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Once viewed as the Communist ideal, cycling has all but died in Tirana, the capital of Albania. Dorina Pojani charts the decline.

Tirana is a sunny Mediterranean city 35km from the coast of the Adriatic sea. It is a perfect place to cycle because it is high density and compact, is relatively flat and has pleasant weather.

But cycling — which was once a prevalent form of transport — is now almost non-existent. The city seems to prove the theory that when urban economies improve, urban transport worsens.

Initiatives to revive cycling in Tirana are under way, started by both the public and non-profit sec-
Bike paths accommodated on footpaths in Tirana. The city is trying to convert growing use of motor vehicles to more use of bikes for transport, which used to be very popular.
While all are in their infancy, it is clear that people want to reinstate this sustainable and accessible form of transport.

From 1945 to 1990, Albania was ruled by a communist dictatorship that prohibited car ownership. Tirana was a compact, medium-density city. Cycling was a popular way to travel throughout this period, and this was promoted through communist paintings, music and movies, while cyclists were portrayed as youthful and athletic. Widespread bike ownership was considered a sign of prosperity.

When the communist regime fell, restrictions on internal travel were removed and Tirana's population boomed. Migrants from all over Albania, especially the impoverished northeast, poured into the capital for jobs and a better life. In 1989, Tirana's population was 300,000. Today, the metropolitan area has 850,000 inhabitants. To house the migrants, a construction drive began. In 20 years, the inner city grew upwards with 12-storey flats [apartments], and the city edges spread into surrounding countryside.

Meanwhile, the economy grew, largely due to business opportunities financed by Albania's 1m emigrants. At the same time, car use exploded. Today, car ownership is not only a status symbol, it is an alternative to using an inadequate bus system.

Less than half of all households own a car, and many of the people who do have them limit their use to out-of-town trips only. Nevertheless, traffic jams are perpetual because Tirana's narrow streets were built for pedestrians and bikes. Drivers, mostly men, are aggressive and unruly.

Cycling is now perilous, and fewer people ride bikes. A 2007 survey of 384 households showed that just 7% of residents used a bike. Typical cyclists were middle-aged, average-income men, and usually Tirana natives.

I recently interviewed women working in urban planning or the environmental arena, and found that not one uses a bike in Tirana, despite their commitment to sustainability. They are also reluctant to let their children ride. Many older women were regular cyclists until the mid-1990s, yet some younger women don't know how to ride a bike. The deterrents include heavy and dangerous motor traffic, the lack of bike lanes, and car fumes.

The interviewees had several suggestions on how to encourage more biking, which includes limiting car use. They said this should happen through:

- The creation of inner-city pedestrian zones complemented by park and ride on the edge of town
- Periodic car bans, such as weekly car-free days
- Increases in car costs, including fuel taxes and parking fees
- More driver education
- They also wanted to see a bike rental scheme.

I also surveyed 45 architecture and planning students at Epoka University. Their attitudes to cycling were just as disappointing: only eight have ever ridden in Tirana — and only at weekends — while 10 do not know how to cycle.

Most students are able to drive but few have access to a car. To commute to the campus most use shuttle-buses (a 30-minute ride from the city centre).

Cycling levels are no higher among students from smaller cities (some of which still have high levels of biking). Several students report that one of their parents or grandparents used to cycle or still does.

Like the women interviewees, students see cycling as dangerous. Although a few of them would ride if they had a bicycle, others say they don't feel the need, and that walking or using a bus is just as easy.

Some students believe that cycling is no
longer a mainstream pursuit, and said it would be considered a strange activity for young women.

Most students want to cycle more and favour the creation of bike lanes. They know cycling has environmental and economic advantages but do not have many ideas on how to encourage greater use. A frequent suggestion of how to raise awareness was to create a campaign featuring celebrities cycling around Tirana.

Tirana's sustainable transport strategy, published in 2009, states: "We need to develop a coordinated city-wide system of public bicycle/pedestrian paths. Bike networks must have a transport function..." In line with this, a few bike/bus lanes have been created on main roads, and several bike lanes have been marked on footways.

The city has been slow to act in favour of bikes, however. Road space is already limited and made worse by car parking, and drivers pressure the city to cater for cars as much as possible. Rivalry between the city and the government (which funds local government) has strangled local initiatives, while infrastructure funds given by international institutions have not been earmarked for sustainable transport: most of the money has gone into widening roads for cars.

World Car-Free Day has been observed in Tirana for ten years. The city organises bike rides which receive wide press coverage and high-profile support. In 2008, Liri Berisha, the prime minister's wife, was one of the organisers, while last year, Fatmir Mediu, the environment minister, rode with members of environmental organisations. However, only a few main streets are car-free for World Car-Free Day, and the others are even more jammed with traffic.

PASS, a new environmental group, has established EcoVolis, a small bike-rental scheme. The American organisation Pedals for Progress gave 500 used bikes to the low-tech scheme, which employs station attendants rather than building costly electronic cycle docks. So far, four stations have opened and 200 people have signed up. The intention is to create 22 stations spaced no more than 300m apart.

The scheme has generated interest despite bike thefts and breakdowns. It depends on donations, which are few in a country with a weak civil society and low environmental consciousness. The fee of €0.72 is expensive when compared with bus fares of €0.21 a ride.

Critical mass, the worldwide celebration of cycling that also helps to assert cyclists' rights to the road, has a small following in Tirana. Participants are generally young professionals, half of whom are women. The group promotes itself through social media: it has almost 300 Facebook fans. A promotional video filmed by journalist Edmond Prifti is on YouTube.

The group is social and informal, with no political agenda. The public is hardly aware that it exists, and the rides have yet to attract media attention.

Most Tirana residents are already disenchanted by the negative consequences of car dependence, and surveys show there is huge support for exclusive bike lanes and other progressive concepts.

The biking movement must gain momentum if it is to succeed. Before that happens, Tirana's residents will have to overcome the passivity that lingers from the communist era. They will have to become active in pressing for a bike- and pedestrian-friendly lifestyle.