

Coming back home? Albanian migrants intentions to return

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Abstract

Return migration is a highly discussed topic in academia. This emphasis by scholars and academics translates into developing and enriching both theoretical approaches and empirical studies around the world. Attempting to better comprehend this phenomenon, several aspects of return migration have been considered, including but not limited to: return intentions, motives encouraging return, re-integration and its challenges. Return migration in Albania is still an unexplored phenomenon despite the long tradition of migratory flows.

This study considers Albanian migrants' intentions to return and the factors involved in their decision to return or stay in their host country. The results of the research emphasize that Albanian migrants express a low intention to return to Albania arguing that the low quality of life in Albania, lack of jobs, lower wages and perceiving Albania as a country where "you have no future" are reasons which led them to not return. Even though they have strong bonds with their home country, transnationalism is not a critical factor in migrants' intentions to return while socio-economic conditions in Albania play an important role. The data does not contradict the suggestion that the higher the level of integration of the migrant the less likely the migrant intends to leave the host country.

Keywords: socio-cultural integration, economic integration, transnationalism, intention to return.

Introduction

Return migration or the 'movement of emigrants back to their homeland to resettle' (Gmelch, 1980) is no more "the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration" (King, 2000). As an issue that impacts the political, economic, and social aspects of a country (Elizabeth, 2015), return migration has increased in its importance by being the focus of academics, international organization, host and home countries. Presented as a win-win-win situation (Sinatti, 2014), return migration affects the homeland, the receiving country and the migrant's in different ways and scales. The impact on the homeland is via the transfer of new skills and competences, the increase of the overall human capital, the enhancement of productivity and employment (Zaiceva & Zimmermann, 2012) and the returnees themselves as becoming actors for social change (Debnath, 2016). Return migration in Albania is still an unexplored phenomenon despite the long tradition of migratory flows. Emigration from Albania is an age-old phenomenon. Situated on the West of the Balkan Peninsula, Albania has been, during various historical periods, a labour sending region (De Zwager, Gedeshi, Germenji, & Nikas, 2005). During Albania's 50 year communist regime, its citizens' movement out of country was very restricted. Only after the fall of the communist regime in 1990, were Albanians free to migrate in search of a better life. According to King and Vullnetari, the Albanian international emigration process after the 1990s

consists of four main episodes: 1. The 'Embassy Migrants', Summer 1990; 2. The Main Mass Exodus, March and August 1991; 3. The Pyramid Crisis, Spring 1997; 4. The Kosovo Crisis, 1999 (King & Vullnetari, 2003). Each episode created a migration flow towards Europe and other regions. The primary destination countries for Albanian migrants were Greece and Italy due to their geographical and cultural proximity as well as the extensive exposure of Albanian society to their cultural influences (such as Italian TV) (IOM, 2008). During the first wave of emigrants, in March 1991, 25,000 migrants were accepted by the Italian authorities and were settled in various parts of the country (Vullnetari, 2007) and by 2001, Albanians were the second largest community in Italy after Moroccans (Mai, 2010).

The most recent migration flows started in 2014 and peaked in 2015 when Albanians were seeking asylum in Europe; mainly in Germany, followed by France, The Netherlands, Greece and the United Kingdom. According to the Albanian General Directorate for Border and Migration, 54,760 Albanian citizens requested asylum in Germany in 2015, and 17,230 in 2016 (Albania- Migration Profile, 2016). The main reason for seeking asylum had been for economic reasons which led to a quite high number of cases refused by the host countries.

There are different reasons why people migrate and why they return to their homeland. Migratory flows include people who in a specific moment of the migratory cycle intend to return. In Albania, a process of independent return migration began to take shape by the mid-1990s (de Zwager et al., 2005). The returnees were coming back from Greece and Italy, but the 1997 political and economic instability caused by the Pyramid Crisis halted the return migration process and prompted others to migrate. Voluntary sporadic returns have always occurred; a particularly important moment of return migration in recent Albanian history was after the World Economic Crisis of 2009, when Albanian migrants decided return to the homeland mostly because of unemployment in their host countries. These returnees were mainly from Greece and Italy, the two dominant countries in terms of Albanian emigration. According to INSTAT¹, the number of returning Albanian migrants increased from 5,000 in 2001 to 25,000 in 2011 (INSTAT, 2014).

The most recent return migration flow, 2015-2016, was characterized by the return of many categories of migrants: economic migrants returning due to the crisis in Greece and Italy, voluntary returnees, return of minors and irregular migrants, and the increased return of Albanians who requested asylum in Europe. According to the Albanian General Directorate for Border and Migration, 25,134 Albanian migrants returned to Albania in 2015 and 21,681 in 2016 (Albania Migration Profile, 2016).

This article aims to analyze the intentions to return of Albanian migrants in Italy, in order to understand if variables like age, gender, length of stay, naturalization, integration, civil status and transnationalism among others, affect their intentions of whether to stay in the host country or return back to Albania. The study takes into consideration their intentions to return and not their actual behaviour. This study will answer the following questions: Do Albanian migrants in Italy want to come back home? Does integration in Italian society affect their intentions to return? What reasons do Albanian migrants favour for coming back home or motivate them to stay

¹ Albanian Institute of Statistics.

in Italy? The paper is structured as follows: The next section discusses a brief review of the theoretical literature and studies on intention to return, methodology, followed by results, discussions and the conclusion of the survey.

Literature review

Different theories have been formulated to explain migrants' return processes to their origin country. Cassarino (2004) framed return migration into five theoretical approaches: Neoclassical, The New Economics of Labour Migration theory, Structural, Transnationalism and Social Network theories. In the Neoclassical Theory, the return of migrants from the host country occurs as a consequence of their failed experiences abroad or because their human capital was not rewarded as expected (Cassarino, 2004), i.e., while "winners" settle, "losers" return (De Haas & Fokkema, 2011).

The New Economics of Labour Migration theory (NELM) considers return migration 'as part of a defined plan conceived by migrants before their departure from their countries of origin' (Thomas, 2008). According to NELM, this plan involves returning home after successfully achieving the goals or targets that migrants had set.

The Structural Theory argues that return is not only related to the personal experience of the migrant, it is also a question of context (Cassarino, 2004), emphasizing the importance of the home country socio-economic and political context as important factors that affect the ability of returning migrants to utilize the skills they acquired abroad (Thomas, 2008). The opportunities in the origin country affect the migrant's capacity to invest their experience gained abroad.

The Transnationalism Theory focuses on a better understanding of the strong social and economic links between migrants' host and origin countries (Cassarino, 2004). Transportation and communication having become infinitively more accessible and affordable (Lima, 2010) are key catalysts for transnationalism, making it easier for immigrants to forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations (Basch et al., 1994) that bond them with their societies of origin, helping maintain their strong connections with home and at the same time feeling integrated in the host society. The Transnationalist approach does not perceive return migration as the end of the migratory cycle, but a stage within it. Return takes place once enough resources, whether financial or informational, have been gathered and when conditions at home are viewed as being favourable enough (Cassarino, 2004). According to transnationalism, returnees prepare their reintegration at home through periodic and regular visits to their origin countries (Snel, Faber, & Engbersen, 2015) while remittances and investments in the origin country contribute to the realization of the return project (Premazzi, Ambrosetti, Cela, & Fokkema, 2013).

Just like the Transnationalist approach, Social Network Theory views returnees as migrants who maintain strong linkages with their former places of settlement in other countries (Cassarino, 2004). The returned migrants are seen as social actors involved in "multiple relational ramifications" (King, 2017). Social networks created and shaped during the migration period are beneficial in the origin country by enriching migrants with resources and information. Similar to the Transnationalist approach, Social Network Theory does not consider return migration as the end of migratory

process.

Empirical studies on intentions to return

Many studies have focused on the factors that may contribute to the intentions to return by migrants. Scholars have studied return intentions to isolate factors involved in migrants' decision to go back to their origin countries. Among them, the most analyzed are age, gender, time spent in the host country, levels of education, social network, family relations, and the impact of socio-cultural and economic integration of migrants in the host country. As shown below, some of their findings are not congruent with each other and in some cases even contradictory.

On gender, scholars are divided on the role gender plays in expressing an intention to return. Some concluded that men's intention to return is lower than that of women's (64% lower) (Carretero, Garcia, & Martinez, 2008); while others state that gender is not a factor in the intention to return (Chabé-Ferret, Machado, & Wahba, 2016).

On the duration of migration, scholars have found that it significantly influences migrants' return intentions, the longer migrants have lived in their host country, the more likely their intention to stay (di Belgiojoso, 2016; de Coulon & Wolff, 2010). Other studies have found that the level of education does not significantly affect the intentions to return (Pungas et al., 2011; Roman and Goschin, 2012). Some scholars have linked return intentions to home investment, pointing out that return intentions increase the probability to invest in the origin country (Chabé-Ferret et al., 2016; Agyeman & Fernández, 2015).

Scholars have also studied the relationship between economic variables and intention to return; Güngör and Tansel (2007) found that return intentions are weaker for those working in an academic environment, compared to non-academics; similar findings were presented by Pohl (2006). While Coniglio, De Arcangelis and Serlenga (2009) studying illegal immigrants found that the highly skilled among them were more likely intending to return. Gaul'e (2013) observed the decision of 1,460 foreign academic scientists in research-intensive U.S. universities during a 10-year period and reported that only 7% of individuals of the sample returned to their home country.

Scholars have also studied the intentions to return of foreign students. These studies aimed to identify the foreign students' intentions to leave the host country after their study period. Paile and Fatoki (2014) found that the majority of international students intend to go back home after their education in South Africa. Similar findings about students' intentions to return were found by Dziwornu, Yakar and Termuçin (2016), while opposite findings are presented in the study by Cheung and Xu (2015) which confirms a low return rate of Chinese students studying overseas. Jan-Jan Soon (2008) found that having decided to return back home prior to migrating to a host country has the greatest positive impact on a student's current return intention.

Integration in the host country is another important element studied in the decisions for migrants to return to their country of origin; de Haas and Fokkema (2011) concluded that there is an unequivocal negative correlation between socio-cultural integration and return intentions. The higher their level of socio-cultural integration, the less likely the migrants were to express a return intention. Similar conclusions were found by other authors (Snel et al., 2015; De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015; Bilgili & Siegel, 2014) while contrary findings were presented by Anniste and Tammaru (2014)

in studying Estonian migrants in Finland. There is no obvious negative relationship between integration and return migration, but ethnicity is found to be one of the most important personal characteristics predicting return migration from Finland to Estonia. According to Carling and Pettersen (2014), the highest likelihood of return intentions is found among people who are both weakly integrated and strongly transnational.

A number of studies have explored the role of family and social ties in determining migrants' intentions to return. Batista and Cestari (2016) found that the migrant's social network in the home country is a stronger factor than the network in the host country. Premazzi et al., (2013) while studying the intention to return of Egyptian migrants in Italy, concluded that first-generation male migrants with aging parents and only sisters at home have stronger return intentions. Dustman (2003) studied the effect of children in their parents' intention and how a female or male child differently affects the intention to return home. While concerns of parents about future economic career and prosperity in the host country may be dominant for male children, they more likely evaluate the future of a female child in the home country as more advantageous.

Research Methods and Data

This paper is based on data from a questionnaire filled by 101 Albanian migrants living in Italy. The data was collected during a two-month period, November to December 2017. Due to the lack of a database of Albanian migrants in Italy and difficulties in identifying the respondents of the survey through other means, this paper generates its data through a web-based questionnaire survey using snowball, a non-probability sampling method. Snowball sampling starts by identifying a few respondents that match the criteria for inclusion in the study, and then asks them to recommend others who also meet the selection criteria (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The criteria included Albanians over the age of 18 who currently have over one year living in Italy (88% of respondents have been in Italy 3 years or longer).

More than 300 Albanian migrants in Italy were contacted through friends, family and kinship in Albania and through other migrants in Italy via social networking sites, mail, telephone, and were asked to fill out the online questionnaire. The respondents are informed that the data and personal information are confidential and subject to the code of ethics of social research. Of all contacted, 101 respondents filled out the questionnaire. An online survey provides advantages like minimal cost and effort, plus the respondents can decide when to fill it out at their own convenience, but this approach also has its limitations. Not everyone has internet and filling out an online questionnaire may be especially difficult for older people. The questionnaire was divided into four sections: 1. Socio-demographic information; 2. Integration in Italy; 3. Transnationalism; and 4. Intention to return.

Respondents represent a diverse sampling in their civil status, education, employment status, and employment sectors. 84% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 35, 53.5% were within their prime productive years, with 59% of respondents being female. 60% of respondents finished high school as their highest educational level,

while 32% finished college. 70% of the respondents are employed; most respondents work in construction, food service, shops, cleaning services, manufacturing while a minority of them are professionals (lawyer, dental lab assistant, economist). 14% of respondents are not active in the labour market (5% were unemployed, while 9% take care of the household). The majority of respondents (51.5%) are married, 34.7% are single and 7 cohabitate with their partners. Among respondents who are married, 19.23% have an Italian spouse.

Albanian migrants have settled in different areas in Italy: Florence, Ferrara, Bolzano, Brescia, Bologna, Genoa, Milan, Pordenone, Parma, Padua, Pisa, Venice, Pescara etc. 26% of respondents have lived in Italy 11-15 years.

Discussions and Results

1. Why did Albanians migrate?

In today's world, international migration is a commonplace occurrence; becoming a reality that touches every nation at different scales. Globalization, technology and modern transportation have facilitated the crossing of states and allowing people to travel more easily, cheaper and faster. Lack of jobs, conflict, poverty, environmental degradation, searching for new opportunities are among other reasons which have motivated people to look for a better life somewhere else, near or far. 59.41% of respondents stated they migrated to Italy in search for better opportunities: 19.8% due to family reunification, 13.86% to study and 25.75% for economic reasons and a better life. Economic reasons have a role in driving migration and are a key component of Albanian migration. Respondents stated that the lack of jobs, poverty levels in Albania, and family reunification reasons led them to migrate to Italy, with hopes that they would find a better life.

2. Integration of Albanian migrants in Italian society

Integration is a long-term process (Huddleston et al., 2013) of inclusion and acceptance of immigrants in the main institutions, relations and positions in the host society (Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2016). Integration affects the migrants' socio-economic and psychological well-being. Bonifazi, Okolski, Schoorl, & Simon (2008) identified three different levels of integration in the host country: 1. individual immigrant level accomplished through housing, work, education, and socio-cultural adjustment to the new society and participation in it; 2. collective level for an immigrant group or groups through participating in migrant organizations; and 3. institutional level, both at a local and national level. Thus, integration processes occur in different levels, and with varying degrees of difficulty for the migrant to adapt to the new society. As such, support from social networks and migration policies are needed to facilitate integration; while racism and xenophobia are major obstacles to any integration effort, as they produce a context of insecurity, isolation and hostility (Rudiger & Spencer, 2003).

The survey shows that 38.6% of respondents express that they feel fully integrated in the Italian communities they live. The data suggests a positive relation between the years lived in Italy with the levels of self-assessed integration. The survey sought to

study the socio-cultural integration of respondents asking their participation in such activities in their communities. In studying their socio-cultural integration, migrants are asked if they participate in socio-cultural activities in their community and what kind of activities. 68% of respondents participate in socio-cultural activities. Of those who do not engage in socio-cultural activities, 67% state it is due to lack of time, while 15% because they do not like them. The socio-cultural activities in their communities that respondents participate in are organized by children's schools or kindergarten, work, churches, their local municipality or other Albanian migrants in their region and Italian friends. The activities are diverse and include sports, charity and churches activities, fairs, family parties, school performances, and concerts among others. When asked about Italian lifestyle, 93.1% of respondents express their positive opinion about it.

3. Transnationalism among Albanian migrants in Italy

Transnational activities that bond immigrants with their places of origin have an economic, political and socio-cultural nature. Economic transnational activities include business investments in the home countries and monetary remittances. The latter being the most important positive direct economic effect for an emigration country (Nikas & Baklavas, 2009). Political transnational activities include retaining membership in political parties in one's country of origin and voting in its elections. Socio-cultural transnational activities include the exchange of ideas, practices, norms, identities (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007) and meanings between the host and origin countries (Lima, 2010). The socio-cultural exchanges occur through migrants visits to their homeland and by communication with family and friends in the origin country. This study considers three elements in analyzing transnationalism: i) communication and its frequency with family and friends; ii) visits to Albania and frequency of visits; and iii) remittances and their knowledge of how they are spent.

The study shows that 95% of the respondents maintain communication with family and friends in Albania. 95% of respondents express that they have visited Albania during their migratory cycle in Italy. Of those who have visited Albania, 43.75% have visited Albania once a year, while 38.54% have visited Albania 2 or more times a year. The remittances data shows that 40.59% sent funds to their family and relatives. The funds are used for everyday living like buying food, medicine, clothes, economical support due to the unemployment in Albania, supporting the family business in Albania or as gift to family or relatives.

4. Return intentions and return reasons in Albania: Coming back home?

Migrants are not all alike; motives that promote migration are as different as the personal experiences of each migrant in the host society. During the migratory cycle, migrants may decide to return home or stay in their host country. This decision may be influenced by both positive and negative factors. Negative factors may include: homesickness, lack of adaptation within the host society, higher preferences for consumption in the home country (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007), serious illness, fear of family breakdown, fear of divorce, or the death of a relative caring for young children

(Carling et al., 2015), while positive conditions in the country of origin, for instance social, economic or political transformations (Gropas et al., 2014) among others may motivate migrants to consider returning to the homeland.

This section will analyze and discuss the correlations between different variables and intentions to return. Data shows that 73% of respondents do not intend to come back. Among the reasons provided are: i) better quality of life in Italy than in Albania; ii) better employment, career and wage opportunities in Italy; iii) having established a life with family in Italy and better future for the children); iv) health care services are worse in Albania; v) Political corruption (jobs can only be found through political connections); vi) cultural mentality of Albanian society; vii) feeling of not belonging in Albania anymore; viii) not having a future in Albania; and ix) being fully integrated in Italian society. Among the reasons why Albanian migrants intend to return to Albania are i) family and parents living in Albania; ii) homesickness and a desire to help develop Albania; iii) to open a business; iv) for retirement.

Regardless of gender, the majority of respondents stated that they do not want to return back; women have expressed a lower desire to return (24%) than males. The results were uniform across age groups with over 64% intending to remain in Italy; except for the eldest group with all participants stating that they wanted to return to Albania.

Comparing the educational levels of respondents and their intentions to return, survey respondents with primary, secondary and bachelor levels of education stated in their majority (64% or higher in each group) their intentions to remain in Italy; while those with a Masters or PhD stated in 100% of the cases their desire to remain in Italy. Considering the years lived in Italy and intentions to return, most respondents' intentions to return are low (between 17% and 38%), despite the duration of their stay in Italy; except for the group of respondents living in Italy between 3-5 years who state higher intentions to return (54%). 73% of University students intend to stay after completing their studies.

Most theories on migrant integration or assimilation suggest that the longer migrants stay, the more they become integrated in receiving societies, the more difficult it becomes to return in practice, and the more they are inclined to settle (de Haas & Fokkema, 2011). Analyzing the self-assessed levels of integration and intentions to return, the data shows that Albanian migrants whose self-assessed levels of integration are lowest, have very low intentions to return. Even the Albanian migrants, whose self-assessed levels of integration were highest, expressed low intentions to return. The data does not contradict the suggestion that the higher the level of integration of the migrant, the less likely he/she wants to leave the host country.

The transnational factors in the survey include: communication, visits and remittances. In each of them, one can gauge a higher or lower level of transnationalism by the engagement and frequency of each of them. Regardless of the level of transnationalism in each factor, the overwhelming majority of respondents intend to remain in Italy. Cross-tabulating the transnational factors with higher engagement and frequency we find: a) 67% of respondents with high level of communication with family and friends in Albania intend to stay in Italy, b) 71% of respondents who have visited Albania intend to stay in Italy, and c) 59% of respondents who send remittances back

home intend to stay in Italy. The data suggests that transnationalism does not play a critical role in migrants' intentions to return.

Conclusions

This study analyzed the intentions to return of Albanian migrants in Italy, the findings are summarized as follows: First, women have expressed a lower desire to return than males, all eldest migrants intend to return to Albania, education does not have an obvious effect on the intentions to return, regardless of their years living in Italy the respondents' intentions to return are low. Second, Albanian migrants feel integrated in Italian society and the data suggests a positive relation between the years lived in Italy with the levels of self-assessed integration. They participate in socio-cultural activities in their communities. The data does not contradict the suggestion that the higher the level of integration of the migrant the less likely he/she intends to leave the host country. Third, Albanian migrants have strong relationships with their family and friends back home and send remittances which are used for everyday living. The majority of them visit Albania once a year. Even though Albanian migrants have strong bonds with their home country, transnationalism does not play a critical role in migrants' intentions to return. Fourth, Albanian migrants do not intend to return to Albania because they have found in Italy the socio-economic conditions which Albania cannot yet provide. Taking into consideration the lower quality of life in Albania, lack of jobs and lower wages and perceiving Albania as a country where "you have no future", Albanian migrants do not consider coming back home. Socio-economic conditions in Albania play an important role in intentions to return of Albanian migrants in Italy.

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