Zu den Reiseberichten

2023: Tirana, Albanien

(17.- 23. September 2023)

Does the "West" exist in Albania?

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.

Albania went through a long period of extreme repression and isolation after the Second World War. In 1991, the Stalinist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha collapsed after more than 45 years. At that time, an impoverished and traumatised country was released into a democratic future. The Hoxha period was the opposite of what for me constitutes the ideal of the „West“. I wonder if this ideal could be my motif here? The thing I'm looking for? As a reality - or as a longing, as something that 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 ruthless authoritarian system? How did or does the transformation from there to a society of subsidiarity take place? Is there even a prospect of this? How does one see the sluggish, complacent „West“ from Albania, as it appears in reality? Is there also

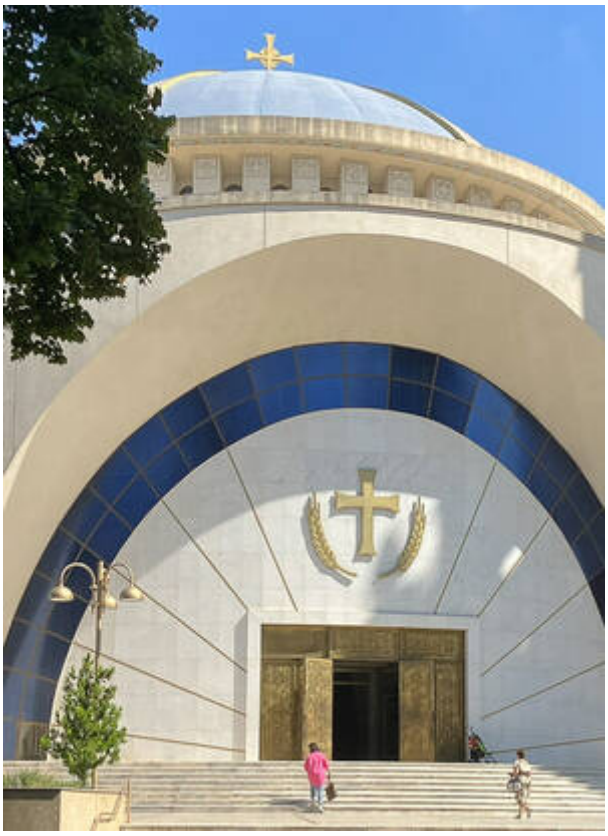
this bitter disillusionment here that I keep encountering in the East of the West? Are people here also beginning to see an alternative to the West in the authoritarianism of China, Russia or Turkey? As the lesser evil to Western hypocrisy?

A sad longing

18 September, breakfast terrace of the Boheme Hotel

During dinner last night, a conversation developed between fellow travellers at the table opposite me. 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 spoke about her country, which she had left. She would like to understand why Poland has become like this, so right-wing. If she understood, maybe she could change it. The two women puzzled this subject together with a kind of perplexed resignation. The German woman, who fled the mental confines of Frankfurt an der Oder as quickly as possible, suspects that it is because of Poland's religious tradition. To the people's attachment to the Catholic Church. Perhaps she is saying that becoming accustomed to submission to a higher authority and its

secular representation blocks the way to oneself.



In the conversation between the two of them, there is a longing for what I want to call the „West“ for this journey. And they have the expectation that people to whom this „West“ is attainably before their eyes would immediately and joyfully set off there.

The Polish woman is stunned that her compatriots behave differently. As if they would deny themselves a hard-won freedom again. As if in an incomprehensible masochistic fit.

I recognise „my West“ in the longing of the two women. But I have a doubt. I find the ideal of the „West“ also includes an understanding of the human desire for order, security and the preservation of traditions. I realise that for me, the „West“ does not only include unconditional freedom from all heteronomy, but also respect for what people consider part of their identity. Or rather: the feeling of being bound to something is also an aspect of Western freedom

The transformation of city and state - a first contact

18 September, Tirana

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 newly founded. One of Albania's big problems is emigration. How can it be prevented without people being forced 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 not have the feeling that everything will remain as it is and that their forbearance will be bought with almoses.

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 to us their tasks on the front line 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. Their own people may not believe in it yet, but they still want to convince the European Union that Albania is on its way to becoming a model European country. The EU's requirements for the candidate country are sharp, 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 ancient country and an ancient people with an ancient language and culture. It all 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 ancestral tradition for what is right, permeates the attitude to life, the relationship between people, the world and society. In some parts of the country more strongly, in others less so. When the state was weak or became an enemy, people could fall back on it. Blood feud is part of it, but also (and even more so) hospitality. Albania is the only country in Europe where more Jews lived after the Second World War than before. Jews were hidden and protected here, not turned away and handed over.

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.

EU Integration

19 September, Tirana, House of Parliamentary Administration

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. At the political level, but also with many concrete development projects, e.g. in schools and training or in accompanying migration and return migration. This help is very welcome.

Fatos, post-democracy and the Hoxha era

19 September, in the mountains outside Tirana

But in the evening, Fatos Lubonja, a journalist, author and human rights activist who survived over 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 busy 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, people 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.

Interlude: Illyria

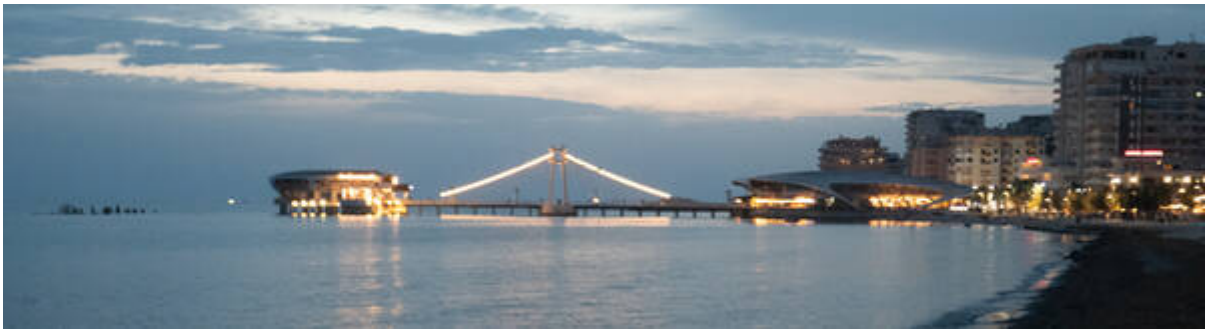
20 September, a day tour by bus

Our tour group takes a day of historical and scenic sightseeing between the fortress of Berat and the old port city of Durres.

In Illyria, where great cities and empires existed since ancient times, tourism is now moving in with a vengeance. Religions came and went, never causing fatal problems here, not even today. As if there were a deeper and more original identity. Perhaps the Albanian language? It was already ancient in antiquity and is considered one of the three independent branches of the Indo-European language family, together with Ancient Greek and Armenian.

History since antiquity is tangible everywhere, not only next to the newly discovered amphitheatre in Durres. It's as if you only have to push aside some of the rubble of time above it with your foot. Great names fall. Caesar fought a battle against Pompey here, Constantine the Great came from here. Onufri created his stylistic icons with the incomparable red here.

On the magnificent promenade of Durres, one large hotel after the other, sometimes with half-finished concrete floors, looks out at the moon over the Adriatic. Our Turkish travel companion feels „just like in Antalya“, while we eat fish and afterwards try to divide the collective bill between us. For the Albanian wine has also made us stagger, in the midst of all the beauty and memories.



Then it's back to Tirana. On the periphery of the city are the industrial areas. Slowly, the focus of the Albanian economy shifted from agriculture to industry and from there to services in industry and real estate. After 1991, when Albania's difficult transformation towards a democracy also began. Private property had not existed during the Hoxha era. Tirana is characterised by illegal, but long-tolerated, construction right up to the outskirts. Especially after 2001, many second-born sons moved from the countryside to Tirana and built a place for themselves somewhere. In this way, the families in the countryside were able to support themselves. It was only later that the ownership of the expropriated properties from communism was largely clarified again. One can imagine what a complicated and huge task that was.

Today, many of the young men are abroad, but like then, they provide for their families at home. Remittances from abroad are a big economic factor in Albania.

Vocational School

21 September, Kamza

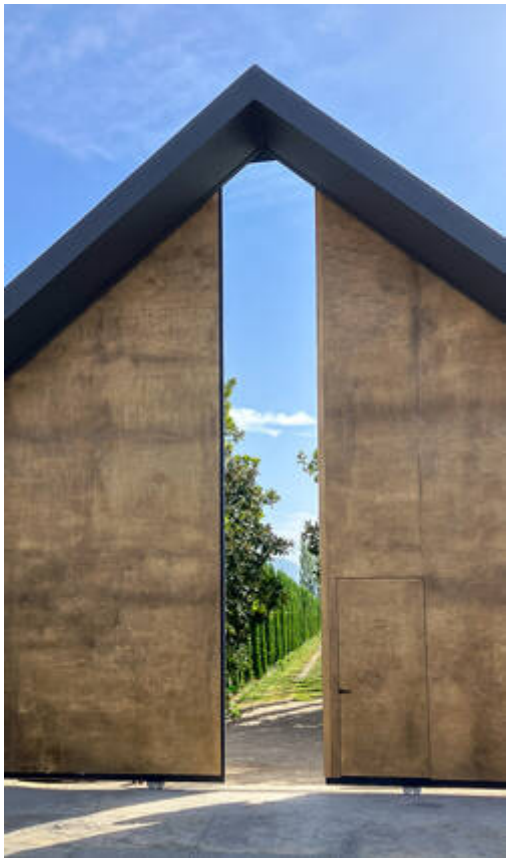
1500 students study at the vocational school in Kamza/Tirana. In the school year 21/22, 97% completed the highest qualification after 4 years: the baccalaureate and the diploma of vocational training. The school is proud that it is involved in developing a middle class. This is how the young headmistress explains it to us. No, not much has remained of the communist school system, even though not everything was bad back then. For example, the further training of teachers would have played a large and self-evident role.

Today, school is free of charge for all Albanians, but only a few schools are as well equipped as this one. Many Albanian families are nevertheless too poor to finance their children's education, even with the numerous scholarships. Young people who are trained in agriculture here automatically receive the equivalent of €70 per month, all girls €35. The number of school enrolments is declining overall in Albania. On the one hand, families today have fewer children than in the past - but mainly because of the rampant emigration of entire families.

„What would help your school?“ we ask the headmistress. For a moment, a sharpness creeps into her friendly eyes: „If Germany would stop poaching Albanian workers so aggressively.“ We are then allowed to visit some classes and meet friendly, self-confident young people who do not show the big question marks about their future.

The Uka farm

21 September, Laknas



In 1996, the entomologist Rexhep Uka, who resigned as Minister of Agriculture, founded a radically ecological farm near Tirana with his son Flori. We meet Flori Uka on a guided tour of the premises and learn a lot about his philosophy of natural agriculture. He advocates it with prophetic zeal. Since

2006, the Uka farm has also been producing a wine that is attracting international attention. The Ceruja grape, which grows on mulberry trees, is according to him the original form of European wine and has been vinified in Albania for 4000 years. We drink and eat from the really delicious products in the farm restaurant.

Nevertheless, the strongest impression that remains for me from this visit is that of a solitary experiment. I find Flori's comments interesting and wonder what other solitary blossoms may have emerged in the decade of dramatic and chaotic turmoil after the fall of the dictatorship. Do they point to the future? Or are they just leftover curiosities?

The European Commission Representation in Albania

21 September, Tirana (Innospace)

There could hardly be a greater contrast to the meeting with Flori, the self-assured visionary, than the cool sobriety of the representative from the 70-member delegation of the EU Commission in Albania whom we meet afterwards.

Albania applied to join the EU in 2009, achieved candidate status in 2014 and has been negotiating since 2022. There is a 90-97% approval rate among the population; they would even rather join the United States of America, but that would not be possible. Together with other countries of the Western Balkans, the accession process was slow, everything is intertwined and complicated, but now the geopolitical situation has changed. The Commission and the Council of the EU have expressed themselves positively, and so have all 27 governments of the current member states. Nevertheless, it will still take a long time, probably 10 years. Yes, the population in Albania is frustrated and has no more patience. Emigration is high and some see this as a kind of colonialist exploitation of Albania by the rich countries in the EU. But the pervasive corruption in Albania is the real problem for the country and for the accession process, not the interests and demands of the EU.

EU Commission staff in Albania report to Brussels on the progress of Albania's alignment with EU structures. From the Commission's point of view, the judicial reform is a revolution. Rarely has the Commission been so involved in an accession country as in Albania and with this reform. The processes for appointing judges and prosecutors have been accompanied by EU observers and depoliticised. There is now also a new special prosecutor's office, which will enable the judiciary to control itself in the future. However, who will control the controllers? One does not expect that everything will suddenly be fine now. Only time will tell whether this new opportunity for the judiciary will lead to a lasting recovery of Albanian public institutions.

Civil Society in Albania

21 September, Tirana (Innospace)

An expert on the NGO scene in Albania tells us: „In democracy, civil society is the channel between the citizens and the government. Both serve the public, whereas the government is elected and the civil society actors derive their legitimacy from the engagement of the citizenry“. Nominally, there are no obstacles for non-governmental organisations in Albania. There are many hundreds of them and there is also a lot of money from donors. The biggest of these would be the EU and countries like Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Norway or the USA.

But: an NGO that does not agree with the government has a very hard time in Albania. It could not make itself visible because the media did not report on it (except negatively). It would be overwhelmed with administrative and licensing procedures and, if that did not help, it would be covered with lawsuits. In Albanian society, moreover, there is no trust in institutions, not even in „independent“ ones. Under Stalinist communism, people learned that they could not even trust their own parents.

Thus, any real movement of civil society in Albania is currently nipped in the bud: From the very beginning, its actors have to make an enormous effort, they are not seen or supported by the citizenry and they have no successes, only obstacles in their way. Nevertheless, there would always be idealistic projects, but the vast majority of their operators would eventually tire and give up. Or they would have to watch their NGO being replaced by a GONGO, a „governmental non-governmental organisation“ with the same issues - but without any criticism of the government.

Alba Broika, who tells us this, nevertheless seems unbroken and pugnacious. She impresses our whole travel group very much with this, after we had already admired her clear analyses and descriptions before.

The Vjosa Campaign

22 September, Tirana (Innospace)

On the last day before our departure, we learn about a very successful project from civil society. Olsi Nica from ECO Albania describes to us how it was possible to save the river Vjosa from being transformed from the longest free-flowing river in Europe into another tamed and species-poor body of water by 45 dams. The planned dams would not have produced much electricity. Albania's demand is small anyway, but its renewable energy resources are rich. In a country with 300 days of sunshine, solar power has not been developed much so far - because more money can be moved and earned with large construction projects. That is what the dams to be built were really about, not energy or any other benefit to society. A citizens' movement was able to prevent the dams because they were pointless and harmful to nature and society. This is very remarkable in Albania, because these projects were very much in the interest of the corrupt structures of the country. Olsi Nica says he has no patent remedy, but is happy to at least list the ingredients for the success of this campaign:

- Collection of data. It was proven how great the species richness of the river is and that the construction of the dams is economically unnecessary or even harmful for Albania.
- This data was communicated through many channels in Albania and abroad.
- Many international researchers joined the project.
- There was an accompanying emotional campaign by artists, both from the river basin and Hollywood stars.
- Lobbying of European institutions (Parliament and Commission) on the basis of conservation conventions. This is how the EU accession negotiations became a lever for the Vjosa campaign.
- Court cases. For the first time in the history of Albania, the government was not only accused by a local group, but was also convicted by a court.
- There was media support through extensive press work.

Today, lawyers and a management team are continuing the project. They will make the won „National Park of the River Vjosa“ a serious and tangible reality. Along the way, a Europe-wide network of researchers has been established in many cooperative ventures, which will continue to exist. In the meantime, the Albanian state is taking the lead among those who have supposedly always wanted and initiated this wonderful national park. In reality, the government and industry have been forced by civil society to rethink, and therein lies a moment of hope for the people of Albania. Even if it seems to be completely lonely, this role model.

Freedom of the media in Albania

22 September, Tirana (Innospace)

Besar Likmeta of BIRN Albania, an NGO specialising in investigative reporting and media monitoring, concludes by painting a bleak picture of the realities in Albania.

There are laws to protect the freedom of the press, but they are not respected. Journalists who become a problem lose their jobs and possibly their families lose theirs too. They receive no effective help from anyone, not even from their colleagues or civil society.

The seemingly diverse media are in reality monopolised by two oligarch families. What is reported is what brings money or otherwise supports the interests of the oligarchs. The booming online media are even worse where they are important. Maybe Meta (Facebook and Instagram) in Dublin checks some net entries for false reports and hate speech - but hardly anyone there speaks Albanian. Even if something Albanian were deleted, it would take far too long. Content from troll factories therefore dominates social media in Albania without hindrance.

The public is not used to a free media; under communism, the media were purely an instrument of propaganda. They are still that way today, but due to inexperience, only a few people notice that. For example, that there are no journalistic reports on sensitive issues, but only PR products that sound the same across all platforms.

Prime Minister Rama threatened a journalist with re-education at a press conference, but that was no scandal in Albania, only outside. If anything, foreign media are not interested in Albania, which is why they cannot counterbalance it.

Although the EU delegations wrote reports on the process of aligning Albanian legislation with EU standards, they did not report on the implementation of these laws. After all, when the government had tried to enact „ethical“ guidelines for journalism (as in Poland or Hungary), this had been prevented by appealing to the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe.

But the journalist does not accept the argument that the reform of the judiciary might make the laws more effective in the future. Until a few years ago, people believed that Albania had good journalists but bad structures. People thought they were in a transitional period from a totalitarian state to democracy. But today it is clear that the cancer cells are everywhere and spread. You can't cure the patient in one place and hope that the others will heal later. Society is in transition, not to democracy, but to oligarchy. Even if the European states and governments try to sell it differently.

„Wouldn't there still be the possibility of rays of hope somewhere?“ we try a few questions from the tour group. His answer is always short: „No“.

A voice in a café

23 September, Tirana

There are many cafés in Tirana, and the way of life and friendliness of the people here is such that I immediately feel comfortable and invited. Doris and I still have some time before we have to go to the airport, and we make a chance acquaintance in a café.

The woman is and remains a civil society, she explains. Since her children were small, the woman has taken them to every demonstration, even though it never helped. Yes, she thinks the success of the Vjosa campaign is great, but far too little has happened in the 30 years since the end of the

dictatorship. Albania is a country that has everything! She lists a long list of raw materials, sun, landscape, history, wonderful people. Albania should be rich and independent like Switzerland! But instead, after communism, everything was destroyed and nothing was rebuilt. No industry (which once existed), the same with agriculture. Only huge buildings were built all over the country, which nobody needed. It was all money laundering, nothing constructive.

Conclusion: and "the West"?

23 September, on the return journey

I saw Fatos Lubonja's pessimism repeated by other people on this trip to Albania. Trust in public institutions has been used up or never existed. Expectations of democracy are low; for Fatos, I believe, they are nothing more than nostalgic platitudes. Mere fairy tales in a global social reality that has left „democracy“ far behind. A hopelessness has spread through Albania. A hopelessness that is not downhearted, however. A cheerful fatalism that does not reproach the West, because: „The rich people in the West are actually no better off, they just don't know it yet“.

Returning to my initial question, I consider how my idea of the West now relates to Albania:

There is a desire here for the Western subsidiary society, the ideal of rule from below - and a readiness for it. It has become widespread to give up hope for it. Far, but not everywhere. I want to believe, together with some people in Albania, in the possible long-term success of judicial reform. I want to believe that the recipe of the Vjosa campaign can be transferred to other civil society projects. During my visit to Brussels this year, I believe I saw that the EU has a will and a force. A force that Albania can rely on and align itself with. Even though I now understand better how this reliance puts human patience to an over-harsh test. I think we, who have the West as a self-evident possession, should move. We should reach out to the people in the East of the West and take an interest in them. In doing so, we can give them hope, and we can perhaps prevent what many here believe from becoming true: that we ourselves have long since lost the West and that it is only an inert illusion.

An outlook: the Vjosa

25 September, Mainz

In many meanders the river winds its way through Albania's newly emerging national park. 70 species of fish are and remain native here, that's 30% of those that exist at all in Europe's freshwaters. The molluscs, the molluscs, even account for 70%. 150 different species live in the Vjosa. In the course of the Vjosa campaign, new insect species were discovered time and again by the international researchers. Species that were not known at all before. You can find a lot of information about them at www.balkanrivers.net.

I want to let the Vjosa flow through my painting film „The East of the West“. Because it is a proud sign of how the „East of the West“ has achieved something wonderful together with the „West of the West“.

Zu den Reiseberichten

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