



Linda Rama : Freedom is my power!

By Anila Basha

Between Family, Work and Albania's Future

Let’s begin with something simple and personal: How does a typical day start for you? Is it Edi who wakes up Linda, or Linda who wakes up Edi? Or perhaps it is Zaho who wakes you both? What does an ordinary day look like, away from the public eye?

So I’m the one who wakes everyone now, ever since Zaho stopped being the baby who used to wake us before dawn. Now he’s at the age when parting from sleep is difficult, despite all the pampering from me and Edi. During holidays, Zaho wakes up with the question, “Mom, what am I going to do today?”. While during school days, waking up is preceded by the plea, “Please, let me sleep five more minutes, just five more minutes”. And he reaches out his hands toward me, eyes still closed, to take me with him into those five minutes. As for me, to tell the truth, I never refuse those five minutes with him, even if we really are very late for school. I remember when we were his age, we would make the same repeated plea to our parents when they woke us up—to stay just five minutes more. A golden five minutes to part peacefully with the night, with sleep, with the caressing feeling that the warmth of the bed gives you. And to begin the day peacefully too, without commands. The rest is generally a morning routine, but still rhythmic for me — having to manage everything on the morning to-do list of the lady of the house, celebrating, when I can, the start of the day with the aroma of a quick coffee with Edi, and leaving the house on time with Zaho so as not to get stuck in the line of cars strung together on the road to school.

How do you and the Prime Minister balance family life with political life? Do you talk about politics during dinner, or do you try to keep the family table free from matters of power?

You’re asking me to describe the 24 hours of our daily life over the 12 years of Edi’s work as Prime Minister, and your question sounds so calm, so undisturbed, even relaxing, that I almost feel sorry to disrupt and complicate it with the exact opposite of those feelings. Nevertheless, to begin with, I can say that under our roof there are not two separate lives—one family life for all of us, and one political life for Edi. There is only one. Naturally, each of us does our own daily work, but without ever forgetting for a moment that Edi is the Prime Minister—meaning he is in a position that inevitably places a burden on his shoulders, conditions his steps, and brings a very particular kind of worry, unspoken in both mind and heart. It may seem strange to you, but Edi’s position, beyond Edi himself, creates these conditions and concerns especially for me and the children, which come on top of the normal burdens a person has in their ordinary life. And, don’t forget, I have lived through both.

Before becoming the wife of the Prime Minister, you had - and still have - a clear professional identity as an academic, economist, and contributor to civil society. How do you preserve that identity both publicly and personally?

By refusing, from the very first day of Edi's time in power and on every day of his premiership, to allow my civic essence, my professional self, and my way of living—both inside and outside the home—to be influenced by my husband's rise to the top, I have maintained, since that day and every day thereafter, a safe, hygienic distance from power. It's a term I loved from the very moment I first heard it long ago from Arben Xhaferri. I have thus resisted every attempt to consider me the antechamber to Edi's office and have faced down every misunderstanding when acquaintances or strangers addressed me as a whisperer in his ear.

I have preserved my own rituals—like the spot where, for 26 years, I have had my morning coffee before going up to the same office—as well as my close and distant connections, keeping alive human contact and my sensitivity and concern for the common good. I have done my work each day with the same seriousness, dedication, and professional passion. Working in economics and public policy, having a sensitivity for vulnerable groups and rights, and at the same time being married to the Prime Minister is not easy at all; nor is it easy to overcome doubts or face prejudice and judgment, which have the power to unsettle you—especially because, in the vast majority of cases, they have nothing to do with you personally but with the stereotype of the Prime Minister's wife, a stereotype so strong that sometimes you are astonished to see even someone who has known you for years misunderstand you to an unbelievable degree. But at the same time, it is also an opportunity to prove yourself and to live in an extraordinary dimension.

Just before the campaign for the May 11 elections began, you became the subject of a series of public accusations from the opposition. Letters were sent to international partners requesting your removal from certain projects in which you are involved. Did this campaign trouble you? Did you receive any reaction from international partners? Had you anticipated being in the spotlight in this way?

A letter—or sorry, to be precise, a political edict of shame—was sent by the men and, unfortunately, also the women MPs of the Democratic Party's parliamentary group to international institutions that support Albania. This edict, which in fact confirmed my professional abilities by stating that “we do not question Mrs. Rama's professional capacities,” asked the internationals not to engage me in their projects or, in other words, to fire me, solely because I was the Prime Minister's wife. I say “fire me” because neither I nor my office have ever been financed by even a single cent from the Albanian state budget. So these men and women were asking international institutions to arbitrarily deny me the right to do the work I have been doing with them since 1999, when I left—or, more precisely, when I was told I was no longer needed as—a servant of the Albanian state.

At first, I found it very strange that the highest institutional representation of the opposition, on the eve of an election campaign, had gathered all its strength and signatures in order to remove me from my job—not Edi. That is to say, at that pre-election moment, for the opposition, the power to be fought was not Edi and his team, but me and my research.

I believe that letter was, first and foremost, the clearest expression of the collective desperation of Edi's opponents, who, after 12 years of failed attempts to find even a single point of contact—of any kind—between me and Edi's political power, ended up launching

a frontal public attack against my only power: my professional work.

That edict was also an act of exhaustion by someone who had tried to weave thousands of malicious words about our family but could not, in the thousands of pages of my published studies over the years, find a single figure or argument that could cast even the slightest doubt on the purpose, seriousness, or quality of my professional practice, or on my professional integrity toward the institutions I have worked with for more than 25 years.

The edict—signed like those roll-call lists we used to sign when picking up green uniforms and wooden rifles—is a screaming testimony to the hypocrisy (I believe it will remain in the annals of Albanian parliamentarism) of all those MPs who vote for and commit to implementing every human rights convention and other documents tied to democratic principles, yet, without shame, give themselves and their party the right to strip someone of their right to work—a job built through their own effort and sweat.

This edict, which astonished professionals and international institutions alike, was drafted on the threshold of the election campaign, when MPs' insecurity about their place on the candidate list outweighed their loyalty to democratic principles or international conventions. Their signatures were even more pitiful than those of false witnesses in the cursed times when failing the loyalty test to the party would cost you your head—except this time, their loyalty test had nothing to do with their head, but with their seat in the next parliament. Each and every one of them, man or woman, by signing to execute my right to work in order to preserve their own seat, proved they would be willing to execute anyone required of them in the name of loyalty to that seat. The university-lecturer husband, the

dream of the well-educated child, the sister's work contract as a consultant with the EU, the World Bank, EBRD, or UN—all would officially be sacrificed by them for the seat. Even re-burying in the grave a persecuted grandfather through the letters of the malicious, or exiling a brother from his job in a public institution, could be naturally signed away for that seat.

The political elections are now over, the winning MPs from the Democratic Party's closed and open lists have been announced, but for me, the MPs who secured their seat by signing that political edict of shame are—and will remain—self-condemned as losers.

Meanwhile, international institutions responded publicly, clarifying that transparency, non-discrimination, open competition, professionalism, integrity, and independence are the criteria for selecting their collaborators. Men and women, well-known figures in the media and civil society, also reacted publicly, calling the Democratic Party parliamentary group's attack on me absurd and unjust.

You asked if this campaign troubled me. Not at all. I had done everything in my power with patience to safeguard my profession and my freedom. When that letter was published in the media, I knew clearly that I had to wait for others to do their part. And they did, giving me the sense of triumph that comes from knowledge, devoted work, independence and professional integrity, the freedom to make your own choices, and the courage to be direct and confront without petty calculations or compromises. This is the great power of ordinary people who, by believing in themselves, their profession, and their work, provoke and challenge politics and its power with their freedom.

Since the 1990s, Albania has had several prime ministers, and with them, spouses who have taken on different public roles. Mrs. Liri Berisha has been active in social causes. Rexhina Nano, and later Xhoana Nano, as well. You too have built a distinct public profile. Do you think the role of the Prime Minister’s spouse has changed over the years? And should it change further?

For the Prime Minister’s spouse, there is no role defined in the laws or regulations of the Albanian state, except for her presence on a few protocol occasions. It has always been this way. For this reason, any public engagement by the spouse, as such, is a personal choice. There is no tradition, no guidebook, nor any institutional assistance for it. It is a personal choice that is not learned but discovered — through effort and experience, little by little, and with much patience, while avoiding “mined” terrain. But when there is no “copy” or ready-made model to replicate, it becomes more natural to convey who you are, striving to embody what you believe in and to contribute with what comes most naturally to you.

In these three and a half decades, the public profile that prime ministers’ spouses have chosen and cultivated has been different in each case. I think what matters is that the Prime Minister’s spouse’s profile should be complementary to her husband’s in his public role, without becoming excessive or intrusive in people’s everyday lives.

You are not a figure who appears often in the media or on social networks. It is difficult to find a photo of you with your grandson, or with your family in intimate moments. Why have you chosen this discretion? Is it protection, philosophy, or something else?

Avi now also has a sister named Rui, my granddaughter who has just turned four months old. Zaho, Avi, and Rui are three little birds who, when we are together, surround us with an extraordinary variety of voices and sounds—cries and laughter, quarrels, teasing, and childlike embraces. Meanwhile, each of us keeps our family’s intimate moments for ourselves; otherwise, they would not be called intimate. Since childhood, I have had a strong instinct not to allow my private territory to be touched, and in the same way, I have respected that territory in others. Privacy is a particular kind of taste that belongs only to you; it is respect for your life, but also for another’s life, for your time and theirs. That space is your exclusive domain.

Mrs. Brigitte Macron, with whom you spent time during the official visit of the Macrons to Tirana, has said that “she does not wish to be invisible, even though she has no institutional role.” Do you believe that the spouses of political leaders should have a stronger public voice?

Brigitte is a very special woman, and I feel fortunate that circumstances have allowed me to meet her and spend time with her. Brigitte possesses the power to be the First Lady in any space she enters—not simply because she is the First Lady of France, but because it is HER. With elegance, care, and attention to everyone around her, she succeeds brilliantly in sharing the great concerns of the world but meantime the little but meaningful joys of life. During her official visit three months ago to Albania, alongside President Macron, Brigitte held a conversation with students from the francophone section of “Asim Vokshi”

High School in Tirana and with several students from Korça. There, I saw how the First Lady of France could effortlessly transform into the passionate teacher, speaking to students about the importance of focusing on school and not allowing daily problems, emotional challenges, or romantic relationships to distract them from their studies. I saw how she encouraged them to freely write down their thoughts, concerns, or daily events immediately after they happen—as a healthy way to process feelings and restore emotional balance. I saw how difficult it was for the students to end their conversation with Brigitte about French literature and the great French authors. And then, I saw how, at the end, the First Lady of France reappeared in the conversation, complimenting and expressing her admiration for the students’ level of knowledge and seriousness toward their studies, even comparing them with their peers in France. Brigitte Macron is a strong and challenging woman who, with her distinctive originality, has the ability to provoke and inspire.

I’d like to focus on this second group of questions, about the elections and post-election period. How did you perceive the Socialist Party’s victory? Did you expect it to happen this way?

Parliamentary elections are the most important political moment for assessing the work of the past four years and the most significant expression of trust for the next four years. Of course, they are an important moment for Edi, but they are undoubtedly just as important for me and for our children. I am pleased that Edi regained the trust of the majority, and I hope that it will be deserved every single day of his mandate.

From the position of a civil society expert, I believe you have also followed the major debate in the media — (unlike Edi, because of the nature of your work you read and listen to the news) — regarding the Prime Minister’s intervention in the competencies of local government. Specifically, the blanket request for the resignation of directors in municipalities, at a time when this is the prerogative of the mayors. Do you have any comment on this?

I have followed this development, which in fact is unusual precisely for the reason you articulate — the imposition of central executive authority on the executive authority of several large municipalities. From what has been explained, this development stems precisely from the level of trust earned in the elections and from citizens’ expectations for a new approach, including in relation to public space. But perhaps the failure to exercise some of the local government’s jurisdictional competencies in a timely or proper manner, at a time when the challenges of big cities have grown even greater, has brought to the agenda the need for a complete shake-up in support of sustainable urban development. Of course, I cannot know all the arguments and counterarguments surrounding this development. What I can say is that the performance of local government is a daily gain or cost for citizens — a determinant of improved or diminished quality of life. What is not working in the mechanisms of implementation, control, and accountability in our municipalities needs to be understood. And for an accurate understanding, the first to speak should be the municipalities themselves, a number of agencies connected to them, and the many civil society organizations that for three decades have supported municipalities. The relevant ministries should speak as well, and of course, the citizens’ elected representatives in parliament. I don’t know if you have sought their opinion, but I do know that none of them can evade their functional and civic responsibility for local issues. Meantime, we need to accelerate the local agenda for smart development, which

is the golden opportunity for more efficient services. But can municipalities themselves achieve their own smart development? Based on the conclusions of a study conducted a few years ago on municipal finances and the quality of services in the country's municipalities, I can say that — despite the Municipality of Tirana, which had the means to be a leader in certain aspects — the other municipalities did not have such means. Perhaps this has changed and Tirana is no longer the only one, but that does not alter the fact that municipalities need support. Naturally, with the premise that they themselves are interested and willing to move in this direction.

- **Aren't these people, whatever they may be, the very ones who contributed significantly to the Socialist Party's victory with 83 seats? Should they have been dismissed in this way? In disgrace?**

A public official is paid by all of us to serve the public, not the political activism and ambitions of parties, isn't that so?! In my view, what is truly shameful is to use one's contribution to a winning party as an argument for not standing at attention before the law and the citizen in one's official capacity — or, even worse, for harming your own city and community by sleeping on the job, by closing your eyes to violations of the law.

I'll start with Theth, but the "Urban Renaissance 2.0" is causing no small amount of trauma — right at the peak of the season. Construction there has always existed, or at least in the last ten years it has mushroomed under the eyes and watch of every administrator in the public administration. Now, tourists are complaining about the chaos; businesses are complaining about the impact on their work; and people are feeling panic. Have you sensed this? Was an immediate demolition reform the right measure, or should the reform have come naturally, gradually, and without so much pain?

Demolishing illegal buildings is not a reform. It is a painful measure, or corrective action. A reform, on the other hand, is more than a single act — and you can ask the government what it has in mind with a second phase of implementing the Urban Renaissance program. Allowing illegal construction or illegal activity to take place, and failing to prevent it in time, is a punishable offense under the law for any public official who commits it — even though the phenomenon cannot be explained by this factor alone.

It is well known that taxpayers pay public officials to serve and guide citizens in the right direction, not to trap them by demanding bribes or being seduced by the bribes offered by those citizens. At the same time, however, the fact that such officials unfortunately exist does not justify a citizen breaking the law, especially when other citizens before them have suffered the consequences of their own illegal constructions.

Illegal construction is a trauma we are still enduring even after 35 years, but it is the duty of the state to find a way to close this chapter once and for all.

Mrs. Rama, I believe you have also followed the recent debate between Bardha and Muçi, which went viral online as a symbol of what is really happening in the country. Many people mocked the tax official in Saranda and felt sympathy for Bardha’s pleas for survival. Meanwhile, Adri Nurellari, in his analysis published in the last issue of Newsbomb.al, writes: “A fiscal system like ours, which favors luxury over production, is no longer a competitive system, but a clientelist one.” He points out that the “Big” players are privileged, while the “small” ones like Bardha are penalized. As an economist — do you feel this concern? Do you share this perception of the current fiscal system and the way small players are treated today in the Albanian economy? The farmer, the fisherman, the small business owner with a roadside stall — in contrast to the large, unauthorized towers or those businessmen with special status and incentives...

Let’s try to take these one by one. First, let’s set aside, for a moment, comments about specific individuals and instead build the logic of the debate between the official inspector and the commercial operator. That exchange reminded me of my childhood, when my brother and I would spend three to four weeks of our summer holidays in Kruja, at our grandparents’ house. Some of my mother’s cousins were my age. With them, I would spend part of my time picking chamomile and mallow flowers. Many women would go to Mount Kruja to gather sage and would sustain their family economies partly through the income from selling it. The chamomile and mallow I gathered I would spread out in the yard on a sheet to dry. At the end of the holidays, I would put the dried flowers in a bag and take them to a collection point for medicinal plants located in an area known as “Xim Zeneli.” There, they would weigh them and give me the money I had earned in exchange. It wasn’t much, but enough to feel the satisfaction of having worked — and to bring home some small symbolic gift for my parents or my little sister.

From the collection point, the dried plants would follow the processing and trading chain, either to the domestic market or for export. In other words, anyone who gathers medicinal plants from the mountains or fields, fishes in the sea, collects strawberry tree fruits and berries — and especially anyone producing eggs from their own chicken coop, milk and meat from their own livestock — can consume them themselves. But if they choose to sell them to others, then they must be registered, licensed, authorized, and inspected by the state — in order to protect the consumer. This is called food safety, and it is one of the most important functions of the state.

Returning to the specific case you mention: the inspector has a duty to verify the source of supply for any food product being sold, and the only way to do that is through invoices — between the supplying business, which is also the guarantor of quality, and the vendor. In this specific case, the discussion about food safety is far more important than simply the discussion about tax obligations. And when it comes to food safety, we should all be very serious in showing solidarity as consumers, because it concerns our health — and that of our children and our parents. Even more so now, as tourism is becoming an industry, which means that over the course of a year, we will no longer be 2.5 million consumers, but 12.5 million — or even more. We are already late in addressing this issue, and if we continue like this, the long-term consequences for both individuals and the economy will be serious.

Let’s move on to the next part of your question, in which you have identified two main concerns.

First, you describe Albania’s fiscal system — and I’ll quote your own words — as “a fiscal system that favors luxury over production, a system that is no longer competitive, but clientelist, one that privileges the ‘Big’ players while penalizing the ‘small’ ones.” This conclusion is quite extreme, and since we are speaking about the fiscal system, let us

refer to the most recent reports from the EU on Albania's progress and from the IMF staff — two institutions that have monitored us since the early 1990s. They note that since 2016, Albania has managed its public finances through an approved fiscal rule, fiscal performance has improved significantly, the fiscal rule has been implemented, and prudent fiscal policies have contributed to a marked reduction in public debt. So, the alarm sounded in your magazine about Albania's fiscal system does not appear to be a source of concern for either the EU or the IMF.

The second concern relates to the differentiated treatment of economic actors by the tax administration — and again, I quote you — “large economic players with special status, builders of huge unauthorized towers, compared to the small ones: the farmer, the fisherman, the roadside vendor.”

Yes, this is a valid concern. There are indeed problems with differentiated tax policies and, in particular, with tax administration practices. That is why these reports recommend reducing informality in general, as well as carefully reviewing reduced tax rates in sectors like tourism, tax exemptions for encouraging strategic investments, exemptions for certain business categories, and other such measures — because they create conditions for informality, unfair competition, and corruption among tax officials.

The continuous pressure that we must all exert on the state — with businesses themselves at the forefront — to bring its daily dealings with citizens and businesses into proper alignment is essential. Only in this way can we have a healthy economy, a motivating climate for investment, and social peace and justice. More importantly, only then will what we teach and demand from our children at school be the same as what they hear and learn at home.

High-level visits, summits in Tirana, two visits by President Macron, the anticipated arrival of President Trump for the NATO summit... We are witnessing what many would call a golden moment for Albania on the international stage. In your view, is this the result of circumstances, leadership, or because we have genuinely worked very well as a state?

Yes, it is true that the past few years have been very good years for Albania — years that have freed us from fears and diminished the complexes of Albanians both here and abroad, making us all feel good about ourselves. I believe there is no doubt that the credit belongs to Edi's clear vision, his inspiring, encouraging, persistent, and transformative leadership, as well as to the extraordinary work of Albanians to make Albania livable, visitable, marketable, and capable of hosting and organizing, with dignity, international events — culminating in 2027, when we will host the NATO summit.

If our work has been so successful, why then are Albanians still leaving the country?

I believe that the reasons for emigration are not solely economic. They are also tied to other cultural, social, community, and gender-related factors — in other words, to psycho-social factors as well. Improving one's income is an individual effort, whereas addressing everything related to our cultural, social, and community heritage — as well as human relationships — requires work both with oneself and with others.

The individual still faces pressure from family, relatives, and community — and, without doubt, the influence of social media today is significant. There is also pressure from the news cycle and from harsh political rhetoric. Freeing the individual from this pressure remains an important mission for families, schools, the media, institutions, and civil society. We also need to build a more meaningful and honest conversation with young people.

We must listen to them and support them. Building a genuine dialogue with them is of great importance for the future.

Prime Minister Edi Rama kneeling in front of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has happened more than once. It has attracted international media attention. How did you perceive it yourself, as Edi’s wife?

 This is the same Edi who goes to meetings with President Macron or to other important gatherings wearing white sneakers; the same Edi who, on one occasion, acted as the conductor for the EU leaders before the camera clicked for the family photo somewhere in Brussels; the same Edi who does not hesitate to take a tray and serve guests at the end of a cultural event at COD. Edi is atypical — and his atypicality cannot help but attract the attention of the international media, which live off the news cycle. Personally, from an artistic perspective, I rather liked seeing Edi appear shorter than Giorgia Meloni.

Those of us working in the media often encounter the harsh realities of violence against women. Many argue that its roots lie in cultural norms, limited access to education, and the deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions inherited over generations. In your view, what are the most pressing challenges women face today in Albania?

 All of the things you just mentioned — along with women’s still-high economic dependency and the generational clash, especially in suburban and rural communities.

Is there a particular woman - whether Albanian or international - who has profoundly inspired you and could serve as a model?

 As we speak, I have three close friends who are battling cancer. My cousin, a student, is also in this fight. I also have friends who are under great life pressures due to unfortunate life circumstances. And there are many, many more in similar conditions across Albania. The strength, courage, and ability to mobilize the best of themselves, while also saving the feelings and lives of those around them, is sublime and admirable. Equally sublime and admirable is my mother’s tireless dedication to my father and to us, and my father’s dignity in living with his health challenges. I admire them, and I admire all those who dedicate themselves daily to children with special needs, who care for the elderly, who put themselves second in order to help others. They remain my daily models and inspiration.

Hillary Clinton often stressed that women should not have to choose between ambition and family. Do you still feel that pressure in Albanian society?

 Yes, of course I feel it. But I also see more and more girls and women today who are managing to find a reasonable balance between career, family, and life.

If you were free to launch a project in the country — entirely your own, personal, and far from politics — what would it be? Where would you focus? Or perhaps a mission of your own?

 Education. I find education fascinating — as both the greatest beneficiary and the most challenged sector in the era we live in.