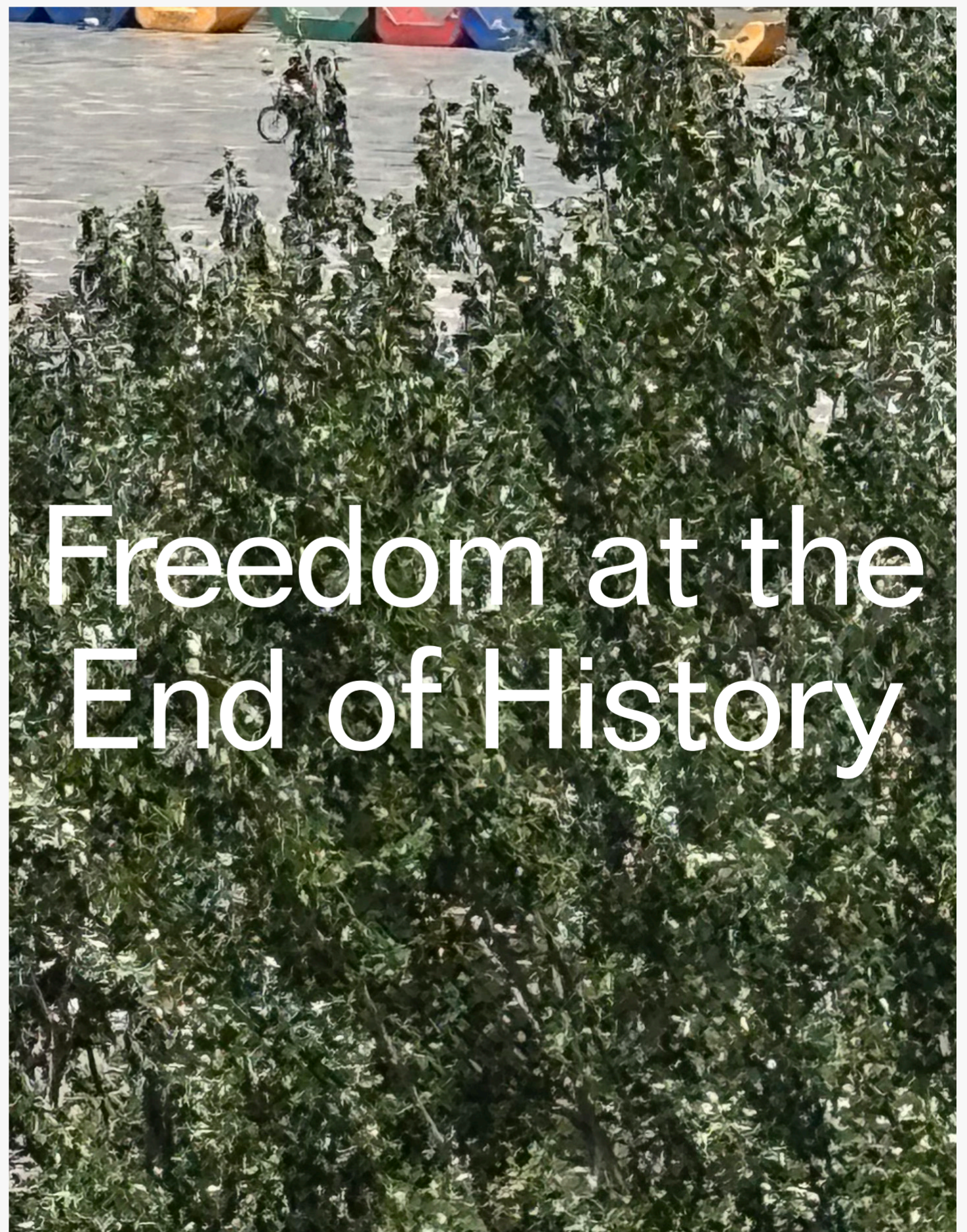




Autumn Semester 2025

Contact: barciamas@arch.ethz.ch



Subject: Seminar Week Albania

Date: 27 August 2025

Dear student,

Albania is in the midst of rapid development, economically, spatially, and culturally. We invite you to join us on a road trip across the country to understand its – and our own – pursuit of freedom.

Once a closed dictatorship associated with the Eastern Bloc, Albania is transforming into a modern, Western-oriented state, aiming to join the EU by 2029. With pristine beaches, relatively low prices, and a layered history shaped by Ottoman, Italian, and communist eras, it has become a popular tourist and investment destination. These changes strongly affect the built environment, which is shifting away from state-imposed spaces towards individual expression and private real estate.

Today, as international architects reshape its cities and tourists flock to its coasts, Albania stands in a dynamic moment of renewal – still in transition, yet confidently embracing its multiple identities: Balkan, Mediterranean, European, while maintaining ties to Turkey and the Arab states. Prime Minister Edi Rama, the driving force behind much of this architectural makeover, recently described Albania as “something still free – astonishingly so – from the suffocating comforts of overregulation and pre-packaged certainty.” His words are echoed by architects featured in this year’s Albanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, curated by Zürich-based Anneke Abhelakh. In the accompanying film, Mikkel Frost (CEBRA) calls the level of trust and freedom “intoxicating.” Jeanne Gang (Studio Gang) agrees, while warning: “I hope that architects understand that the weight is on our shoulders to make good decisions. Right now there are no guardrails. We have to be thoughtful and careful”.

These remarks resonate with Lea Ypi’s *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (2022), in which she recounts growing up before and after the fall of communism. “Freedom,” she writes, “is not only sacrificed when others tell us what to say, where to go, how to behave. A society that claims to enable people to realise their potential but fails to change the structures that prevent everyone from flourishing, is also oppressive.”

With these perspectives in mind, we will visit places and practices that embody the tension between individual freedom and the need for regulation. We will look at how concepts such as “curated development” and “punctual planning” play out in Albania’s volatile political and socio-economic context, where illegal constructions are being demolished by the state to enforce its authority. We will read and discuss Ypi’s novel alongside related texts, and meet other writers and artists reflecting on freedom and its limits. To paraphrase Michel Foucault: what are the practices of freedom that help us navigate liberating forces and shifting power relations?

We will work closely with the National Territorial Planning Agency and its Director General, Adelina Greca, as well as designers, artists, and activists engaged with what urbanist Kai Vöckler has called the “turbo-urbanism” of Albania and the wider Balkan region.

We invite you to join us on this journey into the heart of a changing Europe.

Kind regards,

Ellena, Freek, Juan, Michiel and Sophia