

Tirana

## Europe's new go-to city

TIRANA

**Albania's capital is enjoying a renaissance**

“UNCLE ERI! Uncle Eri!” shout gaggles of small boys who rush to high-five Erion Veliaj, the 37-year-old boss of Tirana, Albania's capital. He has swung by to inspect a street where tarmac and new sewage pipes have just been laid, and where weeks ago there were potholes and mud. No city in Europe has changed as much in the past 25 years as Tirana. Now Mr Veliaj, who is tipped by some to be a future leader of the country, is changing it again.

In his first two years as mayor Mr Veliaj, a member of the (centre-left) Socialist Party, worked on the city centre. In June he completed work on Skanderbeg Square, the heart of Tirana. Once a busy roundabout, cars have been banished and trees and fountains have replaced them. Plans are even afoot to renovate Tirana's wacky but dilapidated 1980s pyramid.

A quarter of a century ago, Tirana was more capital village than capital city. Under communism it was a backwater of 200,000 people. Until 1991 private cars were banned, there were few shops and virtually no entertainment. Now (partly thanks to boundary changes) it is home to 1m people—more than a third of Albania's population. The city generates half of the country's GDP, says Mr Veliaj.

The fall of communism ushered in a crazed phase of building everywhere, including over Tirana's central park. Edi Rama, now the Socialist prime minister, cleared away many of the centre's illegal buildings when he was mayor. Mr Veliaj has picked up where he left off.

When Mr Veliaj was ten his father died and he was taken to Greece on his uncle's shoulders as they clambered across the mountainous border. Later he studied in America and Britain. He first came to public attention running Mjaft, an activist anti-corruption group which did much to discredit the government of Sali Berisha, who was prime minister from 2005 to 2013.

Now that he is half way through his mandate Mr Veliaj has switched his attention to Tirana's suburbs. Almost all the buildings there were illegal, and services patchy. Some homes and businesses built in parks and on other areas where they should not be are now being demolished; even more are being legalised. For many in the suburbs this is the first time they are coming into contact with the state in 25 years, says Mr Veliaj.

His enemies attack him for not being transparent about how contracts are awarded and for attempting to muzzle unfriendly media, both claims he denies. Asked if he would like to lead Albania in the future, Mr Veliaj coyly says he is thinking only about winning a second term as mayor. Right now he could not be in a better place. Everyone can see the results of his work, and he benefits from not being embroiled in a scandal that broke in October that has damaged Mr Rama and the government. A former minister of interior was accused of collusion with drug smugglers, a claim he denies. Satisfyingly for Mr Veliaj, the former minister, whose career has been destroyed, was his only serious challenger for the eventual future leadership of the Socialist Party.