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# Africa e Mediterraneo

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Migrazione e sviluppo: il migrante di ritorno può essere visto come un agente di sviluppo nel proprio Paese di origine?

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# From Failure to Success: Return Migration in Albania

Among the countries with the highest international migration flow in Europe, Albania in recent years has seen a significant rise of return migration, sustained by some specific, but not always effective, national policies.

by Kosta Barjaba, Joniada Barjaba



**A**lbania is one of the poorest countries in Europe, with an unemployment rate of 14.6 percent and youth unemployment rate of nearly 26.6 percent in 2017.<sup>1</sup> Albania remains primarily a country of emigration. In 2015, there were over 1.120 million Albanian emigrants residing abroad, most in Greece and Italy.<sup>2</sup> The country has one of the world's highest emigration rates: nearly 39 percent of the population in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Initially Albania's migration flows were mainly dominated by men.

#### A brief overview of the Albanian migration

However, over the last few years an increase in the number of females has been noted, due to family reunification, especially in Italy.<sup>4</sup> The Albanian emigrants are made up of five main groups: (i) labour migrants; (ii) family members of migrants, or people migrating to reunite with their families abroad; (iii) students; (iv) asylum-seekers and refugees (numerically less relevant as significantly smaller);<sup>5</sup> (v) unaccompanied minors: their number of has increased over recent years, especially in Italy,

the United Kingdom, Belgium and the Netherlands (Barjaba and Barjaba 2015). In 2016, Eurostat recorded a total of 1,028 cases of Albanian unaccompanied minors who applied for asylum in the EU member states. More specifically, in Italy, in 2016, there were 1,343 unaccompanied minors from Albania, equal to 9.7 percent of the total number of unaccompanied minors in this country.<sup>6</sup>

#### Migration policies: particular focus on return migration

Return migration was not the focus of Albania's migration policies during the first decade of its contemporary migration (King and Vullnetari 2004). From 1992 to 2010, the migration policies of the Albanian governments mainly covered issues such as extending legal emigration channels and supporting Albanian migrants' integration and accommodating foreign workers, and improving the admission of asylum seekers and refugees in Albania. Albania's first Strategy for Migration Management (2005-2010) covered three main policy areas: addressing the push factors through economic development and job creation; reducing irregular and promoting legal emigration channels; and protecting Albanians abroad. Later on, in June 2010, Al-



\* ————— \*

**There is a tendency for government policies to shift towards creating a synergy between migration and development and enhancing the return of successful migrants.**

\* ————— \*

bania adopted its first strategy (and related action plan) for the reintegration of Albanian citizens returning to their country of origin. One of the key points of the strategy was creating networks of institutional focal points in order to support the returnees in the country. However, these networks are yet to be formalised within the structure of the employment services and need more institutional capacities and human resources. The complete execution of this task and the failure to follow the expired strategy (in 2015) with a new one illustrate a gap in labour migration policy-making.<sup>7</sup> Some additional government efforts related to migration policies are discussed below.

In 2016, the Parliament of Albania passed an act on "the identification and registration of addresses of the Albanian citizens living outside of the territory of the Republic of Albania". The act is considered to be a concrete government commitment to engage with emigrants. It provides various administrative benefits for emigrants in the host countries, including migrants' right to vote from abroad.

Additionally, the National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI2015-2020), which was approved in May 2016, has a specific section on migration management with clearly identified principles and objectives.<sup>8</sup>

Also, in November 2016, a policy document on engaging Albani-

Street expo in Tirana of a Albanian-Kosovo photographer, Fadil Berisha.  
© Albania Reloaded.

## Dal fallimento al successo: la migrazione di ritorno in Albania

**N**egli ultimi anni l'Albania ha sviluppato una politica di sostegno alla migrazione di ritorno. Nel giugno 2010 è stata adottata la prima strategia per reintegrare cittadini albanesi rientrati nel Paese di origine. Le politiche del governo sono orientate verso la creazione di una sinergia tra migrazione e sviluppo, che supporti il ritorno di migranti “di successo”. Il processo di reintegro manca, però, di una politica strutturata e di un preciso quadro legale, nonché di risorse istituzionali, umane, finanziarie. Per molti anni questi temi sono stati affrontati dal Ministero del Lavoro, con risultati infruttuosi. Attualmente, invece, a trattare della questione – e del tema migrazione in generale – sono il Ministero degli Affari Esteri e il Ministero degli Interni, che si occupano anche di assistenza alle comunità albanesi nel mondo, prevenzione dell'immigrazione irregolare, lotta alla tratta, accoglienza dei minori non accompagnati. Un dipartimento del Ministero del *Welfare* e della Gioventù ha la responsabilità di monitorare l'implementazione delle strategie di reintegrazione degli Albanesi che ritornano. Tuttavia, manca ancora un coordinamento tra le strutture governative che renda le varie azioni più efficaci.

Il ritorno dei migranti è diventato significativo dal 2005, per varie ragioni. In generale, il numero di coloro che rientrano dopo storie di migrazioni di successo è inferiore a quanti ritornano per le difficoltà incontrate all'estero. Dal 2008, ad esempio, si è avuto un aumento di ritorni da Grecia e Italia a causa della crisi economica. Una diminuzione del numero dei rientri si è avuta in seguito, dal 2014 al 2016.

Molti studiosi sostengono che il legame tra migrazione e sviluppo può essere facilitato, da un lato, attraendo investimenti e competenze, dall'altro, vedendo la migrazione di ritorno non come una risposta ai problemi ma come una parte del processo migratorio. Questo approccio potrebbe essere applicato attraverso l'adozione di specifiche politiche relative al mercato del lavoro. Il contributo dei migranti di ritorno può essere fondamentale per lo sviluppo del Paese, portando le competenze formali e non formali ottenute nei Paesi che li hanno accolti. Anche le rimesse inviate dai migranti possono, in questo senso, costituire un importante motore di sviluppo.

an communities abroad was presented during the first Diaspora Summit held in Tirana.<sup>9</sup> Around 1,000 Albanians residing in more than 40 countries were part of the summit.

Recently, there is a tendency for government policies to shift towards creating a synergy between migration and development and enhancing the return of successful migrants. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement on the legal, regulatory, and institutional frameworks for a better management of return migration, and better use of the financial, social, human, and symbolic migration capitals as a source of development. Regarding direct reintegration assistance to returnees, so far there are no government resources available. Consequently, the reintegration process lacks an elaborated policy and legal framework and additional institutional, human and financial resources.

It is important to highlight that in the context of Albania, migration policies are considered to be part of the national policies and as a result, they are scarcely included within the local development framework. However, this attitude should change as the reintegration of the return migrants should be a shared responsibility between the central and local administrations in order to ensure a comprehensive approach to synergy between migration and development.

### Paradoxical shift in institutional framework?

For more than two decades, the key government structure addressing migration issues has been the former Ministry of Labour, known nowadays as the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth. However, data shows that the attempts of this institution to manage migration issues have been unsuccessful. There was a gap between government's migration plan and the practical execution of the policies by this institution. Recently, there has been a shift in the institutional framework addressing migration and return issues. The principal actors dealing with migration are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Intern, as the Government intends to grant a stronger political connotation to migration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is mainly focused on assisting Albanian communities around the world and protecting their rights; undertaking and supporting Diaspora initiatives, and coordinating actions with the Ministry of Intern on readmission and other tasks related to the return of vulnerable emigrants. On the other hand, the Ministry of Intern is responsible for preventing irregular migration and the fair treatment of foreigners in Albania; implementation of readmission agreements; the fight against trafficking and smuggling of persons; and coordination of the reception of returned unaccompanied minors. Also, the civil registry offices, part of the Ministry of Intern, have played an important role over the last two years regarding the law on registration of addresses of Albanian emigrants. The Department of Migration, Return and Reintegration in the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth were responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Strategy on Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens until its expiration in 2015. More specifically, the MSWY migration-related policies are a responsibility of the Directorate of Employment Policies and Migration. The National Employment Service provides information to potential migrants and reintegration support to returnees. It runs six employment programmes, but none of them is a migration programme or intervention initiative. Also, there are no

budgetary resources allocated to services regarding migrants. There are other government institutions dealing with migration related issues such as the Ministry of Education and Sports for migration and education; the Ministry of Economic Development, Tourism, Trade and Entrepreneurship for the economic aspects of migration; the Ministry of Culture for the promotion and preservation of cultural heritage among emigrants, as well as other institutions. Moreover, currently, there is no inter-ministerial mechanism in place which would ensure coordination and foster cooperation among these bodies. Strengthening inter-ministerial collaboration is one of the areas that needs improving; there is a need to establish a formal coordination mechanism to ensure a general involvement of government structures in the migration and development nexus.

**Migration and development:  
maximizing the gains from returnees and remittances**

The Albanian Diaspora is composed of the following groups: lived Diaspora, individuals born in the home country who are currently living permanently or temporarily in a host country; ancestral Diaspora: individuals with ancestral links to the home country, such as second and third generations members; next generation Diaspora: younger members, typically under the age of 35, whose engagement is fundamental in order to ensure the sustainability of current Diaspora strategies; returning Diaspora: members who have lived in a host country and who have come back to the home country; and affinity Diaspora: foreign nationals who worked or studied in the home country and have re-migrated (Rutherford 2009).<sup>10</sup>

*Ideology of failure and success*

Albania has experienced a delay in the return of successful emigrants. Return migration started to become more significant in 2005. Returnees have been diverse: emigrants who lost their job in the destination country; emigrants who came back with a plan to invest in Albania; and emigrants who had gained high qualifications and intended to use them 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. 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 and King 2005; Perrone 1998).

Reverting to the ideology of success is 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 neighbour; the myth of usurper of the jobs of natives is being replaced by the myth of the 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). However, the effects of the financial crisis in 2008 in Greece and Italy stimulated the failed return once again. During the period from 2008 to 2014 between 150,000 and 180,000 emigrants returned to Albania, the majority of them from Greece. Around 75 percent were males and 25 percent females. The ma-

majority of the returns, about 53.4 percent occurred in 2012 and 2013. About 94 percent of the returnees experienced voluntary return; 70.8 percent of the returnees came from Greece, followed by Italy with 23.7 percent and other countries including United Kingdom and Germany. Most of the returnees requested governmental support to reintegrate into Albanian society, including social and health assistance and support for their children's education. Few of them have been able to use their resources towards the country's development; only 8 percent of the returnees surveyed stated that they invested in at least one project. The remaining 92 percent explained that they did not invest their capital for various reasons: insufficient capital limiting the availability of financial resources required to start a business; no prior plan to invest; and lack of experience and training in investment.<sup>11</sup> The increase in returns continued even after 2014. The number of Albanian emigrants in Italy decreased by 4.6 percent in 2015.<sup>12</sup> Many Albanian emigrants returned from Greece, UK, Germany, Switzerland, France, US, and Canada. Of the migrants who returned during 2012-2015, about 96 percent were males and 4 percent females. The majority of the returnees belong to the age group 25-34 and 35-44 years old.<sup>13</sup> The dynamic of return was as follows:

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

Source: Migration profile of the Republic of Albania 2015, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Tirana 2016.

Only a small number of the returnees between 2012 and 2015, specifically around 4,000 people have requested assistance from migration counters of the regional and local employment offices, with a clear predominance of former emigrants in Greece (80 percent) and Italy (14 percent). The typology of returnees during 2008-2014 consisted of three forms:

- i. voluntary return of economic emigrants;
- ii. return of economic emigrants because of crisis in the host countries, Italy and Greece;
- iii. return of minors, whether accompanied or not. The majority of the returnees from the aforementioned categories come from Greece and Italy.

The number of economic returned migrants who have returned from Greece and Italy due to the implications of the economic crisis started to decrease between 2014 and 2016. A considerable number of returnees were vulnerable groups of migrants such as economic returnees, rejected returned asylum-seekers, Roman and Egyptian returnees, unaccompanied migrant children and trafficked persons.

The researchers have made the distinction between two groups of returnees. The first group was composed of economic migrants and data suggests that the return intensity of this group

decreased. For example, the number of returned migrants registered in the migration counters dropped from 1,500 in 2012 to 500 in 2015.<sup>14</sup> The second group was composed of Albanian failed asylum-seekers who applied for asylum 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 (Gëdeshi and Xhaferaj 2016). These numbers underscore an increasing trend of the return process of Albanian asylum seekers. Gëdeshi and Xhaferaj (2016) have classified 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 of the 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 the economic, academic and political life of the country. The potential positive effects of migration, such as the easing of pressure on the labour market and a reduction in the unemployment rate are countered by negative consequences such as loss of key human resources for the country's development. This possible "drain" is partly stemmed by the current return flows, but more efforts should be made to strengthen the positive development impact of return migration. Many scholars 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 (Mai 2010; Cassarino 2014; Barjaba 2016). 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 addition, returnees can bring considerable labour and social innovations to the Albanian system and their contribution is 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. 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.

#### *Impact of remittances on welfare and development*

Remittances have long played an important role in Albanian's economy and welfare, especially as an essential resource in the

survival of migrants' families. Remittances reached their highest level in absolute terms in 2008 (1.4 billion USD), then they fell to 1.027 million USD in 2012, and have increased slightly since then, reaching 1.047 million USD in 2015 (which represented 9.1 percent of the country's GDP).<sup>15</sup> Lower remittances were due to the global economic crisis in lower incomes, higher cost of living, and higher education expenses in the host countries. At the macro level, remittances have had a positive impact on macro-economic stability of the country, which helped finance the Albanian commercial deficit, contributed to the financial consolidation and strengthened the national currency. At the micro level, remittances have contributed to alleviating poverty (Barjaba 2016). Several studies in Albania, mostly carried out during the period from 2000-2005 have shown that the majority of remittances were used entirely for consumption, whereas a small number of international migrants send remittances for investment purposes in the production sectors such as agriculture, industry and construction. The overwhelming majority of remittances were used primarily to finance family daily needs. Building, upgrading and furnishing the homes in Albania, follows the consumption category, and investment in real estate is the next primary category. While undoubtedly important for poverty alleviation, this use of remittances implies a very limited role in sustainable job creation (de Zwager *et al.* 2005).

Efforts by the Albanian Investment Development Agency and other government structures to support the migration-development nexus through the use of remittances have been present in Albania. However, the government has failed to harness remittances as a powerful source of development; despite a few efforts to use fiscal and financial incentives to stimulate the return of successful emigrants and contribute to the country's development. Currently, there is no formal remittance scheme in place promoted or supported by the Albanian government. While, private companies offer money transfer services and charge various fees which vary from 9 to 100 EUR per transaction. On average, over the past five years, the fees of remittance transfers have fluctuated around 8 percent of the amount remitted, slightly increasing from 7.4 percent in 2011 to 8.4 percent in 2016.<sup>16</sup> According to the World Bank, this fee level is close to the world average remittance transfer costs.<sup>17</sup>

One of the key institutions monitoring remittances flows as part of the balance of payments is the Bank of Albania. The Bank has defined three main pillars to further develop its work on remittances: i) improving the methodology for remittance surveys and analysis; ii) creating new instruments for remittance transfer in a quick, safe, transparent way and with minimal costs; and iii) improving extensive, diverse and practical information to help the economic and financial decision-making.

#### **Final remarks**

Recently, there is a positive shift towards successful return to Albania. It requires more support for returnees' economic and social integration as well as legal and fiscal incentives to invest their financial, social, and human capital in Albania's development. The government can also enhance the developmental impact of migration by improving remittance services; channelling of remittances towards investment; mapping, trust-building, mobilising and organising Albanian emigrants; establishing practical cooperation with emigrant communities

in receiving countries; setting up virtual returns of qualified nationals enhancing peer learning in the region; attracting emigrants for the purpose of enlarging entrepreneurship initiatives in Albania and for promoting investment, philanthropy, technology transfer and innovation; infusing the potentials of Albanian emigrants to the social, cultural and economic development of the country; strengthening local governments' provision of services, information and guidance to migrants.

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