



THE ALBANIAN TRAILBLAZER

September 2025

Edhe hana do t'a dijë, edhe dielli do t'ket pa, se përqark ksaj rrokullije, si
Shqypnija vend nuk ka! - At Gjergj Fishta



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The Albanian Trailblazer is an initiative led by the Albanian Trailblazers team. We are a nonprofit organization founded to empower Albanian students and young professionals through mentorship, workshops, and community projects.

This publication is intended to serve as a source of inspiration and a platform to celebrate the achievements and talents within the Albanian community.



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Trust your gut: Young Trailblazer unlocks microbiome clues to mental health

by Silvi Domnori



We've all heard the phrase 'trust your gut' when being told to go with our instinct. Well, while all of us were so focused on the 'How', this young researcher wondered 'Why?'. This month's research spotlight is on **Hana Selmani**, a 23-year-old trailblazer from Shkupi (Skopje), North Macedonia.

Currently a Computer Science student at New York University Abu Dhabi, she has made a bold debut into academia with her pioneering study titled **"Using Machine Learning for Depression Detection Based on Gut Microbiome"** under the mentorship of Prof. Mai Oudah. Turning a figure of speech into literal science, Selmani built a predictive AI model that can detect major depressive disorders with a near-perfect accuracy and a great potential to revolutionize mental health diagnostics.

In her study, she developed a multi-step machine learning pipeline using gut microbiome data from stool samples. The approach involved feature selection techniques to zero in on the most informative microbial signatures linked to depression. From there, she trained an AI model, essentially teaching it to spot patterns that distinguish people with major depressive disorder from those without.

Not only did this pipeline screen for major depressive disorder but it also pinpointed potential microbial biomarkers that can differentiate individuals with depression, with an impressive 99% accuracy. It turns out, when it comes to advancing mental health diagnostics, *maybe our minds should be in the gutter.*

As her first scientific publication, Hana's study already positions her at the intersection of artificial intelligence, microbiomics, and psychology laying crucial interdisciplinary groundwork for biomarker-driven diagnostics.

Selmani has expressed that continuing her academic journey she plans to pursue a master's degree in the UK while working on a second publication in chip security. She also envisions her depression detection model progressing beyond the lab, with potential applications in technology and public health settings.

Now coming to you, *ember reader*, wherever you are: this is your reminder to not wait for a senior title or decades in the field, because the next blazing idea could be yours and its spark already ignited within...

Shkodra Elektronike - A way to remember

by **Uljad Berdica**

Colleagues, and loved ones who've reviewed the previous pieces have accused the author of excessive negativity. The author mildly agrees and, due to the people-pleasing tendency of his Albanian upbringing, will attempt a more positive tone.

Shkodra Elektronike (Sh/E) is a musical duo whose artistic endeavors are so close to the author's heart. Their song "Zjerm" ("Fire"), Albania's 2025 Eurovision entry, is but a sample of their rich library of reverberating soundscapes, gripping vocals, and culturally insightful rhythms that would challenge even the most Jungian of composers—if such ever existed. The duo's brilliance lies in their complementary energies. Beatrice's powerful femininity, assertive presence, and choreographic prowess are spellbinding. Kol's sometimes menacing keyboard work provides the perfect sonic backbone. His unabashed groovy confidence and imposing agility with the keyboard station lays down the canvas for Beatrice's voice to fill and transcend, elevating their music beyond categorization.

This piece is not about the boring debate on how the modern reproduction of folklore ensures survival, referred to by some as enrichment, and by others as tasteless or kitsch. I would argue that if reinterpreting is kitsch, then refusing it is such a banal stance to take. You're not a Kundera character, you live in a society. Traditions should at some point pass through the lens of "cool" to deter death. These songs were once the ultimate means of expression, they were timely before they were timeless and we should not rob them of the opportunity to savor the soul of the present. Admittedly, this insight calls for a nod to the ending of "The File on H." by the Albanian writer who never won a Nobel: Kadare.

I mostly say this because Shkodra Elektronike is not your average Greek or Slavic pop group that repurposes "turbo-folk" for the young generation or whatever the Albanians who throw roses at singers are called (I don't care). My journey with SH/E began through "Kur Perendon Dielli" (When the Sun Sets), a song at the cross-section of Albania's complicated relationship with itself—its lyrics suffering the interventions of socialist realism and modern apathy. The original lyrics also happen to be the first thing I ever learned to read as a toddler, my first foray into civilization, my bridge to the rest of humanity and, evidently, to Sh/E. They weave all the lyrical versions in their rendition. The resulting composition honors every version without judgment, capturing the song's ode to the emotional erasure of realism and the bittersweet pull of nostalgia that follows abandonment. Their arrangement embraces these contradictions, making the broken vessel larger than the sum of its pieces.

Similar to Bob Dylan, who unlike Kadare actually won a Nobel, they pass the artistic high bar of difficult-to-perform folk music in exchange for artistic freedom thereafter. If American folk music has a house of the rising sun to mourn for the unfulfilled life, the Albanians have the peaks where the sun sets to make way for the unrequited love. Like Bob Dylan, Sh/E unites folk purists and the cultural masses with one notable difference: they went electric from the start.

Perhaps most refreshingly, behind their artistic seriousness lies a genuine warmth and humor. When asked if they watched Eurovision—the very competition they would later qualify for—they simply replied with "Not really". This stands out in an industry where being fake is the norm. Even I would have awkwardly recollected watching Lena's "Satellite" on my friend's mother's phone in middle school. Sh/E are cultural alchemists transforming tradition into something that gleams with contemporary relevance, while also putting out original work. They show us that remembering where we come from means carrying it forward, live and electric.



Trailblazer of the Month: Meleq Hoxhaj

With a Master of Science in Economics and a growing track record of international impact, Meleq Hoxhaj has carved a path from Albania's public institutions to Toronto's data-driven ecosystem. Early in his career, he distinguished himself at the Albanian Customs Administration, streamlining risk-assessment workflows, enhancing compliance procedures, and learning firsthand how policy and data intersect in practice.

He advanced his expertise through a Professional Master's in Banking & Finance, then sharpened his analytical edge with a 4.0 GPA in Business Analytics at Seneca Polytechnic, Canada. Today, he is ranked among Albania's top 500 scholars on Google Scholar (h-index: 5), and continues to contribute to academic research, peer review, and international conferences in Hungary, Greece, Türkiye, and Bahrain.

Meleq is a highly adaptable and versatile professional, with proven strengths in organizational strategy, critical analysis, and managing complex, multi-stakeholder projects. His portfolio includes Python-based predictive models and interactive Tableau dashboards used to inform business decisions and public policy.

Beyond his technical accomplishments, Meleq is deeply committed to mentorship and community engagement. Through the Albanian Trailblazers initiative, he mentors outstanding Albanian students, offering guidance, opening professional networks, and helping them navigate academic and career challenges with clarity and confidence. He also volunteers with Lupus Ontario, reinforcing his belief that data-driven solutions and human empathy should go hand in hand.

Asked what drives him, Meleq puts it simply: "It's about learning, improving, and contributing, every single day." That mindset, grounded, curious, and impact-focused is why we proudly recognize him as our July Trailblazer.

Based in Toronto, Meleq is also an avid traveler and lifelong learner who thrives in dynamic, multicultural environments.

Dollia: Albania's Toasting Tradition Officially Recognized as National Cultural Heritage

by Serena Canka



Early this summer, Albania's centuries-old toasting tradition, known locally as Dollia, was officially declared a Pasuri Kombëtare e Trashëgimisë Kulturore (National Asset of Intangible Cultural Heritage) by the National Council of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

But Dollia is much more than simply raising a glass of wine or raki. It is a heartfelt symbol of **hospitality, respect, and unity**. Often captured in the phrase "Kripë, bukë e zemër" (salt, bread, and heart), it reflects the warmth with which Albanians welcome their guests.

At the heart of this tradition is the dollibash (the toastmaster) who sits at the head of the table, opposite the guest of honour. Together, they exchange wishes and words of goodwill in front of everyone present, strengthening bonds through respect, sincerity, and reciprocity. Over the centuries, Dollia has become more than just a custom; it has evolved into a moral code that carries Albania's values from one generation to the next.

Dollia is present at weddings, family gatherings, festive meals, and public ceremonies. In every setting, it transforms ordinary moments into shared celebrations, weaving together poetry, personal sentiment, and collective wisdom into a living tradition.

With its official recognition, Dollia is now safeguarded as part of Albania's cultural heritage, ensuring that this beautiful expression of hospitality continues to inspire and unite for generations to come.

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