

## **Theme 4: Troubled Waters: Reclaiming a Common Space?**

### **Presentation: Resolving the Contradictions**

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I think we are going through a period of great contradiction. I'm talking about Albania and especially about Tirana, which is close to the coast, and so not very far from the concerns of this symposium. The contradiction of which I speak is between the natural environment and human demands. This is a very deep contradiction, a very deep gap.

Since the communist regime ended, we in Albania have passed from a barbaric collectivism to a wild individualism. We realised that communism with its propaganda and its way of dealing with humans had made us enemies of the natural environment, because the natural environment that was called “state property” had been perceived as the property of the “enemy”. So, once Albanians were free, we had to face a very dramatic period that saw an assault upon the environment, a very dramatic period of destruction. We lost thousands and thousands of trees, we lost hundreds of thousands of square metres of green space, we lost thousands and thousands of square metres of sand and so on.

But we have to analyse this process, and to understand that it has not been the result of releasing “wild people” from a cage. It is part of a long story of humiliation that disconnected individuals from their own communities and that suffocated any sense of belonging to nature, to the land, to our common space.

Communism has killed the most universal values, transforming, deforming or even totally destroying the sense of those key concepts and words that make of human beings a species capable of living together and sharing emotions and thoughts, of sharing everything that we all share.

So we had to face freedom without having any sense of key words like justice, solidarity, tolerance, peace, respect for the others, pride—a direct result of what we experienced under the totalitarian regime. And for many years, perhaps for a decade, these concepts could have no impact on individuals in terms of helping us protect the environment, or protect the public space.

Creating a new sense of belonging—belonging to the public space, to nature, to our community, to whatever it includes—is a very big effort. And we have to face many obstacles. Fortunately, we are no longer where we were in 1991 when Albania was perceived as the hell from which we all had to escape, and Italy was perceived as the paradise where we all had to arrive. Many Albanians arrived in this paradise and found it far less attractive than the image presented by Berlusconi's television. The return has started.

Now, we have two different Albanias: the country sketched out on maps of privatised property, and the one included in maps of the public space. If we compare those two

maps we realise that the same people act differently in their own space and in the common space. If you look around our country and our cities you will see how much energy individuals have spent to increase the quality of life. You will be amazed if you had any idea of how it was ten years ago. But now we have to start—and we have already started—to build a sense of belonging to the space that is in between “my house” and “the other's house”.

All the garbage, both the material and the spiritual garbage, is in the public space. The private space has remained clean, protected and very well maintained. This is why I strongly believe that this effort should and can start only from the cities, from very simple, small, modest initiatives, from the sidewalks, from a tree, from a basket for garbage.

If I get up in the morning and I see that the garbage basket we fixed the day before is not destroyed, this is a great signal. If I walk in the street and I see that the trees we planted the day before have not been killed, this is another great signal.

I believe that if we take Tirana or Albania as a paradigm of what is happening in all the Balkans, we have to be very concerned. People in the Balkans are far from having a natural or happy contact with their modest public life, with their sidewalk, with the tress on this sidewalk, with the path that brings the children to the school, with the baskets where they have to put the garbage. Once the common space is dignified, we will have revived a link between ethical values and action.

My big concern as the Mayor of a city in the middle of Europe is that I have heard a lot from other Europeans, from Western intellectuals and journalists, about ethical values. Yet I have the terrible feeling that these ethical values are not operational, that they are like a special dish to be placed before gatherings of intellectuals—but that they no longer nourish those beyond. Others are ready to eat a tree because they have nothing to eat, or to destroy everything because they still have not realised that what is not private is common and not the other way round.