



Laidlaw Scholars Undergraduate Leadership and Research Programme

Summer Global Experience Reflection

Leora Kasneci

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On my nearly 18-hour commute back to Toronto, I had a lot to think about as I felt the plane drift farther and farther away from Albania. In the Tirana airport, I frowned at the thought of leaving behind six weeks of developing friendships and rekindling family bonds. Sitting in Munich airport, with a plate of bratwurst I was anticipating having during my layover, I regretted longing for food that would symbolize my departure from all the food I would grow to miss. A few hours into the flight from Germany to Canada, I even cried. Most tears were happy to have the privilege of this global experience. But I would be lying if a few of them weren't sorrowful from the uncertainty of knowing whether or not I'll return to Albania in the near future.

From my trip, I have many takeaways. I had to develop my sense of cultural awareness, especially as *i huaj*, or better known in English as a foreigner. Even though I am Albanian, I could barely speak the language when I first landed in the country. The first taxi I stepped into without my cousins, the driver was very talkative. I was not used to his extraversion; it honestly made me a bit nervous. I tried to be polite and curt but kept myself reserved. I realized that I'd repressed my curiosity about others in Canada, but in Albania? Everyone asked questions. Where are you from? Where are you headed? Where does your family live? I transgressed my own boundaries and reservations towards questions that, back in Canada, felt too intrusive to ask others. By the end of the trip, I no longer needed to repress my need to talk to people, because the culture itself was open enough where no one found it strange.

Albanian sociability was everywhere you looked. Every corner of the street had a cafe brimming with people. Now imagine being in Tirana during the World Cup. Every day, the cafes near my apartment – which was tucked in an alleyway, away from main roads – were packed with people having *kafe*. Chatting, laughing, resting, and perhaps even shouting at the television during the Egypt v. Argentina game. In Toronto, many cafes have become heavily corporatized

due to the wave in work-from-home jobs and even just the social pressure of always being or even just *seeming* productive. For every favourite local spot I have in Toronto, in Tirana I must have hundreds. The only downside is that I could never pull out my laptop at a cafe, it was socially alien. Thus, most of my work was relegated to my apartment. The upside was that going outside was not accompanied by some sort of instilled pressure to be instrumental to work. The work-life disassociation I will miss dearly.

There are a few more social pressures I was made aware of during my trip. Slippers are a common item. I'm used to taking my shoes off when entering my home, but wearing slippers instead never really occurred to me. In Albanian homes, many people have tons of pairs of slippers to give to guests. I found that the small gesture is enough to signify a broader sense of hospitality amongst the Albanian populace. Another social canon is that it is rude to refuse food when entering someone's home. Whether it is something simple such as coffee, tea, or biscuits or someone had just cooked, you are obligated to indulge in that food so long as it was being put in front of you. As a result, I ate more than I could have ever fathomed in the first two weeks of my trip. I was visiting old family and friends that I either have never met or have not seen in a decade. Their generosity made me feel like I had eaten more in those two weeks than in the entire decade I spent awaiting their presence.

All of these takeaways culminate into a central message: community is baked into Albanian society. Sociability, hospitality, and a deep sense of empathy comes with living here and convening amongst the people. In the protests, I saw this community at-large, as they imagined a better future in their acts of solidarity. In Albania, goodness does not end between you and me. It extends as far as possible, even with hours standing in crowds of people in

blistering heat, shouting until your lungs have no volume to push. It means not fighting for your own interests, but for the interests of people you may never meet.

My parents may have left Albania with many bad memories, leaving a stain on that mass of land they spent years growing up in. But being able to return and see the culture for what it is since the fall of the dictatorship has been able to subvert the way I think about Albania in its modernity. Thinking about it as more than a purveyor of trauma and generational wounds imparted on the youth, history that remains unresolved and perhaps without proper justice imparted, but also a place that my mom could return to with a sense of newfound hope. Around my age, she'd dreamed of going to Taiwan – a cafe-restaurant style wonderland in the center of Tirana, almost akin to our Cheesecake Factory (but seriously not as impressive as Taiwan). Taiwan still stands today, and I was able to sit there and experience its glorious flashy lights, big fountains, and indulgent food.

There is still intense pain surrounding Albania, even beyond its direct transitional state into today. I can be certain about one thing, even in the uncertainty surrounding the current socio-political state. I am sure that the things that challenge Albanians will not make the culture any less beautiful. It will not erode the community-based care that I had the privilege to see, or the resilience of a people who have spent generations practicing resistance. I will miss Albania dearly – the people, the mountains, the beaches, the rivers, and all the stray cats and dogs I tried giving water to -- but in the words of my cousin “maybe it's not tomorrow, but you will be back before you know it.”

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