric times of Europe, long before democracy was invented in nearby Greece. Like the Armenians in Cacasus, Albanians have preserved their language and culture, despite centuries of occupation and oppression. Their identity as Albanians is still more important than their religious affiliation. Even abroad, in the economic diaspora of these days, identity is preserved. Similar to the Armenians and the Jews. The Kanun, an ancient tradition for what is right, permeates the attitude to life, the relationship between man, the world and society. When the state was weak or became the enemy, one could resort to it. Blood revenge is part of this, but so is (and even more so) hospitality. Albania is the only country in Europe where more Jews lived after the Second World War than before. The Jews were hidden and protected here, not turned away and extradited.

Old and peculiar, oppressed and humiliated, but now in youthful awakening and full of zest for action, that is how I encounter this country. It is not naïve hope for the West that I find here so far. Nor do I find the disappointment I was expecting, the disappointment in Western hypocrisy.

20 September, Breakfast terrace of the Boheme Hotel



Jorida Tabaku from the Democratic Party and Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration took time for us. She is part of the opposition to the ruling Socialist Party. But on the point of EU accession, Albanian parties are united with civil society. There are 15 key EU criteria for which the collection of the status quo has now been completed. Most important in the Albania/EU relationship are the criteria „corruption“, „organised crime“ and „property rights“. Negotiations on compliance with the individual criteria will now begin this autumn. Politicians in Albania are under great pressure because the population is losing patience in waiting for the EU. A new wave of emigration is building up because of this, another „brain drain“ - and the country can no longer afford it.

For years, Germany has been very involved in the preparations for EU enlargement in the Balkans. On the political level, but also with many concrete development projects, e.g. in schools and training or the accompaniment of migration and return migration. This assistance is very welcome.

But in the evening, Fatos Lubonja, a journalist, author and human rights activist who survived more than 17 years in the labour camps of the Hoxha regime, will criticise the aid from abroad. With them, Albania is like a tree that grows with its roots upwards. It is well-intentioned on the part of the EU, but actually development must come from within Albania and not be alimented from outside. Like a crowd of underage children, Albanian society is lurching seamlessly from dictatorship to post-democratic society, he says.



What he calls the post-democratic society of the monopoly oligarchs is what drives him. For him, the hope for a democratic development of Albania and the entire former Eastern Bloc failed at the moment when the winners of the transition, the oligarchs, stopped fighting each other and instead individuals asserted themselves. Using Russia as an example, he describes this as the transition from the Yeltsin system to the Putin system. At first, Fatos had hoped that a pluralistic democracy could emerge from the ideological competition between the oligarchs. But then, says Fatos, pure economic interests prevailed, which today are only politically disguised. Stagings to deceive the population and the world public and to keep them occupied on insignificant sideshows. While the real masterminds increase their wealth. The politicians of the world no longer have any power in this economically subjugated globalisation. The programmes of the parties no longer differ, everything political is just an empty spectacle. Such is Fatos' impressively vivid, deeply pessimistic analysis. He describes the neoliberal reality of today's Albania as a distorting and magnifying mirror for the old democracies. Here and in the other countries of pseudo-communist enforced collectivisation, power would now lie exclusively with the criminally acquired private fortunes. There is no memory of what was once „democracy“. And thus what little immunity there is in the old West may still be there for a while. But then, Fatos believes, what for me is „the West“ will also fade there: any real participation of individuals in the construction of society. „Oh, one will still be allowed to vote!“ - But he predicts that there will be no more individual critical consciousness in an immature herd of guided children.



Fatos Lubonja survived Hoxha's regime, was one of the last to be released from prisons and labour camps before the proclamation of the Republic in 1991. Hoxha's communist dictatorship was a period of paranoid despotism in which all bonds of friendship with the other communist states were gradually broken. Enver Hoxha did not support the de-Stalinisation of the Soviet Union, for him that was treason. Albania adopted China's cultural revolution, but not the thaw of Ping-Pong diplomacy. Albania sealed itself off from everyone and everything, remained Stalinist to the bitter end. Enver Hoxha died in 1985, leaving behind children but no dynasty. The attempt of his faithful to continue the personality cult lasted only until 1991, when Hoxha's system in Albania collapsed and a country that was altogether like a paranoid prison suddenly and abruptly became part of a larger world.

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