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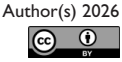

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"I want Albania to be like Europe": Grassroots movements and new ways of commoning in contemporary Albania

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Abstract

"I want Albania like Europe" was the slogan of the student protest that followed the demise of the communist regime in Albania in 1990. During this period, students were seen as the main agents of social change. Despite considerable social, political, and economic changes, Albania remains one of the lowest-income countries in Europe. While many local economists and politicians continue to use EU accession as the benchmark for the country's well-being, inhabitants increasingly face precarity and uncertainty, with alternative scenarios often seemingly non-existent and coated with passive attitude. Although this passivity seems to be the prevailing mindset, certain grassroots collectives have sought ways to reshape the uncertainty of daily life. I argue that through their practices and tactics, they aim to remit already familiar structural remnants such as the nexus of house–land–kinship, translating them into collective commons that have the potential to lead to alternative futures.

Keywords

grassroots movements, collective commons, house-land-kinship nexus, alternative futures, social change, Albania

Introduction

"I want Albania to be like Europe" was the slogan heard in many street protests against the communist dictatorship in the late 1990s that ensued after the collapse of the communism

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in Albania. The majority of the protesters were students who, as Shinasi A. Rama (2019: 12) explains, were "important agents of social change" who gathered in a relatively short time (in a couple of days) and acted independently of the ruling Albanian intelligentsia and other political structures. As I discuss elsewhere (Gregorič Bon, 2008, 2019), this slogan not only fuelled future visions of Europe as a geopolitical entity and raised expectations of the straight "road" towards Europe (*rruga drejt Europes*) but also referred to the past structural forms associated with the prehistoric past. Albanian archaeological scholarship (Aref, 2003; Ceka, 2005; d'Angely, 1998; Kocaqi, 2010; Kokalari, 2001) holds that the Pelasgo-Illyrians were the first "pre-Indo-European population" of the region (Ceka, 2005). The communist regime institutionalised this claim as historical fact, positioning Albanians as the direct ancestors of the first Europeans. Against this backdrop, the slogan "I want Albania to be like Europe" resonated with multiple and remarkable meanings.[1] One meaning evoked the hope of returning Albania to Europe—geographically and historically its primal home (Gregorič Bon, 2019); another pointed to Europe as the "ultimate structure of freedom and prosperity" (Hysa, 2008).

The same slogan and its various versions also reappeared in later decades, coinciding with political events that brought the EU closer to people's daily lives: for example, in 2006, when the Albanian government signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, and in 2010, with the liberalisation of the visa regime in the country. The latter event marked an important milestone within which intimate and collective aspirations and imaginaries of the EU were no longer shared by a majority of the population.

With the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis in the EU, accompanied by a sharp increase in return migration (especially from Greece and Italy) to Albania (see Cena and Heim, 2022; INSTAT, 2013), ambivalence towards the EU has grown. On the one hand, decades of waiting and ongoing negotiations for EU accession, the increasing presence of national and transnational neoliberal extraction policies (see Gregorič Bon, 2024; Kasapi, 2022; Malaj and Pali, 2024; Musaraj, 2021), the humanitarian crisis, and related geopolitical conflicts in Europe and beyond have led Albanian citizens to adopt a more reserved attitude towards the EU. On the other hand, the Balkan Barometer (2024) shows that, although the majority of people in Albania and other parts of the Western Balkans (59%) still believe that EU accession would be positive, the younger generation are less certain about the benefits of becoming an EU member.

This ambiguous attitude towards the EU is even more pronounced among the younger generation (born between 1985 and 1995). They are reserved about EU policy, largely due to general EU accession fatigue, the ongoing humanitarian crisis (the "Meloni-Rama agreement"), the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and various other political manoeuvres. However, they simultaneously have greater confidence in the EU than in national politics, due to increasing corruption in the country (European Western Balkans, 2024), the construction boom and associated gentrification, particularly in cities (e.g. in the capital Tirana) and the coastal regions, the associated land grabbing, and the overall political crises in the country.[2]

How can this bleak present be restructured or changed in the everyday lives of people in Albania, which is often referred to as one of the lowest-income countries in Europe in international economic assessments (Eurostat, 2025)? While many local economists and the political elite still cling to the discourses on Albania's EU accession, the inhabitants are

increasingly confronted with precarity and uncertainty, with alternative scenarios often seemingly non-existent and coated with the passive attitude that nothing can be done (in Albanian, *çfarë të bëjmë*). Although this passivity seems to be a prevailing mindset among the majority of the population, there are still a few individuals—legal and social activists, engaged architects, and artists—who seek ways to reshape the uncertainty of daily life.

This article focuses primarily on these individuals, born between 1980 and 1995, who try to design alternative space-times that are in favour of social change. In contrast to the passive majority of the population, these individuals, self-declared activists, try to step out of the prevailing passive mindset to pave a better future and well-being either for their small community where they live and work or for the general public in Albania (Gregorič Bon, 2024). Most of them are part of grassroots collectives who, through their activities and tactics, aim to remit already familiar structural forms such as the nexus of house, land, and kinship and translate them into collective commons that have the potential to create alternative futures. Even more than EU accession, these futures are about collective values that are based on the revitalisation of the past structural forms.

The material presented here is based on over two decades of ethnographic fieldwork in Albania. Following the classical anthropological approach, most of the ethnographic material analysed in this article was collected through participant observation and numerous conversations with various individuals, conducted mainly between 2021 and 2025. In addition to the legal and social activist, and the engaged architect on whom I focus in this article, I conversed with many other people of different genders and generations who may or may not consider themselves activists. These include independent journalists, artists, designers, curators, art scholars, and other academics, environmental activists, as well as some public officials. I spent most of my time especially with three groups, mainly in the capital, Tirana, and the neighbouring city of Kamëz. Most of our discussions were recorded and transcribed.

This article begins by outlining the social and cultural context in which civil society and grassroots movements have formed. It highlights the role of EU and US funds, which have been present since the collapse of the communist regime and have supported various activities through different forms of funding. The discussion then turns to two grassroots movements—engaged architects and legal and social activists—that are seeking to pave alternative space-times in response to the current precarious and uncertain everyday life. In the final section, it explains how both grassroots movements strive to establish a new space of collective commons that would ensure a better future and well-being (*mirëqenie*) amid the precarious and uncertain everyday life in the country.

The historical legacy of civil society and grassroots movements

According to EU policy, civil society, together with grassroots movements, plays an important role in shaping and implementing its policies. Unlike in many other European countries, the formation of civil society in Albania has taken a specific path which has to be read within its historical, social, and political context.

Due to the Ottoman legacy (1501–1912), the relatively brief period of the Albanian Renaissance, and the formation of the Albanian nation state in 1912—including the

short-lived monarchy (1928–1939) and its collaboration with Italian fascism, the subsequent world wars, and 45 years of a strict, draconian communist regime (1945–1990)—civil society in Albania is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning with the student protests of the 1990s. Although these protests introduced new ways of commoning (Bogdani, 2019; Rama, 2019), they were soon appropriated by various political parties. Amid the general political and economic crisis and massive in- and out-country migrations, a number of international governmental and non-governmental organisations were established with the mission of "stabilising" the country's economic and social situation (De Waal, 2005) and leading it towards so-called "democracy" (Bogdani, 2023).

Whereas in the first year after the collapse of communism, American institutions such as USAID and the World Bank were prominent in supporting and monitoring Albanian reforms, by 1993 the European Commission had sent its delegation to the capital, Tirana, to work on reform assignments. The presence of these institutions led to the introduction of the concept of civil society, which was later associated with international NGOs and political elites. This was exacerbated by the near outbreak of civil war in 1997, when the collapse of pyramid investment schemes resulted in most Albanians losing their savings, if not their property (Musaraj, 2020). This rupture, which many still refer to as the period of anarchy (De Waal, 2005), led to a change in the regime of values, which became blurred and entangled over time (Gregorič Bon, 2022). An important milestone in the formation of civil society was the period between 2000 and 2010, when the Albanian Parliament adopted legal acts on civil society in the Albanian Constitution for the first time. In this context, one of the first, well-known, and later widespread civil society movements, called MJAFT (translated as "Enough"), was founded by a former mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj.[3] In line with the events and the political ambitions of its founders, civil society was soon appropriated by political parties. Although these parties have organised many protests against various issues recognised as violations of civil rights, these protests have a strong political flavour, as they are often organised by different political parties and pursue political rather than societal goals (Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Hoxha, 2018a, 2018b; Sighele, 2022).

In contrast to much of Europe, where civil society and grassroots movements have deep legacy, their counterparts in Albania remain relatively nascent. Decades after the turbulent year of 1997, these protests remained uncommon or almost absent. After 2000, however, small socially initiated movements began to emerge, such as the "Civic Alliance for the Protection of Vlora Bay," which protested against large infrastructure projects including the construction of a thermal power plant in Zvernec (which only operated for one day before it broke down), the hydrocarbon terminal near Vlora, as well as the "Civic Coalition Against Corruption" (Ekman and Hoxha, 2024). In addition to these initiatives to protect urban spaces and urban commons, grassroots movements such as "Citizens for the Park," "We Tirana," and "Protect the Lake Park" were launched in 2011, protesting against urbanisation (*betonizimi*) (Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Musaraj, 2021) and the reduction of the city park in Tirana.

One exception to the general absence of grassroots activism in the first decades after the collapse of the communist regime was the mass protests in 2013 against the import and dismantling of chemical weapons from Syria following an agreement between the Albanian and US governments. Several scholars (Ekman and Hoxha, 2024; Hoxha,

2018a, 2018b; Kajsiu, 2016) as well as my interlocutors, concur that the 2013 protests were among the first large-scale, self-organised grassroots movements since the 1997 riots. After 2013, grassroots movements in Albania began to appear in number and visibility. Among these were the student movements of 2018, which were among the first in Albania to be initiated through social media. They protested the government's decision (Council of Ministers Decision 288, Article 4) to charge students additional fees to retake exams, making university education even more expensive (Hoxha, 2018a, 2018b).

In the years after 2014, several small, locally organised protests emerged relating to environmental issues—such as infrastructural interventions in the nearly intact rivers (organised by the NGO "EcoAlbania" in cooperation with affected inhabitants) and excessive oil drilling (by "Hashtag Initiative"/*Nisma Thurje*). In response to the ongoing plans of the local and national authorities to destroy the National Theatre in Tirana, the "Association for the Protection of the Theatre"/*Aleanca për Mbrojtjen e Teatrit* was founded in 2018. These grassroots initiatives aimed to raise public awareness about the need to protect collective commons. This also applies to "Group They"/*Grupi ATA*, founded in 2014, as well as many other grassroots movements (such as "*Debatik* art group," engaged journalist writing for the "Citizens Channel") who publicly opposed various issues related to the state reforms or instances of neglect or destruction of collective property.

All these self-initiated groups, formed by the younger generation, have been centred on the protection of the collective commons[4]—that is, spaces relating to particular public places, buildings, monuments, or the community itself. Here, it should be noted that the role and meaning of the concept of the collective commons—*të përbashkëta* in Albanian—has evolved over time, shaped by historical, political, economic, and social contexts. Originally, prior to communism, the commons were linked to the kinship system and the associated land ownership, pertaining to pastureland and olive groves that are collectively owned by specific extended families or brotherhoods (vëllazëri). Under the communist regime, communal land was expropriated and collectivised. With the agrarian reform of the 1960s and 1970s, collective land that used to be in the hands of the *vëllazëri* was further expanded and appropriated, in most areas by village co-operatives, or by state co-operatives in larger and more agriculturally productive areas. The management of other types of common land differed: village squares or public meeting places, important sites for meetings of village elders (such as the *kuirija*, which will be discussed later in this text), as well as parks, public squares, and marketplaces in urban centres, became collective property maintained by the whole community through obligatory collective cleaning actions. After the fall of the communist regime, these collective actions and maintenance activities for the commons ceased. Due to resentment towards the previous regime, many people had negative associations with communal spaces, which were then neglected and gradually deteriorated (Gregorič Bon, 2024). This neglect was exacerbated by mass emigration from the country, which left some areas deserted and abandoned to the passage of time. It particularly applied to public areas that were not significantly affected by privatisation, unlike pasture and agricultural land. However, after 2000, as emigration slowed and the country's economy stabilised, people began to recognise the value of public spaces, especially in response to planned changes imposed by the authorities—whether through municipal urban planning (such as the "Lake Park"/*Parku i Liqenit* in Tirana), coastal tourism developments (e.g. on the southern

Albanian coast), or infrastructure projects (such as the port of Vlora, mentioned above) (Kasapi, 2022; Malaj and Pali, 2024; Pllumbi, 2024). Thus, in recent decades, public space—with the involvement of youth grassroots movements—has once again become a potential space for the reformation of the collective commons.

In contrast to politically organised protests[5] and politically orientated civil society, the rare grassroots collectives attempt to design space-times[6] (Gregorič Bon, 2024) that are potentially pregnant with *and* for social change. By engaging with affective domains, they seek to create new ways of commoning (Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Gregorič Bon, 2024; Massarente and Musaj, 2021; Stavrides, 2016; Stefanelli, 2023; Susser and Tonnelat, 2013).

Restoring and redesigning the commons (*të përbashketa*)

In March 2023, Juliana, a 40-year-old architect and lecturer at the University of Tirana, and I were sitting in a café in the pedestrian zone (*Pedonallja*) of the capital Tirana, discussing the last days before the demolition of the National Theatre of Tirana by order of the Tirana City Council on 17 May 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. We were sitting in the bar which, at the time of writing this article, has already been destroyed by Tirana City Council due to the construction of another skyscraper facing the pedestrian zone. The bar was located near the former National Theatre and was deliberately chosen by Juliana because she wanted me to see the place where it used to be. "In recent years, when we were fighting against the demolition, we often referred to the theatre as *ajo* (her in Albanian), the building," noted Juliana, emphasising that the notion of theatre goes beyond the meaning of a material building and highlights the interrelation between the people and the theatre. The building, as Juliana continued, had a rich cultural and social heritage not only for the Albanian capital, but for the whole country in general (see also Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Massarente and Musaj, 2021; Pompejano and Macchioni, 2022; Troelenberg, 2020; Van Gerven Oei, 2024). Originally, it was constructed by Italian architects during the Italian Protectorate period in 1938 and formed a part of the Italian-Albanian cultural Circolo Scanderbeg (now renamed Scanderbeg Square/*Sheshi Skenderbeu*) on the initiative of the Albanian government and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Massarente and Musaj, 2021). During this time, it served as a multifunctional complex that offered the public space for entertainment and fascist propaganda (Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Massarente and Musaj, 2021; Pompejano and Macchioni, 2022). As it was built immediately before the Italian occupation of Albania (Pllumbi, 2024), it is often discussed ambiguously in current politics. On the one hand, it is considered a benchmark for the period of modernisation of the country, when Tirana received its first urban plan designed by Italian architects (especially by the majority of grassroots movements), and on the other hand, as a remnant of so-called Italian colonialism and fascist propaganda (especially by the ruling political elite). Numerous scholars (Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Kristo and Perna, 2021; Pompejano and Macchioni, 2022) emphasise the uniqueness of the theatre as a building, that managed to be preserved throughout different political regimes and systems (Italian and German occupation during the World War I and II; the communist regime between 1945 and 1990; post-communism between 1990 and 2010; and the present day). Despite the mentioned political and economic changes, the theatre managed to maintain intellectual and

cultural activities. Thus, even during the communist regime, it was considered the oldest modern theatre in the city and was renamed as the People's Theatre (Allkja and Musaj, 2024). The National Theatre and its surroundings constituted an important public space that was treated as part of the collective commons where people gathered and socialised (Pllumbi, 2024). As many of my interlocutors recounted, the theatre seemed to be a silent agent of cultural and intellectual expression, where people could attend first classical concerts by Vivaldi, Paganini, Chopin, Schuman, and many others from the 1940s onwards; later, during the communist regime, the first theatre plays by both national and international authors; and after the 1990s, it served as the founding venue of the Little Ballet (1947), the Opera Ballet and Theatre (1952), the National Circus (and the only circus in the Balkans at that time), and many other important institutions (Allkja and Musaj, 2024). Thus, over time and due to its important public function, the theatre has never been seen as a sheer fascist building, but above all as a space where collective commons have formed over time.

In the last decades, the theatre gradually became a place for so-called informal social gatherings and grassroots movements. As Juliana pointed out, the theatre was a kind of "safe space" where the inhabitants of Tirana often found refuge. Especially in its final decades, it became a place where different grassroots collectives offered social assistance to vulnerable groups, or it acted as a refuge for the people whose houses were destroyed during the 2019 earthquake in Tirana and Durres. As Juliana emphasised, the theatre was not just a cultural monument that embodied a particular time in history. Having survived different historical periods and political systems and the resulting changes and transitions (interwar period, World War II, communist regime, post-communism), it became one of the rare collective constants in the rapidly changing Tirana, which is still undergoing a strong construction boom and gentrification (Kasapi, 2022; Pllumbi, 2024).

After the year 2000 and the stabilisation of the Albanian economy, extensive construction building—so-called *betonizimi* (concretisation) (Musaraj, 2021)—began. Although this process was paused during the 2008 financial crisis, it was resumed in 2015 under the newly elected mayor Erion Veliaj. *Betonizimi* included not only the construction of various skyscrapers (*kullas*) but also the destruction of many old villas—the so-called gardens of Tirana built between 1930 and 1940. Many of these villas as well as the National Theatre, as Juliana continues, were declared a cultural heritage site decades ago. However, since in most cases the owners of the villas could not afford to repair them in accordance with the laws on the protection of cultural heritage, they were gradually left to decay and lost their heritage status, and many of them were demolished by order of Tirana City Council (see also Kasapi, 2022; Musaj, 2023a, 2023b). The same happened to the theatre as its destruction was announced in March 2020. This announcement triggered spontaneous grassroots protests that were mobilised under the Association for the Protection of the Theatre. The association together and with the support of numerous European and worldwide networks of theatre associations, such as Europa Nostra, protected the theatre from destruction for 27 months (from February 2018 to May 2020) (Europa Nostra, 2020; Karaj, 2019; Musaj personal communication). One of the members of this occupation movement was also Juliana, who safeguarded the theatre until its final demolition at 4 a.m. on 17 May 2020, one day before the COVID-19 curfew was lifted (Allkja and Musaj, 2024; Kristo and Perna, 2021; Pompejano and Macchioni,

2022). With tears in her eyes, Juliana described her traumatic story of the final destruction by a large number of police officers and a special army, who dispersed the protesters and destroyed the theatre in a relatively short time. This demolition was not only a sign of the destruction and erasure of a certain historical epoch, but also of the destruction of grassroots movements that are still very nascent in the country.

But as Juliana emphasised in our many conversations, even this destruction did not suppress her zeal for the revitalisation, protection, and preservation of the urban commons. Together with her colleagues, also self-declared activists, including architects and journalists, she was part of the group that has set up the website "Citizens Urban Stories" (Citizens Urban Stories, 2024a, 2024b). The project was supported by the funds of different EU institutions. The website is a place where the oral history of Tirana's old villas is mapped, written down, vocalised, and presented together with their owners and their kinship that formed the neighbourhoods in which they lived for a century. On the map, the viewer can trace the history of the individual villas and their architectural features and listen to the oral histories of their inhabitants, most of whom no longer dwell there as they had to move after their destruction.

Juliana's words and the website Citizen's Urban Stories resonate with the meaning of houses/homes (*shtëpi*) and their relation to property, which, together with land, constitute inalienable social capital that generates the identity of a particular patriline as well as an individual or owner (Gregorič Bon, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). The destruction of old villas and the construction of high risers (many of which are uninhabited due to high prices) felt to Juliana as if "the ancestors (of the city) are disappearing, and the entire genealogical tree of a family is being killed." She continued that "[c]ultural monuments are all objects that have a memory, they are alive and have an origin in the history of a city." Both Juliana and scholarly works on the disappearance of urban heritage emphasise that houses and cultural institutions do not embody a specific temporal epoch in which they were built, such as fascism or bourgeois society, but rather a temporal and spatial continuity that has managed to endure despite turbulent political upheavals in the country. The destroyed villas and cultural monuments and their time-space are also about the disappearance of the historical space of the city, which was an important place for the inhabitants of Tirana and later became a space for the formation of grassroots communities. In her "hunt for old villas in Tirana," as she often explains her mission, Juliana and her colleagues try to preserve the stories of the ancestors and their space-time, which are important to pave the future of the city and the emerging community of activists (see also Kasapi, 2022).

In my earlier work (Gregorič Bon, 2017a, 2019), I wrote extensively about the meaning of home/house, which in Albanian colloquial language is referred to as *shtëpi*. The latter is an important traditional institution in Albania, which even today generates the core structure of Albanian sociality. The *shtëpi* is indeed a part of cultural capital. This is reflected in the widespread phenomenon of migrants' house-making in their place of origin, often referred to with the name of the region from which the migrant has been sending the money to build the house (e.g. Italian house, Greek house). The *shtëpi* often acts as a proxy presence for absent migrants, as it reifies the migrant's routes as well as his or her belonging to the place of origin (Dalakoglou, 2010). In this way, the *shtëpi* is closely linked to the meaning of locality and belonging to a particular place and property. And it is property that is continuously generated by the interrelations between kinship and land, local community and collective commons, as well as through people's sense of

dwelling in a particular place/location (*vendi*) and their place-making. In this sense, the individual, together with the patrilineal kinship, is inextricably interrelated to the *shtëpi*. The question "Where are you from?," for example, is a common question in Albanian parlance as it is used to identify a person by their patrilinear place of origin. Therefore, both the kinship system and the local community are emplaced in a particular place (*vendi*), which in turn is embedded in both the collective community or kinship and belonging. This inalienability also extends to the grassroots collectives to which Juliana and her colleagues belong. In this sense, as Juliana describes, the process of guarding, nurturing, and caring for the theatre has transformed the theatre into a home for new ways of commoning. The theatre is thus a new *shtëpi*, situated at the nexus of house, land, and kinship.

Restoring and redesigning the house/home–land–kinship nexus

Founded in 2014, ATA (they) has aimed to support and empower marginalised communities in Kamza and other towns and regions in Albania through legal activism, journalism, and art. Theatre in particular has played a role in bringing about what they call on social media a "meaningful social change." Kamza, the fourth most populous municipality in Albania (AdminStat Albania, 2020), used to be unsettled and was simply part of a state agricultural cooperative until 1990. After the fall of the regime, a significant number of people migrated from rural northern areas to Kamza. These migrants first lived in an abandoned former cooperative cattle shed and then gradually built houses on land, which they either bought from former state cooperative owners or from extended patrilines who occupied the land immediately after the 1990s (so-called *zaptuese*/occupiers in the public parlance). Initially without real infrastructure, the area gradually grew into an urban sprawl. The state government constantly threatened to evict the local population and in some cases the houses/*shtëpise* of the locals were demolished.

Nevertheless, the community continued to grow. Today, Kamza has around 82,000 inhabitants (INSTAT, 2020). In the first decades, the layout of the first neighbourhoods followed the kinship principle (*sistemi fisnorë*) in which particular brotherhoods from a specific region built their houses next to each other and formed a neighbourhood that bore the name of the region of origin. Thus, according to the social toponymy, Kamza maps out neighbourhoods that are in the local parlance known as *lagja Dibraneve, lagja Tropojaneve, lagja Kuksit*, and so on.

Despite the improved infrastructure, as ATA group accentuates, Kamza lacks public cultural spaces for social commoning. Several Kamza inhabitants also do not legally own the houses they have built or bought. Many of them have long been making efforts to have their ownership legally recognised and ATA has assisted them with legal activism.

The ATA legal counselling service is called *Kujiri. Kujria*—a term from the codices of unwritten laws called *Kanun*—means common space and is synonymous with the local community parliament that existed before the communist regime, especially in the rural areas of northern Albania. The three female lawyers along with the male journalist, who all grew up in Kamza, offer not only legal advice but also bring the inhabitants of

Kamza and beyond together by organising theatre plays, art exhibitions, environmental protests, and various workshops to rethink and revitalise their relations with the community and the place itself. Most of their projects are founded by the EU funds or different EU embassies (such as Swiss Embassy) or foundations (HBS Stiftung Tirana, British Council) who support various small-scale grassroots projects.

One of their events, which I attended in 2023, was a workshop called "Kamza Layout," part of the annual Urban Anthropology Laboratory (LAU) organised jointly with the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology in Tirana (IAKSA). The summer school was first organised in 2021 entitled "Arrival–House–Grave." This multimedia laboratory explored the arrival of people from the rural north to new land on the outskirts of the capital, their house and place-making, and their relationship to their place of origin by being buried there after death. The laboratory gave a voice to the local population and their initial autonomous urban planning, which was only set after 1990 and is now managed by the new urban planning of the Kamza municipality's administrative bodies.

The Urban anthropology lab in 2023—"Kamza Layout"—focused on the social and spatial memory of place-making and aimed to set a "place in history" (Herzfeld, 1992). The participants of the lab were students, independent journalists, various NGO workers, and activists, between the ages of 25 and 35, and mainly from Albania. During a week-long intensive workshop, they recorded and edited 4–5 films about the history of Kamza, its foundation in the 1990s, and the growth of urban sprawl over the last three decades. By evoking and re-enacting the social memory of their migration and arrival in Kamza, their house-making, and social organisation in general, the participants of the lab designed the visual narrative of Kamza's history. The history is strongly linked to once important traditional institutions, such as the house/*shtëpi*–land–kinship nexus. This can be seen, for example, in the settlement patterns of some neighbourhoods where certain brotherhoods built their *shtëpisë* next to each other, which, according to social toponymy, bear the name of the region from which most of the brotherhoods originate. Although the *shtëpi*–land–kinship nexus is based on gendered brotherhoods, the workshop participants have made the dominance of male lineage more diverse. For example, oral video recordings vocalised the female perspective, which remains an implicit but important part of Albanian society. As one activist repeatedly emphasised in our discussions, *Grupi ATA* is also concerned, among other things, with revitalisation of once important social structures that today are often seen as "backward" by many Albanians and by political and media figures. These structures, the group emphasises, are essential for preservation of essential moral principles such as the relation of the local population to land and property, which goes beyond simple economic value. The nexus *shtëpi*–land–kinship is crucial for the revitalisation of the new collective commons (të *përbashkëta*) as well as for the creation of general prosperity in the country.

Moreover, by strengthening the interrelation between people and place/location (*shtëpi*–land–kinship nexus) and by encouraging participants to engage with the social and spatial history of Kamza, the "Kamza Layout" lab also aimed to restore an "autonomous design"[7] (Escobar, 2018). This new design rethinks the interrelations between *shtëpi*, land, kinship, and property, that is no longer linked to brotherhoods as core to particular locations. Instead, a sense of collective commons and community shaped these interrelations. As an outcome of the lab, participants created visual narratives that

emphasised traditional social structures, the meaning of belonging to a place through migration routes and roots (place of origin, often referred to as place of roots/*rrënje*) and reframed this within the contemporary context by emphasising gender. Similarly, engaged architects created a narrative space on their website of urban villas in Tirana to reaffirm the interrelation between the owners, their families, and their *shtëpisë*. In so doing, both collectives have offered an alternative to the centralised urban planning that defines urban spaces as a neoliberal asset of a fiscal, not social value. They inspire the participants of the Lab and their interlocutors (the people of Kamza), as well as the visitors of the website Urban Stories, to reimagine the urban space as an autonomous environment.

In this way, the lab and the website act as an alternative space-time in which the activists, together with the locals, reconfigure their relationships between home/house, land and kinship, and translating them into a community and collective commons. The Kamza Layout Lab and the Urban Stories website are experiments that can potentially create a proxy for what Escobar (2018) posits as autonomous design.

Conclusion

This article aimed to unveil alternative visions of Europe emerging in grassroots movements that seek to create potential spaces of collective commons in today's worlds of precarity and uncertainty. While grassroots movements in many parts of Europe and beyond are gaining a new voice in shaping social spaces (Corsín Jiménez, 2003; Nonini, 2017; Susser, 2017), in Albania, a country on its way to EU accession, these movements are still in their early stages and are thus crucial for the future.

Through an anthropological approach that explores and vocalises local perspectives often overshadowed by mainstream narratives, this article has shown how conceptualisations of Europe and the EU are not univocal but are always defined by a multitude of relations—between international and national policies, local practices and interpretations, and various social, political, and historical processes. From a local and grassroots perspective, the meaning of the EU oscillates between being an alternative geopolitical goal and EU accession fatigue. Some of these imaginaries of Europe remain implicit (e.g. through EU funding), while others are explicit (e.g. international political positions).

As discussed above, civil society in Albania—initially emerging in the wake of post-communist protests—was soon appropriated (or, as many activists say, "hijacked") by political parties. Today, grassroots movements are experiencing a revival in response to the current alignment of the political elite with the neoliberal market economy. However, these groups are consistently sidelined by the ruling political elite.

This article has thus explored how particular activist collectives, through mapping and documenting Kamza's unwritten history, have sought to revitalise and reconfigure familiar structural forms to generate new ways of commoning. Through various projects and activist tactics—such as websites, workshops, labs, and protests—they strive to resist the imposition of emerging neoliberal regimes of value, within which land and property are regarded solely as economic assets. They have achieved this by emphasising the interrelation between a kinship/community's emplacement within a particular land or location, and the embeddedness of that land or location to a particular kinship group or community. These grassroots communities have created a form of space-time that has the capacity to

reconfigure existing social relations—both with one another and with their place of living and dwelling (the *shtëpi*–land–kinship nexus). This "not yet, but almost" formed space-time allows activist collectives and inhabitants to experiment with and explore new ways of engaging with urban places, thus making them part of the collective commons. Such space-time calibrates a constant potential and expectation of change—the outcome of which may indeed produce a place of commoning or may fail during the process.

More than EU accession, it seems that for the younger generation of Albanians, the creation of collective commons is of greater importance, as they regard this as more crucial to shaping an alternative futures that could alleviate the precarity and uncertainty of everyday life. Perhaps, more important than the outcome itself is the very process of formation, during which they are revitalising essential cultural structures within Albanian society.

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Notes

1. This article is based on long-standing anthropological research in Albania. Therefore, I will primarily use local, emic terms when coining and defining certain concepts or terms—whether institutional, social, or grassroots. This also pertains to the meanings of Europe (as a geopolitical entity) and the European Union (as a political institution), which are often equated and/or interrelated in local parlance. As I describe throughout this text, the social, political, and economic events following the fall of the communist regime in Albania in the 1990s have led to an equation of Europe and the EU in the local peoples' discourses. As this special issue

explores visions and imaginaries of Europe in different parts and territories of the European periphery, I will adopt a local discourse (emic perspective) that allows for a close, anthropological examination and translation of visions, ideas, and expectations of Europe and the EU in Albania.

2. Due to increasing corruption in Albania (Eurobarometer, 2025) and the ongoing social and political crisis in the country (Bogdani, 2023), there is growing general distrust among many inhabitants towards national institutions, which they see mainly as incapable of leading the country towards "democratisation" (Bogdani, 2023). Political scientist Mirela Bogdani (2023: 23) points out that with a more professional and committed domestic policy, Albanian politics could remain more independent from the international community, which often pushes reforms that are not always beneficial for the country's well-being. This may also explain why Albanians, despite their ambivalent attitude towards the EU, are the only inhabitants in the Western Balkans who remain relatively positive about joining the EU (Eurobarometer, 2025). According to the Eurobarometer (2023), Albanian citizens rank NATO (74%), the UN (71%), and the EU (77%) as the most trusted institutions.
3. Erion Veliaj who was a mayor of Tirana for a decade (between 2015 and 2025) was deposed from his function of a mayor on 10 February 2025 when he was arrested by the Albanian Special Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Structure (SPAK). The arrest followed extensive investigations into allegations of corruption, money laundering, concealment of assets, and misuse of public funds, particularly in relation to large municipal contracts and the waste incineration project in Tirana (Wikipedia, 2025).
4. In the anthropological literature, there is a broad discussion about collective commons (De Angelis and Stavrides, 2010; Khalb, 2014, 2017; Nonini, 2007, 2017; Stavrides, 2016; Susser, 2017; Susser and Tonnelat, 2013). Despite different theoretical standpoints, most scholars concur that commons refer to the common or/and shared property in a particular place, be it urban or rural, and to the emergent community whose aim is to build and restore the commons and its values of shared place. Most research on collective commons concludes that the latter always emerge in relation to the specific social, cultural, and historical context of the community under study.
5. Between 2011 and 2021, there were several anti-government protests in Albania, led by the two major political parties that were in opposition during these two decades (BalkanInsight, 2018). These are the two dominant parties, the Socialist Party (PS; with the unrest in 2011) and the Democratic Party (PD) and its allies. The protests led to profound political polarisation in the public sphere as well as allegations of corruption between these parties and demands from various smaller youth movements for electoral reform and government accountability. In the last 10 years, numerous collectives have formed from spontaneous protests, some of which have developed into political parties within a few years. One of these collectives, for example, is Nisma Thurje (Hashtag Initiative), which was founded in 2013 on the initiative of civil society and the youth movement. Nisma Thurje became known for its youth movements that organised mass protests and demanded accountability from politicians. In 2018, it became a political party and ran in two elections (2021 and 2025) in a coalition with other movements such as Albania Becomes (Shqipëria Bëhet) and the League for the Rights of Albanian Workers. In the last parliamentary elections, the coalition was unable to win a seat in parliament. Another movement that pursued political goals is the Political Organization (OP), which became a political party in 2022 under the name "Levizja Bashke." There are also other grassroots movements such as feminist groups such as "Shota," which publishes an online feminist magazine (https://shota.al/), the Feminist Collective and other small local organisations in different cities in Albania such as the Hana Centre in Lezha, the Sebastia Centre in Laç and community organisations for the rights of Roma and Egyptian minorities.

6. The term space-time considers space and time as inalienably related and enmeshed (De Certeau, 1984; Gregorič Bon, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Gregorič Bon and Repič, 2016; Ingold, 1993, 2000; Lefebvre, 1991; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003; Tuan, 2001).
7. The ATA's grassroots approach to urban design, which emphasises local autonomy and community-oriented design of places to some way, echoes with A. Escobar's (2018) concept of transition and autonomous design. In his critique of contemporary design practices that pursue a dualistic ontology of control and appropriation, often operating in a singular worldview and leading to universal solutions, Escobar (2018) proposes a relational approach with all living beings. Escobar's (2018) design thus has an ontological significance and calls for a radical rethinking of design as a practice that not only creates objects but also shapes ontologies. Drawing on his research into the Zapatista movements of Latin America, their decolonial aspirations, and their struggle for autonomy, Escobar calls for an ontological design based on a more collaborative, place-based, and community-orientated approach. He postulates autonomous design by advancing the idea of transition design (coined by Ezio Manzini, an Italian design thinker). While transition design aims to enhance the social transformations towards a more sustainable futures, autonomous design is the reimagination of design itself, where local communities shape their own social and cultural worlds based on their ontologies and ways of being.

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