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The year that could be

Hope no longer dazzles. Its power lies in persistence, in acting as if change is possible

Every December in recent years, I think back to the time when Jeremy Corbyn, then the leader of the opposition Labour Party in my adopted country, the United Kingdom, quoted from a New Year's speech that had a familiar ring to it. 'This year will be tougher than last year,' he said. Corbyn's words were familiar because he was quoting Enver Hoxha, the infamous communist leader of my native country, Albania, who added, 'On the other hand, it will be easier than next year.' The comment caused an uproar, with some seeing it as evidence that Labour had turned into a Marxist cult, while others decried its insensitivity to the traumas left open by Albania's communist past.

Under 'Uncle Enver,' the Albania of much of my childhood was one of the most isolated places on earth, cut off from both the 'revisionist' East and the 'imperialist' West. It existed in its own time capsule, a harsh reality forged through loyalty, propaganda, surveillance, and the repression of dissent. Its sense of the future was shaped by past myths of heroic sacrifice and self-reliance, embedded in conspiracies of imminent foreign aggression.

Every New Year brought with it new paranoias, new shortages, new disciplinary measures, new calls for endurance. The only consistent investment the state made was in bunkers. How could one even remotely compare it to what was going on in the West?

Yet for all the dark humour that Albanians and many others failed to appreciate at the time, Corbyn's speech – and that quote – turned out to be oddly prescient. It captured the creeping gloom and dread with which much of the left has greeted each New Year since 2016. Back then, Brexit seemed like the ultimate catastrophe. 'Taking back control,' the triumphant slogan of Britain's departure from the European Union, sent a shudder through cosmopolitan elites across the West.

With hindsight – after US

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whether the sight of half-empty supermarket shelves reminded me of Albania under Hoxha (they did not). Yet with hindsight – after US President Donald Trump's first election, a global pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and Trump's return to the White House – even die-hard opponents of Brexit might now concede that their panic was somewhat overblown.

Or was it? Next year, Brexit will mark its tenth anniversary – certainly an important symbolic milestone in the current age of globalisation. The referendum signalled a return to a world in which states are increasingly isolated from one another, institutions are held hostage to the arbitrary will of individuals, and the rule of law seems irreversibly in decline.

The year ahead is unlikely to be different. The Brexiteers' call to 'take back control' – once carrying at least a veneer of intellectual honesty, insofar as it invoked legitimate debates about sovereignty – has degenerated into a full-blown conspiracy narrative. Control, we are now told, is impossible, owing to the ever-present threat posed by foreigners and those deemed incapable of 'integrating.'

The future seems to offer only a blend of dread and paranoia. What else is to be expected in a world where the only reliably expanding markets belong to the military sector, and where technological innovation appears increasingly devoted to perfecting the art of mutual destruction? Amid all this, where can one still find hope?

A key path for hope

In his 1784 essay 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose,' the German philosopher Immanuel Kant tried to identify a standpoint from which one could interpret history as more than a sorry spectacle of violence, injustice, and irrationality, and identify a pattern conducive to the development of moral dispositions. It was difficult, Kant thought, because human beings do not always pursue what is in their rational self-interest. They have a free will that enables them to recognise what is right but still leaves them susceptible to error.

Paradoxically, Kant identified in war – more precisely, in the irrationality of war – a key path to hope. He believed there would come a time when

war would become not only utterly destructive and uncertain, but also economically unsustainable – a source of runaway debt and ruin. As he saw it, the escalating conflict between states' interests and the expansion of global trade would eventually make 'the influence of every shake-up in a state in our part of the world on all other states so noticeable' that a new political configuration would have to emerge. He envisioned a future cosmopolitan federation, the likes 'of which the past world has no example to show.'

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Eventually, the world did produce such an example, though an imperfect one. Kant had predicted that 'after many devastations, reversals, and even thoroughgoing exhaustion of their powers,' nature would 'drive humans to what reason could have told them even without much sad experience.' His prophecy seemed to be borne out when, in the nightmarish conditions of the Ventotene prison camp, where Mussolini had exiled his democratic rivals, Altiero Spinelli and Ernesto Rossi wrote a manifesto arguing for a federal Europe in which states would be bound together not by conquest, but by cooperation.

The Ventotene Manifesto later became the inspiration for the European Coal and Steel Community, and eventually the EU – a historically unprecedented attempt to transform shared economic interests into a moral and political project. In the mid-2000s, that project was still very much alive. University seminars buzzed with talk of Europe's future as a supranational institution, divided by the question of how to turn the existing union's functional integration into something more ambitious: a political body founded on 'right,' not 'might.' It was a time when Europeans could still conceive of a constitutional convention for 'We, the people of Europe.' It was a moment of hope.

Paradoxically, the only place nowadays where that dream still lives is Albania, which seems to have ended up in yet another time capsule, an alternative reality that reminds me of the Bulgarian novelist Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter*, where people get to choose the historical epoch they wish to inhabit. For Albanians, the ideal epoch is the EU of the mid- to late 1990s, roughly from the signing of the Maastricht Treaty to the constitutional project. Albanian elections are fought and won on the promise of joining the EU; legislation is passed overnight to align with the *Acquis communautaire* (the EU's body of law).

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But there is a price. On the Albanian coast, in the towns of Shëngjin and Gjadër, detention centres built by Italy to accommodate deported asylum seekers are a reminder of the temporal order in which the rest of Europe, and much of the world, now lives. There we find a liminal space between cosmopolitan ideal and future dystopia.

In a speech delivered to the Italian parliament in March 2025, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni articulated this new order better than anyone else has. Unsurprisingly, she also took aim at the Ventotene Manifesto, whose authors wrote: 'The problem to solve in the first instance, failing which all other progress will only be superficial, is the definitive abolition of the division of Europe in national sovereign states.'

To that end, Spinelli and Rossi advocated (among many sensible provisions) the separation of powers, the importance of democratising the economy, the role of cultural inclusion, and the political necessity of mobilising a broad coalition of progressive parties. To this, Meloni countered, 'I don't know if this is your Europe, but it is certainly not mine,' adding that she hoped those who were defending the document had not read it.

Yet almost nobody noticed outside Italy. Perhaps that's because today's Europe bears a far closer resemblance to the vision of Meloni's party, the Brothers of Italy, than to that of Europe's early federalists. The European elite's contribution to imagining the future now consists largely of applauding Meloni's model of 'migration management,' or engaging in lavish flattery of Trump in hopes of securing meagre trade concessions. As for European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's latest call to 'rearm Europe,' that, I confess, does remind me of Albania's bunker-building campaigns.

So, rather than speculate about what is likely to happen, I would rather speak of hope – the kind Václav Havel described as hope without optimism.

As I think about the year ahead, I find myself returning once more to Kant and his reminder that, in human affairs, no one can truly predict the future. A 'conjectural history,' he wrote, differs from natural history because the course of human events depends on freedom, not necessity. The only prophecy that can come true

is the one that the prophet helps to bring about.

So, rather than speculate about what is likely to happen, I would rather speak of hope – the kind Václav Havel described as hope without optimism: a moral duty, sustained even when outcomes seem bleak. It is the hope of seeing the ideas that once animated Europe's institutions return to its streets in defence of migrant rights and against the machinery of war. Progress is never guaranteed, but it is always possible, provided we act as if it were. Thinking in this peculiar mode of conjectural history, we could do worse than to revive the spirit of resistance that gave us the cosmopolitan socialism of the Ventotene Manifesto.

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