

Failure of “Myth of Homeland”: delay of return migration to Albania

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The multifaceted profile of Albanian Diaspora

Albania has one of the world’s highest emigration rates, relative to its population, with a stock of emigrants nearly 39 per cent of the total population¹. There were respectively 437,356 Albanian legal migrants residing in Greece and 447,586 in Italy in 2015².

The recent flow of Albanians migrants is largely made up of four main groups: i) labour migrants; ii) family members of migrants, or people migrating to reunite with their families abroad; iii) students (the number of Albanian students at Italian universities constitutes the biggest community of foreign students in this country)³; and iv) asylum-seekers and refugees. The first three groups are numerically more relevant as significantly larger⁴.

Generally, the Albanian Diaspora is composed of the following groups which fits to the contemporary classification of Diasporas (Rutherford, 2009): i) lived Diaspora or individuals born in the home country who are currently living permanently or temporarily in a host country; ii) ancestral Diaspora or individuals with ancestral links to the home country, such as second and third generations members; iii) next generation Diaspora or younger members; iv) returning Diaspora or members who have lived in a host country and who have come back to the home country; v) affinity Diaspora or foreign nationals who worked or studied in the home country and have re-migrated.

The main causes of emigration for Albanian citizens are still of economic nature, among which the unemployment that remains high (17.3 per cent, with a peak of 32.5 per cent in the age group 15-29 years) and poverty (12.5 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line)⁵. This happens despite the improvement of living conditions and a net stable growth of the Albanian economy by 1.11 in 2013, 1.8 in 2014, 2.8 in 2015⁶ and about 3 in 2016⁷ at a time of the economic crisis in destination countries and Europe.

“Economic Asylum Seekers” growing flow: a momentum for revisiting Albanian migration

During the last years the numbers related to Albanian citizens who applied for asylum in EU Member States (11,040 in 2013, 12,295 in 2014) and whose requests have been largely rejected/unsuccessful were growing. Beginning in early 2015, a surge of

¹ UNDESA (2015) *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2015 revision* (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2015), Extracted on 13 January 2016.

² <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates15.shtml>.

³ Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali. Rapporto annuale sulla presenza dei migranti. La comunità albanese in Italia (2015).

⁴ IOM, Policy on Engagement with Albanian Communities Abroad 2016-2020, August 2016.

⁵ INSTAT, Tirana, 2016.

⁶ World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=AL>.

⁷ Ministry of Finance of Albania, Tirane, 2017.

“economic asylum seekers” left Albania, heading largely to Germany, Netherland and other Western European countries. In total, 53,805 Albanians submitted an application for asylum in Germany in 2015⁸. Albania ranked fourth in the number of asylum seekers to the European Union during the first quarter of 2015, according to Eurostat data.

Albanian asylum seekers, particularly those directed to Germany, were encouraged by signals that the German government was revisiting its migration policies, looking to attract new foreign labor. Many Albanians called themselves “economic asylum seekers”, as did the media, and offered motivations including unemployment and poverty as reasons for leaving Albania in their asylum interviews. Indeed, almost all of them were labor emigrants who were self-nominated “economic asylum-seekers” as a tactic to be admitted in Germany and other EU member countries. Given their perception that Germany was seeking workers, many Albanians adopted the term “economic asylum seeker” as an argument to incentivize their accommodation in Germany. Many may have been misled by smugglers to believe this was a viable route to gaining residency in the European Union (Barjaba & Barjaba, 2015).

Economic motivations are not recognized under the 1951 Geneva Convention, which defines a refugee as an individual persecuted or fearing persecution based on belonging to a political, religious, or ethnic group. In 2016 Germany added Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro to a list of “safe countries,” which would fast-track processing and removal of failed asylum seekers from those countries.

The growing flow of self-labeled “economic asylum-seekers” is a momentum to start re-reflecting on the nature of Albanians’ migration flows, particularly on their expectations on return and the ideology of return.

The failure of “Investing for children” myth

Some of the myths of Albanians’ emigration at early 1990-s, were the myth of children’ future and that of immediate return to Homeland. Almost all emigrants interviewed in Greece, Italy and Germany mentioned that among the strongest pull factors were their desires to “ensure a better education for their children” and “make some money to meet their basic needs and to return to Homeland” (Barjaba, 2002; Barjaba, 1996). After reaching at last one of these goals, most of them confessed they will return back to Albania. My intention in revoking these Albanian emigrants’ projects is not to put into attention the timing gap between “educating the children” and “return to Homeland”. My hypothesis is that Albanian migration was accompanied and even motivated by several myths about working and living in Western countries.

I remember that during my field work with Albanian emigrants in Greece, Italy and Germany, the expectation to find better schooling and educational opportunities for their children was a principal common concern of most of them (Barjaba & Perrone, 1996). Democratic Albania inherited a well-structured education system from the previous regime. Of course, it was deeply politicized and isolated from contemporary scientific achievements and technological innovation in Western countries. However, the access to free education was a public policy implemented by communist regime. Free and mass education was propagated as a pride of the country, in the context of total isolation from the rest of the world.

⁸ EUROSTAT, 2016.

However, education system was deeply affected by transitional developments. The stature of "educated people" was soon replaced by the perception of "reach person." Education was not perceived to be the best avenue towards wellbeing and social mobility (Barjaba, 1995a). The rate of illiteracy rapidly increased and in the mid 1990-s Albanian parents started to understand that country's education system did not respond to their expectations. The rate of illegal and family employment of children and even minors increased (Barjaba, 1995b).

In these circumstances was shaped the expectation to find better schooling and life opportunities for children, which characterized the motivations of first emigration flows from Albania. It was meaningfully articulated by their expression "We left Albania to ensure a better future for our children" (Barjaba, 1996).

How this project was implemented? Almost three decades later, the second generation of Albanian migrants has followed the school system in destination countries. They have received, of course, a better education compared to that in Albania. Thousands of Albanian students have followed and are graduated at Western universities. However, the gap between expectations of the parents and education of their children is visible. Employment, rather than education, seems to be the life path of Albanian migrants second generation. In addition, most of them are employed in the periphery of labor market. Consequently, the myth of children education remained only a myth.

The Myth of Fatherland versus delayed return

Well-known Albanian migration scholars have assumed that a possible quick return will not be the case of Albanian migration. King and Vullentari (2012) have noticed that "*Return is unlikely to take place on a large scale for two principal reasons. First, as migration matures into family settlement abroad, there is a need to sustain family incomes and to build an educational and career future for children which would be interrupted were return to take place. Second, the Albanian economic environment is not propitious for employment-seeking or business-minded returnees*". This hypothesis has been confirmed. Contrary to early Albanian emigrants' expectations, the country experienced a delay in the return of successful emigrants.

Return migration first became significant in 2005. Returnees of this stage have been diverse: i) emigrants who lost their job in the destination country; ii) emigrants who came back with a plan to invest in Albania; iii) emigrants who had gained high qualifications and intended to use it in their home country.

Generally, the flow of successful returnees has been less than those who returned because of hardships abroad. Consequently, the ideology of return migration has mostly been the ideology of failure. Returnees are not always those who come back at the end of their migration project to invest in their country of origin; rather, they are often migrants with high qualifications or indeed entire families who have not found, or have lost, a suitable location in the foreign labour market. By returning, they make an attempt to establish themselves again in the homeland, while leaving it open to return to the country of emigration.

The domination of failure was explicable in the conditions of the illegal emigration, during the first decade of Albania's contemporary migration. After 1999, as the immigration legislation of Italy and Greece became more liberal and favourable, the rhythms of forced return started to decrease (Barjaba & King, 2005, Perrone, 1998).

However, the increase in returned migrants started to be a trend of Albanian migration

after 2008. The effects of the financial crisis on the Greek and Italian economies, particularly stimulated return and raised challenges for individual contributions to Albania's development. Between 2008 and 2014, it is estimated that 150,000 to 180,000 emigrants returned to Albania, the majority from Greece. Albanians residing in Italy were also decreased by 4.6 per cent in 2015.⁹ Similarly, many Albanian migrants have returned home from Greece, and other main countries of destination, including the UK, Germany, Switzerland, and France.

High rate of rejection of asylum applications by citizens of Albania also contributed to the return flows.

The yearly breakdown of return figures shows the following returns by year¹⁰:

Year	Number of returns
2012	14,762
2013	20,751
2014	20,376
2015	25,134

Most of returnees have requested governmental support to reintegrate into the Albanian economy and society, including social and health assistance and support for their children's education.

Only a small part of them have been able to direct their resources towards the country's development. According to a 2013 IOM/INSTAT study, only 8 percent of returnees surveyed said they invested in at least one project. The remaining 92 percent said they did not invest for three main reasons: insufficient capital limiting the availability of financial recourses required to start a business, no prior plan to invest, and lack of experience and training in investment¹¹.

Recent researches show that there are three main motivations encouraging the ideology of failure of return migrants to Albania: family problems, unemployment and nostalgia. Being female, not having children before departure, send goods, maintaining contacts and visit Albania frequently, do not investing after returning, having intentions to leave the country again, and returning to place of birth or residence are positively associated with returning for family problems. Returning for unemployment reason is positively related to being married as a pre-migration condition. Individuals appertaining to the nostalgic group are more likely to being female, not being married and having children before leaving the country, sent goods, maintain contacts and visit Albania frequently, returning to the place of birth or residence, and declaring their intentions to stay and not leaving the country again (García-Pereiro & Biscione, 2016).

The researchers (Gëdeshi & Xhaferaj, 2016) have made the distinction between two groups of returnees. The first group was composed of economic migrants. Data suggest that the return intensity of this group decreased after 2014. For example, the number of returned migrants registered in the migration counters dropped from 1.500 persons in 2012 to 500 in 2015¹². The second group was composed of Albanian failed asylum-

⁹ IDOS, Statistical Dossier on Immigration, Rome, 2016.

¹⁰ Migration profile of the Republic of Albania for the year 2016; Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2017.

¹¹ Return Migration and Reintegration in Albania 2013, IOM & INSTAT, Tirana, 2014.

¹² Monitoring Report of the Action Plan of the National Strategy 2010-2015 for the reintegration of the Albanian return migrants, Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth, National Employment Service, 2016.

seekers who applied mostly between 2014 and 2015, and returned in groups. Around 3.600 asylum seekers returned from Germany in 2015 and around 3.700 in the first half of 2016. These numbers underscore an increasing trend of the return process of Albanian asylum seekers.

From a more detailed perspective, Gëdeshi & Xhaferaj (2016) classify the returnees in five groups: i) unemployed; ii) employed; iii) self-employed; iv) small and medium investors; v) students. The first group is the most socially excluded and in emergent needs for employment, economic assistance and integration of children at schools. The second group is characterized by a higher professional level and is richer in social capital which has assisted them in employment. However, they are critical to quality of services offered in Albania. The self-employed are requiring some financial and technical support to start their businesses in Albania. Entrepreneurs are characterized by a higher level of human, financial and social capital, but require more qualitative business consulting and services in education and care. The returned students require more access to participate in economic, academic and political life of the country.

The trend to revert to the ideology of success is also related with some positive features of the migration of Albanians and the collapse of the so-called “myths” about their emigration: the myth of demon and criminal is being replaced by the myth of neighbor; the myth of usurper of the jobs of the natives is being replaced by the myth of competitor; the myth of burden on welfare system is being replaced by the myth of sponsor of the system, as the Albanian emigrants contribute to the receiving countries as tax payers (Barjaba, 2015).

Final remarks

Despite its moderate character, the current return trend is partly stemming the negative consequences of high migration flows, such as loss of key human resources. However, more efforts are needed to strengthen the positive development impact of return migration. Many scholars (Mai, 2010; Cassarino, 2014; Barjaba, 2016) support the idea that the link between migration and development in Albania can be facilitated, on the one hand, by attracting investments and expertise of migrants and, on the other hand, by seeing the return migration phenomenon, not as a response to the migration problems of destination countries, but as part of the migration process. This could be achieved by the adoption of labour market and other appropriate emigrants’ engagement policies. The Diaspora can be a bridge to stimulate investment and trade relations abroad for Albanian companies as well as for institutional and private sector partnerships between the country of origin and the destination countries.

In order to promote such a partnership, the country migration policies need to adopt a spirit of reciprocity through which Albania and Diaspora will work together for mutual goals. The country needs to build trust between Government and Diaspora in order to encourage physical or virtual return migration. Ancestral or affinity Diaspora may not intend to physically return but may have an interest in helping through their financial, social or human capitals, skills and ideas. These capitals can be mobilized associated with 3E strategy: Enable, Engage, Empower.

In addition, returnees can bring considerable labour and social innovations in the Albanian system and their contribution is a key to the country’s development. Returning migrants bring a valuable set of informal and non-formal capacities, skills and competencies obtained during their migration experience. A number of successful

transnational ventures in Albania, largely found in big cities such as Tirana, Durrës, Korça and Gjirokastra near the Greek border, generated by migrants mostly with experiences in Italy and Greece, have led to the birth of transnational networks and entrepreneurship among Albanian migrants (Barjaba, 2017). These ventures could be of great importance to the country's development. The transnational networks should be supported by various policies, incentives, and resources in order to promote the migration-development nexus.

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