



Just Linda

By Iva Tiço

Dressed simply in black and white, shirt and trousers, a pair of dark sunglasses over her head and a girlish spring in her step that does not attract the attention of some people who are sitting at the handful of tables in a section of the “French Bread and Pastry” during the lunch hour. “Discrete” – that is how everyone who knows her from a long or short time described her in those three days in which Linda Rama went from full anonymity to becoming the headline of newspapers, magazine covers, and TV shows. For the entire week, her love story with Tirana Mayor, at the same time head of the opposition, was the talk of the town. Despite her accepting to give a one-time interview to Top Story, requests were overflowing those days. Journalists went on a frenzy to interview everyone, from the wedding organizers to opinion-makers, so efforts to interview the protagonists themselves could not miss. After some recommendations from common acquaintances, I managed to get through to Linda Rama the day before the wedding. She sounds rather kind and friendly and agrees to be on the cover of JETA Magazine. However, we decided to discuss the details of the interview and photo shooting after the wedding. After wedding photos splashed all over the media, it makes no sense for us to tell stories of bride and groom, so we need to let a certain time lapse in between, before having Linda on a magazine cover. In the wishes exchanged via SMS in the New Year, we mention again the promise of the cover we are set to make. So it goes, until the end of February, where the time seems right, three months following the November fuss, and three others ahead of elections. “This is not relevant to elections at all. Why should I be on a cover during the campaign?!” – Linda asks while I explain to her that, at that particular time, journalists will be as persistent to talk to her as they were in the week ahead of her wedding.

“That is why this is the best time,” she says, opting to appear on the magazine when the campaign has not yet started, and her husband has not yet confirmed publicly whether he will run for Tirana Municipality. She chooses to make this appearance, but without it being connected to the election day, sticking to her statement in her one-time TV interview that she would stand by her husband, but will not be involved with politics. Thus, she stays true to her distinctive trait acknowledged by everyone who knows her, “discretion”.

You have been keeping a low public profile for years, without being present in the media, although many university professors or civil society actors like you have turned into protagonists (it was a challenge for many of my colleagues to find even a single picture or TV footage of yours). Why this choice?

It is how exactly I wanted it to be, a choice made early on fully aware that being a protagonist in this life we were given the incredible gift to live is not necessarily connected to being in the media. I respect the protagonists we know from the media, but I have known, either in person or through readings, many other protagonists who stay away from media attention. These are life protagonists who try to be useful to others, away from cameras, the breaking news, beyond the reach of the media focus.

How do you do that?

| There is no recipe or any fixed hierarchy for that. Everyone makes their respectable choice.

For instance, leading a project on the Roma community, even if away from media attention, makes you a protagonist for those who lack a voice and, often, even an image in the collective perception, let alone in the media. For an engaged researcher, for someone like me who reads and writes in the hope of being useful to others, that is the challenge I have chosen. However, I am not the only one who has taken this path, and I would even dare say that I feel I am at a rather hygienic and safe distance from the chaos of everyday protagonism, when I am surrounded with people who are like me and who in their “silence” speak with the language of usefulness that is not news fodder.

What does it mean for someone who has kept such profile to find herself suddenly on all TV news and newspaper front pages?

The transition for a few days from “silence” to the frontpages of the newspapers was inevitable under the circumstances where I chose to marry a man who, due to his political engagement with the public, is on the front pages. Media has its indisputable right to inform the public by actually scrutinizing his choice rather than mine and, on the other hand, the public has the right to know from the media who is the person who became Edi Rama’s wife. But that’s all. A few days under the strong, almost blinding, and then annoying stage lights, and then back to a normal life routine that takes place far from the stage on which my husband finds himself daily, as a result of his choice to be a protagonist in the political arena. What I have chosen, however, is the man Edi is beyond such protagonist role, the man unknown to many, but very dear to me.



Even though for only a few days under the strong lights, anonymity has been lost once and for all. How do you feel about this change, about being constantly scrutinized?

I hope I have not changed, although my life has shifted from one unobserved life like many in this city, into a life scrutinized by the entire city. But I would not be fully honest with you, if I didn't admit there is something that has dramatically changed. It happens frequently that Edi's well-wishers, who are numerous in this city, stop me in the streets to show me warmth, but there are also instances, although significantly fewer, where I feel saddened of the resonance of the defamatory words against him. I cannot hide, however, that this "loss of anonymity" has increased the positive energy that surrounds me when meeting with people.

Are you nostalgic of the more carefree times?

No, and that is perhaps, by nature, I have never been oblivious to my living environment and those around me, be them people I know or strangers.

When it comes to the people you know, given your career both in the State administration and the civil society, you must have friends in the socialist and democratic "camp". How have these relations changed following your relationship with Edi Rama?

Nothing has changed. I want to stress that it is not only thanks to me, but also thanks to my friends and acquaintances, as well. They all honoured us with their presence in our wedding, and it is such a good feeling that the relations and friendships built in the course of the years with true democrats have not been affected at all by my relationship with

Edi Rama. Equally so, being Edi Rama’s wife has changed nothing in my relations with socialist friends and acquaintances. They all remain the same to me and to them I am and will always be simply Linda.

Linda, who for some months now has a different last name, Rama. How has this last name changed your life?

I have not changed the name, only the last name. I am the same Linda as before, who takes care of the children, of her parents, her brother and sister. The same person who worries if something is going wrong for a friend or an acquaintance and celebrates the good things happening to them. I am the same Linda who is part of both the civil society and academia, a person who follows passionately the social and economic developments in Albania and elsewhere, for pure academic purposes. The essence of who I am has not changed at all. The substance of my life has been enriched, however. There are more obligations and satisfactions related to love, family, friends and common concerns. But the desire to live life within a circle of people and things that are simply mine remains unaltered.

Among these are also the various visits where you accompany Edi, like, for instance, the last condolences... Is it you who want to accompany him in such cases, or it is him who wants you and his mother to be present?

Neither one, nor the other, we simply stand together in joy and sorrow. The tragic case you refer to is one I would have given everything not to experience. It touched our family, like every other Albanian family I think, not only as we saw people killed in the middle of

Tirana, but also learned something more about the lives, sufferings and living conditions of these poor, unemployed and innocent people. Condolences paid to their families were not part of any protocol, but a simply humane gesture, just like with their relatives that are plagued by an inconsolable calamity.

You have stated you will continue to support Edi’s political career without ever becoming a political protagonist. Do you have in mind a similar “first lady” model”?

It is true, I will support Edi relentlessly in his political engagement with the public, because I feel his passion, conviction and sincerity. I believe in Edi’s power to firmly stand up to challenges, to do things better and, most of all, not to let anyone down. Edi is genuine and so is his success. In terms of my role model, I have not looked for anyone to follow, because I believe it is enough for me to simply be who I am, regardless of the admiration I feel for outstanding women, who have gone through this journey with dignity and impressive brilliance. Furthermore, I respect every wife who stands by their husbands in politics in this country, where politics remains the source of unprecedented distress for those who make it and the ones who follow it.

Do you read every newspaper, or do you only follow the news on Edi Rama?

Every newspaper?! No, I don’t! And that is not only because I have a very busy day for how my time is organized and the type of work I have chosen to do, but also because time ago I found a selective way of learning about the news happening daily in the life of the country. That does not mean I am not constantly following the developments here,

including the political ones. On the contrary, apart from being a researcher, I have always been an interested citizen, who has followed the country's progress. It goes without saying that being in Edi's life has sharpened my focus on the political process, where he is engaged heart and soul.



How do you feel about the political attacks aimed at him?

It very much depends on who pens or articulates them. Let's make this clear and make a firm distinction between what is mere mudslinging and attacks that keep within ethical boundaries, no matter how tough they are. The latter, penned more often than not by people I respect, and, at times, I call friends, are an entirely different story. As for the slander coming from the bearers of all the degradation going on in the public discourse, I perceive it first as a sad drawback for our country, with scarring consequences for all its citizens. I am indeed distraught over the psychological persecution our society suffers due to the defamation that leaves people spiritually drained and uses them for wicked interests. Perhaps, this is a price we still must pay for the psychological suppression caused by the past ideology of hatred against the different. Nonetheless, this has been going on for such a long time that it outlasts the tolerance a normal person would have towards this language that is unlike anything one hears in conversations between normal parties or people in today's democratic world. When it comes to attacks aimed at Edi specifically by those who are engaged in hurling mud either verbally or in writing, I brush them off as the lies of the turn. But, certainly, there are cases where they get to me.

When do you they get to you?

When others are unjustly affected beyond any fathomable limits, even beyond the logic of gaining political advantage – if there is any – in exchange for a brash language that no normal mind and ear would find acceptable! A father who no longer lives and is savagely vilified, when all he did was to live with dignity! Greg, the son, who listens to the monstrous fabrications made up by those who today present them as facts, to publicly disparage the

political opponent! Do I have to say more? You know, everybody knows, even by heart I am afraid, all the slander that is repeated, again and again, as if in a game that this society has been forced play by the mind-poisoning politics, while they expect politics heal their wounds. Even worse than that, though, is getting used to such venom and see this ethical and linguistic scandals become a routine, and mud-slinging become a common way of confronting the other. This is maybe the only explanation for the baffling transformation into authors of such smear campaigns of some people, both men and women, who not only I had the opportunity to know in the past when they were in opposition or part of the civil society, but who I have also encouraged to take a more proactive role in politics, without ever thinking of how power would disfigure them.

Politics and power have also caused significant transformation in Edi Rama, the man who Linda has decided to spend her life with. In her first interview ever for Top Story Linda mentioned the once anti-conformist Edi, with an eccentric fashion style, whose writing she loved. She even dropped a hint that she would want him to stay that way in the future, as well... Even during our conversation, she does not hide it that she thinks it is only a matter of time; that when Edi Rama has completed his entire political cycle, he will withdraw from active politics to go back to his past passions, particularly, writing and painting.



You speak of a time where Edi Rama, upon having fulfilled what you call his political mission, will withdraw ...

As he himself says – and I share his view – politics is not Edi’s profession, although currently it is his full-time occupation. Only those whose profession is politics and who are not able to do anything but “politics”, or those who are into politics solely to pursue unlawful profits find it impossible to step away from it. Edi is in none of these categories. That is not to say that I think politics is not a respectable profession. Quite the opposite, there would be no social progress without the politicians and professional politicians definitely are not all the same, mediocre or charlatans.

How do you imagine Edi between the painting and writing? Do you think he will go back to his once anti-conformist fashion style or suit and tie have become a permanent love?

Writing and painting are Edi’s loyal companions that, even as we speak, you can find in the words or colours he puts daily on the working papers. However, I am looking forward to the day where he will have more time for them, although I would not dare pre-determine his future choice simply as him going back to the painter’s studio. Who knows what may cross his mind... By the way, I have heard him say at times that he would really like to make clothes for friends and acquaintances in the future! When it comes to his style, I think Edi’s perennial love is neither his former non-conformist style, nor the suits and ties that, nonetheless, have their own anti-conformist twist, but rather his passion for beauty.

You once said that what you liked most about Edi is his writing. Now you have the privilege to be the first reader of everything he writes.

Edi is undoubtedly one of those connoisseurs of the Albanian language who has won my admiration since very early on. His critical essays in the 1990s were just like an exploratory dive into the Albanian linguistic treasure used to build the visionary and strongly critical thinking of a man who was rather peculiar for the time. He is still that same man and, although his role and the times have changed, Edi’s way of writing remains a strong motive to feel deeply privileged to be his first reader.

Do you approve of everything he writes or says or there are matters on which you don’t share the same opinions?

We are highly complementary because we are different and, as such, we always find a reason and the pleasure to talk about our approach on certain matters. However, there is never any difference in our shared values and principles.

Is Edi Rama a man who accepts advice?

Quite differently from what is said or what he shows, Edi has got a particular, if not obsessive interest in asking for and listening to as many perspectives as possible in relation to all the matters he is concerned with. I know it might be difficult for you to believe, given all that has been said and written about him as a man who does everything on his own. But let me tell you that he is always willing to listen to advice and consult anyone who he thinks can be helpful to him for a certain matter that needs to be addressed. It is not hard at all

for Edi to take and internalize every advice that is convincing. It is quite different when it comes to how adamant he is in defending the beliefs or positions he takes after listening to such advice. I have never seen anyone who is more determined at this point.

Is yours one of those loves that result from friendship and the nurturing of shared ideas, or is it rather an attraction of the opposites?

Allow me to pass on this question with a kind smile. If that were possible to explain, it would not be love.

Can you at least tell us what are the things you liked the most in Edi...? What made you fall in love with him?

Edi has traits that make you live life qualitatively, not for yourself alone. He is above all very open, warm and direct. He has this incredibly appealing creativity when communicating and goes out of his way to make people feel good when they are with him. He gets satisfaction from any good work that has been done by others. He is never jealous of someone else's success and has this inner urge to encourage others at every opportunity they have to succeed. Edi Rama – who I sincerely am sorry that not everyone knows – is a very special father, who is never unequal to his children. He considers and treats Greg and Rea as free people, challenging them in conversations, without ever imposing himself as the older one, but creates room and opens windows of communication, even unusual at times, to help them with their dilemmas or issues, avoiding the common ways of parental authority.

Was the decision to get married a logical result of a love story between two adults, or a sudden wish of one of you?

Our wedding event is now in the past and the decision about it is our daily life together, which we both wished for and are happy with as a decision.

What does a day by the side of Edi Rama look like? How do you spend your week-ends when they are not filled with political activities?

I would not exaggerate if I said that every moment spent by Edi's side is a motive to say wonderful things, but you will allow me to keep them to myself, as a part of our life that we have chosen to keep out and away of the public eye.

Linda Rama is quite cautious to let such details out. She manages to draw as if with an invisible marker the line between what she can share with everyone and the rest she has decided to keep strictly within the walls of her house, so much discussed in the media as the rented flat of a man who the ruling majority has long accused as abusing with construction permits. For Linda Rama that just adds to the pile of mud and she would not comment on them, while the 90-square metre-flat is the home she feels better than anywhere else. At the end of the day, she is a newlywed and like all newlyweds of the world she would certainly like as many alone moments as possible with her husband.

Do you find the permanent presence of his collaborators, bodyguards, driver, a nuisance? How much time do the two of you spend alone?

It is not a nuisance at all, because I have accepted the specific aspects of what he does, with all the hassle that comes with it. But, in the meantime, I have not had my patience tested when it comes to the presence of the people you mentioned, because when with me, Edi and I are generally alone with each-other, since we mostly spend the time left for us at home.

Do you avoid political conversations at home?

We like to spend our evenings at home between conversations, movies, readings or even a sport match that Edi makes me watch.

Now that you mentioned sports, I do remember that in his interview for One Magazine, Edi talked about running as the sport he never abandoned and that he does together with Greg. Have you joined the team, too?

I have always had special respect for talented sportsmen, but I have never had any distinct talent or willingness to do sports. From time to time, I make my own efforts to prevent my body from entering the lethargy of the years that pass.



There is another “sport”, however, that you do together as a couple, “shopping”; that is grocery shopping. We were told that you are regular customers in the supermarket where you were photographed. Does that mean that you have regular home-cooked meals? What are your favourite dishes?

Our dishes are simple, not heavy I mean. The favourite dish is the artichoke, traditionally cooked in Edi’s family, and, made in different ways, they are tasty indeed.

Does Edi cook?

Of course, whenever time allows, and he is really into it. The dishes he cooks are unbeatable; alas, it does not happen as often as I would wish.

You spoke of traditional dishes of Edi’s family. Have you got any cooking “lessons” from Edi’s mother in the meantime?

I always get cooking advice both from my mother and Edi’s mother. When they cook something special, we enjoy their dishes that bring us childhood memories.

What are the house chores you hate the most?

I have always tended to the house myself and never hired anyone to help me. If you love the house you live in, you can’t hate any of its chores; quite the opposite.

What is the interior of your house like? What are the colours? Is it Edi or you who is the painter in the house?

It is a small flat that Edi’s eyes and hands have obviously transformed into a special living space, with no internal walls and an arrangement of the premises that allows us to share hours of hospitality with our dearest people, regardless of the modest space. Colours? Red, grey and white are the predominant colours, “splashed” with a little green or blue here and there.

There has been such a fuss in the media over the choice to live in this rented flat ... Are you going to live there forever or are you planning to buy a house?

Just like everyone else, we dream of a house that is all ours and that we want to build slowly. It has already started to take shape in my dream. I know by heart the walls, the living spaces, the furniture, everything. I am happy that Edi joined me in this dream.

It seems like a happy-ending fairytale, where two adult people decide to build their home, their family, with their own children. Greg, Edi’s son and Rea, Linda’s daughter appeared happy by the side of their parents on the wedding day.

How has your decision to marry impacted your daughter’s life?

Rea has been raised very well, surrounded with special love, in an environment where the mutual care and respect were always intact in the precious family code. Thanks to the extraordinary dedication her father and I had at every moment of her life for years, Rea is now a girl with a great inner world, open-minded, and bold. She loves her grandmother,

her father and me so much, and she keeps her relations with both households in a perfect balance.

How did she react to your relationship with Edi and, later, to the marriage decision?

The relationship between Rea and Edi is a lovely chapter in its own right that, when Rea took up arts and architecture, turned into a space where they both are involved in continuous conversation. My mother is rather critical of those parents who overdo it singing their children’s praises – and rightly so – therefore, I hope that when reading this, she does not call to scorn me for having spoken a tad too much about my daughter.

Several times during this conversation I heard you talk about “the children”, in plural. Does that mean you see Greg as your son? What is your relationship with him?

Of course, our children are equally a part of us, and we are blessed to have them. Greg is the same age as Rea and they even attended together the first year of high school. Even then, you could tell him from the girls and boys in my daughter’s course, not only because he was very tall but also very well-mannered. Five years ago, the boy went through a major health challenge that has helped him reach a certain depth, but also has imbued him with a particular sense of humour. He has this “secret” communication with me, and it brings me a smile when I say this, since he wants to share every one of the numerous questions that are quite natural for his age. He, too, is into arts. He paints and photographs beautifully, but one thing I always look forward to is the pieces of writing that he sends me regularly.

In your first and only interview so far you said that you have a friendly relationship with Aneta, Edi’s mother. How long has this friendship been going on? Do you share your concerns when Edi’s private life is attacked for political reasons? How does she react to that? What about you?

Beyond my very close relationship with her, Aneta Rama is a rare woman. One of these days I happened to look at a folder of drawings from Edi’s and Olsi’s early childhood that had been kept very carefully by their father, Kristaq, in a compilation where he had written “children’s memories”. There was this one that touched me particularly. I picked it to frame it and hang on the wall of the house. It is a drawing by Edi, then a 6-year old, of the sea and a multi-coloured ship sailing along, where he had written: “5-11-70 TO MY MUM -BY EDI”. I think it is the best image to describe the atmosphere in the Rama family all the time. Aneta is a cultured woman who left her career aside to support the man she adored and bring up her children with great care. She is a mother who respects her son’s political choice, regardless of the pain caused by constant shameless attacks against her family and the memory of her husband. Edi, in the meantime, is to her the son who, having gone through hard years of smear campaigns, is increasingly sensitive towards the mother. Feeling the burden of the hurt caused to his mother by the disgraceful words of her son’s political opponents, Aneta gets his affection on phone every day, when time does not allow for more and, often, bouquets of flowers sent by Edi to her house. In the meantime, I am often with her. We get worried when she worries and do whatever we can to calm her and cheer her up.