

Albania: Coming of age at the end of history

*In December 1990, Albania changed almost overnight from an isolated communist state into one where people could vote freely, wear what they liked, and worship as they wished. But as factories shut and jobs disappeared, optimism quickly gave way to disillusionment for many of the country's citizens. Drawing on a new book, **Lea Ypi** writes on life in Albania under communism and how the country's transition left her questioning what freedom really meant.*

Growing up in Albania, I thought about foreign children with curiosity, occasionally envy, but often also pity. I felt especially sorry for them on Children's Day, 1 June, when I received presents from my parents and we went to eat ice cream by the beach and to visit the funfair. On that occasion, they also gave me a yearly subscription to several children's magazines. It was through these magazines that I learned about the fate of other children around the world.

The magazine *Little Stars* was for children from six to eight years old, and on Children's Day it ran a cartoon called 'Our 1 June and theirs'. On one side there was a fat capitalist wearing a fat top hat buying ice cream for his fat son, and on the floor next to the shop's entrance two ragged children and a caption: '1 June never comes for us.' On the other side, there were socialist flags, happy children carrying flowers and presents, holding their parents' hands, waiting to buy ice cream in front of a shop. 'We love 1 June,' their caption read. The queue was very short.

In the late eighties, I also started to receive *The Horizon*, for teenagers. I was still young for it, but my father loved it because it featured a maths and physics challenges section, as well as a regular column about scientific and astronomic curiosities. Occasionally, he had to be reminded that he had bought the magazine for me, and needed to pass it on. *The Horizon* depicted Western children frequently; never in such detail as to exhaust all possible questions about their lives, but enough to provide a sense of how different they were. Unlike my world, theirs was divided: between the rich and the poor, the bourgeois and the proletarian, the hopeful and the hopeless, the free and the shackled.

There were privileged, entitled children who, like their bourgeois parents, had everything they wanted but never shared it with the less fortunate, whose hardship they ignored. There were also poor and oppressed children who had to sleep rough, whose parents could not afford to pay the bills at the end of the month, who had to beg for food in restaurants and train stations, who could not attend school regularly because they were forced to work, who dug diamonds in mines and lived in shanty towns. There were regular reports about the fate of children in places like Africa and South America, and reviews of books about the segregation of black children in the United States and about apartheid.

We knew we would never meet these poor children, humiliated and oppressed by the capitalists, because they could never travel. We sympathised with their predicament but did not think we shared their fate. We knew it was difficult for us to travel abroad because we were surrounded by enemies. Moreover, our holidays were subsidised by the Party. Perhaps one day the Party would be powerful enough to have defeated all our enemies, and would pay for everyone to travel abroad too. In any case, we were already in the best place. They had nothing. We knew we did not have everything. But we had enough, we all had the same things, and we had what mattered most: real freedom.

In capitalism, people claimed to be free and equal, but this was only on paper because only the rich could take advantage of the rights available. Capitalists had made their money by stealing land and plundering resources all over the world, and by selling black people as slaves. 'Do you remember *Black Boy*?' our teacher asked when we read Richard Wright's autobiography in school. 'In the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, a poor black person cannot be free. The police are after him. The law works against him.'

We had freedom for all, not just for the exploiters. We worked, not for the capitalists but for ourselves, and we shared the products of our work. We didn't know greed, or have to feel envy. Everyone's needs were satisfied, and the Party helped us develop our talents. If you were particularly gifted in maths, or dancing, or poetry or whatever, you could go to the House of the Pioneers and find a science club, or a dancing group, or a literary circle in which to practise your skills.

'Can you imagine, if your parents lived in capitalism, they would have to pay for all these things,' our teacher would say. 'People work like dogs, and the capitalist doesn't even give them what they deserve because, otherwise, how would he make a profit? Which means that part of the time they work for nothing, like the slaves in ancient Rome. For the other part, they receive a salary, and if they wanted their children to develop their talents, they would have to pay for private lessons, which of course they can't afford. What freedom is that?'

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On 12 December 1990, my country was officially declared a multiparty state, one in which free elections would be held. It was almost twelve months after Nicolae Ceauşescu had been shot in Romania while singing 'The Internationale'. The Gulf War had already started. Small pieces of the Wall were already being sold in the souvenir kiosks of recently unified Berlin. For more than a year, these events had left my country untouched, or almost. The owl of Minerva had taken flight and, as usual, seemed to have forgotten us. But then she remembered and returned.

Why had socialism come to an end? Only a few months before, in our moral education class, our teacher had explained that socialism was not perfect, it was not like communism would be when it arrived. Socialism was a dictatorship, she said, the dictatorship of the proletariat. This was different, and certainly better, than the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie that ruled in Western imperialist states. In socialism, the state was controlled by the workers, rather than by capital, and the law served the workers' interests, not the interests of those who wanted to increase their profits. But she made it clear that socialism had problems too.

Class struggle was not over. We had many external enemies, like the Soviet Union, which had long ago given up on the ideal of communism and turned into a repressive imperialist state that sent tanks to crush smaller countries. We also had many internal enemies. The people who had once been rich and had lost all their privileges and property kept plotting to undermine the rule of the workers and deserved to be punished. Still, with time, the proletarian struggle would prevail.

When people grow up in a humane system, and children are educated in the right ideas, she said, they internalise them. Class enemies become fewer in number, and class struggle first softens, then disappears. That is when communism really starts, and why it is superior to socialism: it does not need the law to punish anyone, and it liberates human beings once and for all. Contrary to what our enemies' propaganda suggested, communism was not the repression of the individual but the first time in the history of humanity in which we could be fully free.

I'd always thought there was nothing better than communism. Every morning of my life I woke up wanting to do something to make it happen faster. But in December 1990, the same human beings who had been marching to celebrate socialism and the advance towards communism took to the streets to demand its end. The representatives of the people declared that the only things they had ever known under socialism were not freedom and democracy but tyranny and coercion.

What would I grow up into? How would we realise communism now that socialism was no longer there? As I stared incredulously at the television screen, where the Secretary of the Politburo was announcing that political pluralism was no longer a punishable offence, my parents declared that they had never supported the Party I had always seen them elect, that they had never believed in its authority. They had simply mastered the slogans, and gone on reciting them, just like everyone else, just like I did when I swore my oath of loyalty in school every morning. But there was a difference between us. I believed. I knew nothing else. Now I had nothing left, except for all the small, mysterious fragments of the past, like the solitary notes of a long-lost opera.

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More changes occurred in December 1990 than in all the previous years of my life combined. For some, those were the days in which history came to an end. It did not feel like the end. Nor did it feel like a new beginning, at least not immediately. More like the rise of a discredited prophet who had foretold calamities that all dreaded but no one believed.

We had spent decades preparing for assault, planning for nuclear war, designing bunkers, suppressing dissent, anticipating the words of counterrevolution, imagining the contours of its face. We strove to grasp the power of our enemies, to reverse their rhetoric, resist their efforts to corrupt us and match their weapons. But when the enemy eventually materialised, it looked too much like ourselves. We had no categories to describe what occurred, no definitions to capture what we had lost, and what we gained in its place.

We had been warned that the dictatorship of the proletariat was always under threat by the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. What we did not anticipate was that the first victim of that conflict, the clearest sign of victory, would be the disappearance of those very terms: *dictatorship*, *proletariat*, *bourgeoisie*. They were no longer part of our vocabulary.

Before the withering away of the state, the language with which to articulate that aspiration itself withered away. Socialism, the society we lived under, was gone. Communism, the society we aspired to create, where class conflict would disappear and the free abilities of each would be fully developed, was gone too. It was gone not only as an ideal, not only as a system of rule, but also as a category of thought.

Only one word was left: *freedom*. It featured in every speech on television, in every slogan barked out in rage on the streets. When freedom finally arrived, it was like a dish served frozen. We chewed little, swallowed fast and remained hungry. Some wondered if we had been given leftovers. Others noted they were simply cold starters.

In the days and months leading up to December 1990, I walked to school, sat in my classroom, played on the street, shared meals with my family, listened to the radio and watched television, just as I had done every other day of my life. The same acts, and the desires and beliefs of those who undertook them, would later be remembered with radically different meanings. We would speak of courageous gestures, timely decisions and mature reactions to challenging circumstances.

We could not bring ourselves to contemplate the possibility of accidents along the way; to imagine plans having gone amiss. Scenarios that would have been considered wild fantasies up to that point later acquired the features of strict necessity. We could not contemplate failure. Failure was the shore from which we sailed: it could not be the port where we arrived.

Yet all I remember from that time is fear, confusion, hesitation. We used the term *freedom* to talk about an ideal that had finally materialised, just as we had done in the past. But things changed so much that it would be difficult to say later if it was the same 'we'.

For half a century, everyone had shared the same structure of cooperation and oppression, occupying social roles that would now all have to be different, while the men and women performing these roles remained the same. Relatives, neighbours, colleagues had both fought and supported one another, cultivated mutual suspicion while developing bonds of trust. The same people who had spied on each other had also provided protective cover. Prison guards had been prisoners; victims had been perpetrators.

I will never know if the working classes who paraded on 1 May to mark Workers' Day were the same who protested in early December. I will never know who I would have been if I had posed different questions, or if my questions had been answered differently, or not answered at all. Things were one way, and then they were another. I was someone, then I became someone else.

This article is based on extracts from Lea Ypi's new book, [Free: Coming of Age at the End of History](#) (Penguin, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Árpád Czapp](#) on [Unsplash](#)
