



Linda Rama, the Hygienic Distance from the Power of Evil and the Absence of Consciousness

By Klevis Hoxhaj, February 2023

1. Why did it take time for Linda to frame herself in a dimension that encompasses both her past and present?

My marriage to Edi in 2010 added a new dimension to my life, that of the spouse of the Tirana Mayor and, at the time, also chair of the opposition. It suffices to visit my window, linda.al, and click on my first interview on Top Story, on a Thursday of my wedding week, and the other interview that followed on the same programme early in 2013, to realise the existing cliché of how the spouse of a politician was perceived at that time, and even more so, of a politician at the apex of power. There was so much diffidence, it seemed so improbable for people to even think, let alone believe there was “an alternative” to the stereotype etched in everyone’s mind. Reluctantly, somehow, I came to realise there was no other way to “draw” my profile in the eyes of a sceptical public opinion, but to be understanding of their doubts or distrust and give them time to see the person I would be by Edi’s side as a politician and further as a Prime Minister. I had to be patient and let time be the best witness of this dimension, which has been and certainly remains the most challenging for me. That is why Linda.al could not come earlier. It would have been not only an endeavour bound to be prejudiced, but also an unfair effort to impose Linda the professional on the public, while the latter, willingly or not, perceived me first and foremost as Linda, the spouse of a man who my sceptical judges had entrusted with running the Capital and later the country. However, there is also something else that caused the “delay”, and that is that I do not believe in rushing or forcing things. I think time took its natural course to create this space, Linda.al, that fully mirrors me as a mother, a citizen, a professional and as the wife of Edi, the Prime Minister.

I am truly pleased that Linda.al has made its visitors feel welcome.

2. Once upon a time, Linda, part of a socialist society, started work in the textile combine. Afterwards, Linda, now part of an unscrupulous capitalist socialism, finds her success as an economy expert. What are the differences Linda has experienced between the two eras?

You took me back to my first job:))))). I have to say that both my life and career have run through a truly interesting trajectory. My first job was at one of the biggest economic entities of the time, an industrial textile combine that counted thousands of workers, a significant pool of selected economists and engineers, capable of addressing any manufacturing-related challenge. Working there was an opportunity to understand the discipline, the applied economics and the various occupations in the factories and workshops that operated as links of a single production chain, the dynamics of the hierarchies and their explicit and implicit rules, the human relationships, the fears and insecurities, the politics of the collective working force, as it was known back then, and the individual responsibilities. At that Combine, I, as an attentive witness, followed closely the process of economic downfall of such a huge undertaking within the vicious communist circle that was on the verge of its collapse. There I closely watched how the mass uncertainty bred by the threat of sweeping unemployment loomed large against a chaotic free fall backdrop. I realized back there and then how deceptive our life had been, how much of a toll the superficiality had taken, how organically disabling the bureaucracy of that system was and how helpless people were to rectify the wrong course imposed for so long by the higher ups.

That was the point I felt lost and at a crossroads, faced with completely new dilemmas, and the emergent need for a new compass to grapple with them. I wasted no time and in May 1992, in the first opportunity that presented itself, I applied for post-graduate studies abroad, at the Central European University in Prague.

Immediately upon return I was hired at the National Privatisation Agency, a unique chance and experience not only as far as the extent of the challenges one had to face in perhaps the most important body of reforms was concerned, but also in terms of understanding the new political and administrative hierarchies and experiencing all the inherent pressure and interests that were present among different categories, old and new, like the former owners, workers or the officials of the enterprises going through privatisation, the former politically persecuted, new entrepreneurs, politicians, government officials, members of

the opposition. A whole different story was the dynamics in the relations within the public administration, which lived as if on the rubbles of an earthquake that had upended the order of things and movements on the ground, which, however, had not buried all efforts to advance professionally that carried on notwithstanding the associated barriers and risks. During my time there I witnessed the Ponzi schemes, transition's biggest social madness and adventure. I witnessed the distortion the pressure of governing majorities inflicted on the public administration, the political arbitrariness exerted on institutions, the utterly immature political class behaviour towards the State employees. I was there through the horror of September 14, 1998, in my office, at the second-floor balcony of the building opposite to the Prime Minister's Office up until a few minutes before the breaking and raiding of institutions, including the one I headed, would start to go on for hours. In that place, only a few months after, I experienced first-hand how a high public administration official was dismissed from office without any reason, based on a Government decision fuelled by non-public interests, with no motivation or notice, thrown in the street, without any other opportunity of employment. I stopped for a minute, maybe two, in that street opposite to that building which had no answer to give and I loudly swore to myself: "Never again in a State office!" That moment and pledge in 1998 gave me the strength to set up an independent institute, among the first of its kind in Albania, as an expression of my realisation that only on my own would I be able not only to advance professionally, but also to be free to think and openly voice my opinions on the major dilemmas or challenges of that time.

What has changed in me? My deepened knowledge of the world, my experience, courage and patience to be guided, confronted with and contribute to it.

3. Linda has addressed and written about the post-1997 privatisations. What is the difference between Albania and other post-communist countries when it comes to the privatisations? The Shock Therapy was only applied here. Why?

The Shock Therapy was a triumphant theory and a rather widespread practice in the Eastern countries, with its most violent manifestation in Russia and Poland. In Albania, the Shock Therapy was implemented not only aggressively, but also with such a harrowing blindness in the midst of a social mayhem, with deep ramifications in the decisions on the reforms and particularly on their haphazard implementation in the early 1990s, as a payback to the past. It was a payback, since in other Eastern countries, the fall of the communist wall marked a turnback to the times where

the market economy operated with its own rules, institutions and owners. But in Albania, not only did the past not offer any market culture, entrepreneurs or market institutions, but it also lacked an educated political and economic elite who could think outside the box of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. I believe the lack of this elite was the heaviest toll and deprivation communism left Albania as a legacy in the 1990s.

The privatisation of the State-owned property in Albania went hand in hand with its destruction, with the Government finding itself under the hammer of the individual interests of former employees and officials, of the potentially benefiting parties, like the former owners and former politically persecuted people and, even more so, of the preferences of the political parties and their key figures, who came to realise very quickly that privatisation meant power.

Quite differently from the commercial and housing units, the privatisation of State-owned enterprises was much more challenging, as their stock was too large for a country with no buyers, where foreign investments were deemed a blasphemy for decades in a row and the country itself was nowhere on the map of the investment world compared to other Eastern European countries, a place with an inexistent private property culture, with no facilitating entities, like investment funds or a capital market. There were efforts to restructure dozens of State-owned undertakings to make them more attractive for the investors, but they failed. Neither the chosen design of auction-based privatisation of the major enterprises, nor mass privatisation as a more simplified form of the practice applied in almost all the countries of the East did not succeed in establishing viable institutions like the capital market, investment funds and stock market. The handful of established institutions were either dismantled or failed to fulfil their scope, and people were stuck with the “privatisation bonds” or “securities”, a bitter, worthless relic of their contribution to the creation of the common property.

Obviously, it is easier to think and judge today how things could have been done differently, but what I can say is that while enterprise privatisation gave rise to new private property and owners, it generally failed to create real owners, an economic activity, a market culture and capital institutions. By severely misusing its chance to make up for the wasted decades, Albania became a glaring example of the inevitable toll of history on the future of a country.

4. Your intro to Linda.al seems a call to a society that needs to be born, even through Linda herself. So, it is Linda's call which the system needs. How will Linda's interaction with the society be like, according to you? Which of the two will benefit more from the other?

My work over the years has introduced me to scores of capable individuals, competent professionals, and passionate people across the country. While Linda.al was being finalised, I had this beautiful dream that at one moment all the Albanian professionals could show themselves in their digital windows, and I assure you that you would see a large army of economy experts, geologists, architects, electronic engineers, medical doctors, history scholars, linguists, philosophers, psychologists, lawyers, physicists, mathematicians, and many more of all ages. I wished they showed themselves as a living proof of their existence, breeding optimism for the present and the future. By doing so, they would remind us of how important it is for the Government and the private sector to pay attention and create the conditions for this army to be heard and be motivated to do their best. We cannot wait for an earthquake to strike to appreciate the engineers; or be overwhelmed by a pandemic, in order to hear from the medical doctors and nurses; to be attacked by the cybercrime in order to seek out the IT experts or witness financial shocks, in order to listen to the economy experts. One reads so many headlines these days that are almost a malicious promotion of people leaving the country, but there is not a single word on the success stories and the life this army of professionals and ordinary working people build here in their country. I think that focusing on these people is of paramount importance. Let us not make things unbearable for them, let us not exasperate them and stir their lives. On the contrary, let us motivate and appreciate them as only by doing so the society will be more peaceful, healthy and hopeful. That is the only way to ensure a mutually beneficial relationship between them and the society.

5. What is motherhood like at different stages in life?

Zaho is the biggest blessing in my life. It is a divine moment for every woman to see a child come to life, it is the great fortune of seeing, touching and experiencing a miracle. At a certain age, this awareness takes on the status of the absolute truth and this is no longer one of the life's fast lanes, but rather what grabs all my attention, allowing me to enjoy at best every moment of his life growing up. With Zaho I follow closely each and every detail and I have realised, since a very young age, that he was attentive to our every detail. I am intrigued by the way he thinks, his judgment fascinates

me, and I am very happy to see how different his generation's childhood is from ours. It gives me comfort seeing that he remembers everything I explain to him, although, more often than not, he gives himself the chance to rebel. I am taken by surprise anytime he tries to put me on the spot using my own arms, and, further, his questions are so many and so authentic. There's a handful of cases where I acknowledge he is right and many others where I have to take my time to answer, after going through a process of contemplation and reflection in which Rea, with her perspective and judgment, is a significant help.

In this era we live in, age is not the only factor that influences parenting; it is mostly the context that does, as it is downright different from the one we were brought up in, or even that in which Rea and Greg grew up. This is the era of globalisation, communication and diversity of information, of technological advancement, unhinged consumerism, of widening gaps between categories and localities, of the diversity of opinion and judgment, of an expanding freedom and narrowing gender differences that come with added responsibilities both for girls and boys, the time of increased entitlement and expectations, the time of refusing the sacrifice and chasing the proper well-being. All of these have made a parent's role not only central and inalienable, which it has always been for that matter, but also dynamic in terms of the need to learn along with your child from a world that goes through hectic changes force parents to deal daily with an unprecedented pressure. Striking a healthy balance within such challenging dynamics is a serious and paramount responsibility that cannot be overlooked.

6. How hard is it to stay behind a political person?

Staying by the side of a politician is not easy, but standing beside a spouse who is Prime Minister is a test in and of itself. Whoever has been in this position have their experience to talk about, their observations and feelings, that is why I think that every generalisation would fall short. As far as I am concerned, I can say that being by Edi's side in opposition and after that as a Prime Minister is the most extraordinary journey of my life. Unmatched emotions, tests and trials and constant efforts to resist being demotivated and discouraged by the challenges, the unexpected, the illusions and disappointments that every day has in store.

I will kindly ask to leave my answer at that. This is not a challenge you can put in a paragraph, or an interview and I hope it will be duly addressed when Edi completes his mission.

7. How hard is it to manage a family with a husband that is fully taken by politics?

The day-to-day challenges are, I believe, the same with those of many women or men who have chosen to have by their side someone who does not share their time proportionally between work and home, be it in politics, arts, business, science, media, social networks, the academia and so on, and who, in addition to their own professional engagement, have to carry all the daily responsibilities. On other hand, being the spouse of a politician comes with another dimension that adds to you daily life, to your relationship with the society and the public domain, because politics is a public mission and, as such, is a responsibility that does not simply lie with the one who is in politics, but yours too, because it fully exposes one to the public judgment. Respect for what is public, the way you behave with the power, the relationship you forge with the surrounding environment is a constant concern that adds to the rest of your daily duties and shapes who you are.

8. For Linda as a mother, where do the public and the personal meet and separate?

They are inseparable. When things run smoothly in the public sphere, that makes our personal life easy, whereas distasteful personal episodes, when you are in this position, cannot but be experienced on a more general level.

9. Although this appears to be a difficult moment, what are the odds for Linda to enter politics?

There is a wise saying, “never say never”, because life is what happens while we are busy making other plans. However, I think I have given to both politics and the public sphere everything I could as a professional, a citizen and as Edi’s wife. I have given my unrelenting passion, trust, support, criticism, inspiration, attention, objection, resistance, understanding, patience and hope – in a very intense and particular manner. In the meantime, I share the same passion for my loyal working desk, to which I am inseparably connected, and the desire to dedicate every minute to Zaho and to my family.

10. Does Linda Rama have a role model or at least a source of inspiration? If yes, what is it?

Yes, I do. My parents.

11. In your interviews you place a special focus on the role of Albanian women in society. How do you see the role of Albanian women in politics?

If in the past, we were in dire need of increasing women’s participation in politics and government, and even resorted to compulsory means like gender quotas, now the situation is entirely different. Not only is the number of women in

politics, government or at the helm of institutions high, but they quite often outnumber men. Presently, we even feel satisfied when it comes to our position vis-à-vis a majority of other countries which, not so long ago, we used to look up to from the bottom of international rankings.

On the other hand, it is precisely this numerically distinct achievement that has placed us in a very particular situation that is completely different and offers us the opportunity to go deeper than just numbers and realise that if, on the one hand, such reversal has its positive traits, it is evident, on the other, that it is no magic wand that addresses all the significant deficiencies in the democratic and institutional culture. I would have wished this issue received more attention in the public debate and went beyond only the issues related to the exercise of the representation right and increased participation of women in politics - which is indisputably positive - because it has been proven that be it in politics or the in the different government levels there are no gender-segregated phenomena. Nepotism is not exclusive to men, nor is meritocracy a given among women. Misuse of power cannot be pictured through clichés, as if it were only related to men and the morals of the power or the moral authority as a notion and practice is not necessarily personified by women, but the former remains a horizontal threat across the vacuums of the institutional life, whereas the latter is an ambition threatened by all types of circumstances and interferences along the top-bottom decision-making processes, regardless of whether there is a man or a woman who sits at the top. The arrogance of power knows no gender and the same applies to it being subjectively used. Preaching to others that what counts in politics are the principles, morals, values and reliability, while you may be largely lacking them, is equally unacceptable for men and women.

So, without elaborating further on a topic that, as I said, would deserve to be looked into more deeply, attentively, patiently, free of any complex, I would say that we are at a stage where the significant achievement we have marked in terms of gender equality makes it even clearer that the meritocracy, the integrity in its full meaning, the ability to not stifle, but inspire the large army of public servants and ordinary people, the sense of the mission and sensitivity towards the concerns of people remain goals to be pursued by men and women in politics or institutions and, as such, they should be the only inevitable evaluation criteria for both parties. In my view, this is the call of the present after the past of the unacceptable numbers is a mountain we have climbed and the future of going further than mere numbers rises as another mountain to conquer.

12. Is Linda fulfilled by philanthropy as her only social protagonism?

I do not consider social protagonism as a philanthropy at all, but as an opportunity to give my opinion, where the case requires. Personally speaking, I respect and appreciate everyone who does not see their well-being as strictly linked to themselves, but also to the others and to what is common – I will start off with the Albanian diaspora, who has been a constant contributor to addressing part of the issues in these last decades and with every Albanian who has made solidarity a part of their daily life – while I equally find it unreasonable for the spouses of the people in power to use that power to feed their personal protagonism, in exchange for interests that only deform this environment, doing a disservice to the causes and the power itself. On the other hand, it is highly encouraging that big companies, mainly in banking and telecommunication, have included social responsibility in their agenda. It is also positive that civil society organisations have engaged themselves in philanthropic work, especially in favour of vulnerable categories and children. I think we should go further than only adopting legal regulations that would encourage philanthropy and do more to increase the visibility of and gratitude for the very acts of philanthropy.

13. What would be the policies and projects, if there any, concerning the protection of the

The protection of the most vulnerable cannot be a matter of one or more projects. It should be a daily concern first and foremost of the politics, of the State and the local government and it should shape public policies not only in terms of their survival, but mostly of the efforts to take them out of poverty. We cannot allow poverty to be inherited. There are still about 60 thousand families with a predominant number of young people of working age who live on social assistance. It is critical that social services delivered to these families are improved and that training and employment opportunities increase. There is a series of institutions and a significant number of public and local administrators who are engaged daily in this respect, that is not an easy undertaking, without forgetting the exceptional contribution provided by the non-governmental organisations with the support of international donors.

14. “Emancipate men, and women will be emancipated”, they say. What is your perspective on Albania’s progress towards an overall societal emancipation, especially, in terms of gender? How much is gender emancipation and eradication of misogyny an obligation of the politics, how much of the television and other educational agents, and how much is it an obligation of women themselves?

I think women have shown they cannot wait for men to emancipate to take their chances, and gender-related developments in the last five decades both in Albania and the world are mind-boggling. If men fail to keep up with the current times and their dynamics, they will be the first to lose. Figures in Albania indicate that girls perform better in education, they are persistent in their advancement, without neglecting motherhood and family obligations, while there are new emancipating conditions tied to the increasing opportunities for information that penetrate even remote realities. Distances are smaller and continue to shrink. There is an ever-increasing number of success stories and, if it were not enough, fate has wanted us to be part of the world's most emancipated continent. All of these make for an assurance that emancipation is already only a matter of time. There are no separate roles in this endeavour. We must all have a common agenda, and everyone must stick to it, preventing any situations or phenomena that would prove detrimental.

15. How much do you know Kosovo and what are your impressions and feelings about it?

I am privileged to have friends in Kosovo. In 2013, Kosovo gifted me with an experience of several months that started because of a great challenge that made it impossible for me to work in Albania. During that time, I realised that they not only followed everything that happened in Albania, but doing so at a distance allowed them to be more objective in their judgment. That experience allowed me to know closely another part of our nation, of our people, with their best qualities.

16. Between fame and privacy, which one would you chose?

Fame is far from being my goal and privacy is far from being my obsession. I would neither chose making noise uselessly for the sake of fame, nor keeping silent when that is harmful, for the sake of anonymity. Being useful, at the best of my abilities, to my family and friends is my constant choice.

17. If you would edit you past, what would you change?

With all its beauty and challenges, life has ultimately been generous to me, and I would not dare alter anything.