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Albanian Households in Transition

The role of family and migration in Albania's journey from isolation to integration

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Abstract

This thesis explores the Albanian migration wave after communism, putting the role of the household into focus, especially the women who did not migrate right away with their husbands, who chose migration as the best alternative solution after the collapse of the regime. Drawing on interviews with people who directly migrated to neighboring countries (in this case, Italy), as well as with women who managed the household, the thesis highlights the gendered impact of migration. In addition to the interviews, which serve as valuable sources of oral history, a film and a documentary provide important viewpoints that helped me collect more data about migration itself (such as Daniele Vicari's film *La nave dolce* and a documentary about gender propaganda during communism).

Furthermore, primary sources from books written by Albania's dictator, Enver Hoxha, offer important insights into the role of women in Albanian society during communism. Secondary literature contributes different perspectives on life under the regime and on the migration routes taken by many Albanians, particularly aboard the *Vlora* ship, which marks the starting point of this thesis. Together, these sources help to bring various aspects into focus at a qualitative level, revealing how mobility in a country that faced total isolation—unlike any other communist country in the East—was not a viable option during those years, and was seen as the only escape once the regime fell.

This mobilization that took place right after the collapse of the totalitarian regime was not only a personal decision but also a political act shaped by fear, surveillance, and resistance. These perspectives contribute to understanding the human cost of isolationist regimes and the collapse that the country experienced afterward in many directions.

Abstrakt

Diese Arbeit untersucht die albanische Migrationswelle nach dem Kommunismus und rückt dabei die Rolle des Haushalts in den Mittelpunkt, insbesondere der Frauen, die nicht sofort gemeinsam mit ihren Ehemännern migrierten, welche die Migration als beste alternative Lösung nach dem Zusammenbruch des Regimes wählten. Die Arbeit hebt die geschlechterspezifischen Auswirkungen der Migration hervor, basierend auf Interviews mit Personen, die direkt in Nachbarländer migrierten (in diesem Fall nach Italien), sowie mit Frauen, die den Haushalt führten. Neben den Interviews, die von mir geführt wurden, die als wertvolle Quellen mündlicher Geschichte (Oral-History) dienen, liefern Daniele Vicaris Film *La nave dolce* und eine Dokumentation über Gender-Propaganda während des Kommunismus wichtige Perspektiven, die mir halfen, weitere Daten über die Migration selbst zu sammeln.

Darüber hinaus bieten Primärquellen aus Büchern, die vom albanischen Diktator Enver Hoxha verfasst wurden, wichtige Einblicke in die Rolle der Frau in der albanischen Gesellschaft während der kommunistischen Zeit. Die Sekundärliteratur liefert unterschiedliche Perspektiven auf das Leben unter dem Regime sowie auf die Migrationsrouten vieler Albaner, insbesondere an Bord des Schiffes *Vlora*, das den Ausgangspunkt dieser Arbeit bildet. Zusammengenommen helfen diese Quellen, verschiedene Aspekte auf qualitativer Ebene in den Fokus zu rücken und zu aufzuzeigen, wie Mobilität in einem Land, das völliger Isolation ausgesetzt war – anders als jedes andere kommunistische Land im Osten – in jenen Jahren keine realistische Option darstellte und nach dem Sturz des Regimes als einziger Ausweg wahrgenommen wurde.

Diese Mobilisierung, die unmittelbar nach dem Zusammenbruch des totalitären Regimes stattfand, war nicht nur eine persönliche Entscheidung, sondern auch ein politischer Akt, geprägt von Angst, Überwachung und Widerstand. Diese Perspektiven tragen zum Verständnis der menschlichen Kosten isolationistischer Regime und des anschließenden Zusammenbruchs des Landes in vielerlei Hinsicht bei.

Introduction

When I first began considering this topic, my primary goal was to give voice to migrants whose life stories are rarely heard but whose experiences are crucial to understanding Albanian migration. With this aim, I started to shape the vision of my thesis, focusing on whose voices should be amplified and how their stories could bring depth to the study of migration. Before continuing with the migration story, it is necessary to define the concept of migration. A migrant is anyone who leaves their country, either temporarily or permanently, for a period longer than one year. The destination may be within national borders or across international boundaries.¹ Throughout this thesis I seek to uncover how Albania's history of isolation and how migration has reshaped family roles and societal structures. By including the personal stories of migrants and those who stayed behind, this research will highlight the resilience and adaptability of Albanian households in response to rapid change. This thesis attempts to combine individual experiences with broader socio-political shifts with the aim to intertwine fresh insights with existing research on the ongoing impact of migration on Albania's evolving identity. Migration continues to influence Albanian society profoundly even today, as it impacts all aspects from economic stability to family dynamics. This significance lies at the heart of my research.

As a migrant myself, with close relatives and connections to others with migration backgrounds, I have gained a unique perspective and a deep personal connection to this topic. These relationships have not only deepened my understanding of the sacrifices, resilience, and adaptations migrants endure, but also have fueled my commitment to portraying their stories with respect and authenticity. Through a combination of firsthand narratives, historical context, and scholarly sources, I aim to capture the complexities of migration and honor the voices of those who have contributed to Albania's evolving social landscape. My personal association to the topic, combined with a focused research approach to cover all the aspects, drives my motivation to bring new insights to the topic, bridging academic understanding with real-life experiences.

¹ IOM, 2019; Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1, 1998, p. 132, p. 9. At: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml_34_glossary.pdf (12.01.25).

One country, filled with hopes and dreams, yet with limited possibilities: this is the story of Albanian migration. It is a story shaped by poverty and nearly five decades of isolation under a communist regime that severed Albania from the outside world. Though geographically in the heart of Europe, Albania remained disconnected from European lifestyles and advancements in this time frame. Its people were taught to believe that the regime represented their only hope and were unaware that only seventy-two kilometers across the Adriatic Sea, Italy was experiencing a dramatically different reality.

The fall of communism in Albania began with the death of its long-standing dictator, Enver Hoxha,² in 1985³. His death marked a turning point, but it also plunged the country into uncertainty, as Albanians had little sense of what might come next. Hoxha spent his final days in a weakened state, confined to his bed with only his wife, Nexhmije Hoxha, and a nurse by his side.⁴

After this significant happening, the opening of foreign embassies marked both a pivotal moment and a powerful symbol of newfound freedom for Albanians. The dictator's successor, Ramiz Alia, who had been appointed by Hoxha as the future leader of the Albanian Communist Party and the People's Socialist Republic of Albania, struggled to maintain control as the country began to stir with calls for change. He would lead the country down a different path, hinting at reforms and encouraging students to work toward what he termed "the democratization of the country."⁵ Alia held power until 1991, but his leadership faced mounting opposition as Albania's citizens, particularly students, launched widespread demonstrations. The movement and the protests had their starting point in Tirana but spread to other cities and gave people the hope to put down the regime once and for all. This is where the future of this small country came to a significant turning point. As tensions rose, a revolution began to take shape, driven by a collective demand for true freedom and an end to authoritarian control.⁶

² Abrahams, Fred C. (2015). *Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe*. New York: New York University Press. p. 25.

³ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2024) *Enver Hoxha*. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Enver-Hoxha> (11.11.24).

⁴ Fevziu, Blendi. (2016). *Enver Hoxha. The Iron Fist of Albania*. London, New York. p. 13.

⁵ Abrahams, "Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe." p. 50.

⁶ Abrahams, "Modern Albania: From Dictatorship to Democracy in Europe." p.. 51.

For many Albanians, this shift sparked aspirations of crossing borders in pursuit of opportunities and a life beyond the limitations of their homeland. Migration became the only way to discover what the “other world” might offer. Though their perception of the outside world was often more vision than reality, Albania’s proximity to two European countries, Greece and Italy,⁷ fueled hope and provided an accessible starting point. These two countries were the main destinations for Albanian migrants and represented a door of hope. While there were alternatives offered from their close neighbors, Kosovo in the North and North Macedonia to the East, there were no prime migration destinations, as political challenges had happened in all the Balkans. Greece and Italy would eventually become steppingstones for the continued journeys of Albanian migrants deeper into Western Europe.

The era of television and channels in Albania began in 1985, when Albanians first gained access to glimpses of TV channels from Yugoslavia, Greece, and Italy.⁸ Few knew what awaited them on the other side of the Adriatic. Most knew Italy only through Rai 1, Rai 2, and Canale 5—Italian TV⁹ channels that some Albanians watched in secret, fearful of being caught by the communist authorities. Italian channels had their fascinating programs and colorful advertisements, mostly with different children’s toys, that would attract children’s attention. This programming offered Albanians parts of realities that existed in that part of the world but was still undiscovered for them.

As Albania’s borders opened, migration now became tangible, inspired by an ambition and a desire to have a pathway toward a different life—a life inspired by images of a Europe that, until then, had seemed distant physically as well as far away from reality.

To delve deeper into the scholarship and sources that form the foundation of my research, I will outline several key resources that have proven valuable in addressing the topics I will explore. INSTAT¹⁰ (the Institute of Statistics in Albania) serves as a good source for precise

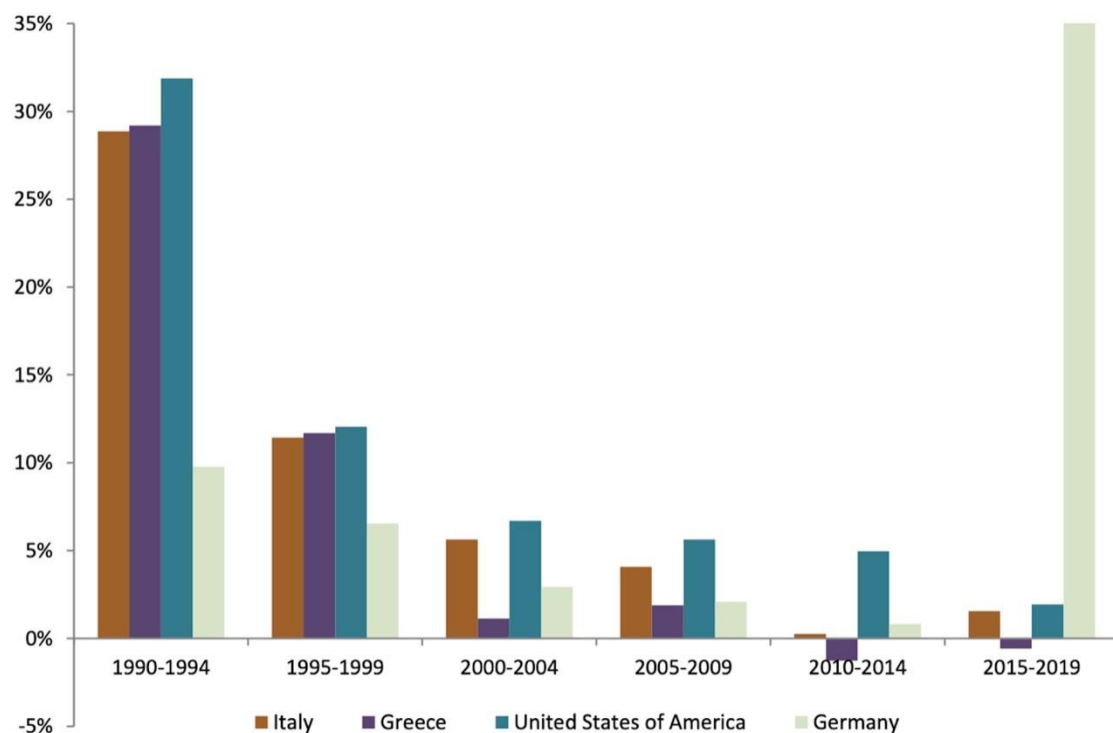
⁷ International Organization for Migration (IOM) Albania. (2008) *Identifikimi i zonave më të prekura nga emigracioni dhe migracioni i kthimit në Shqipëri: Profili i migrantëve të kthyer* [Identification of Areas Most Affected by Emigration and Return Migration in Albania: Profile of Returning Migrants]. IOM Albania. p. 30.

⁸ Fischer, Bernd J. & Schmitt, Oliver Jens. (2022). *A concise history of Albania*. United Kingdom/ New York. p. 324.

⁹ Bexhet, Braho (2020), *Il Titanic dall’Adriatico*. Munaro Editore. p. 45.

¹⁰ INSTAT (2020). *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra* [Albanian Diaspora in Figures].

statistical data on migration patterns, including the number of migrants, gender breakdowns, and their most common destination countries. According to United Nations data from 2019, the number of Albanian emigrants worldwide is approximately 1.2 million. At the beginning of the 1990s, Albania's population was around 3,2 million people.¹¹ The majority of these Albanian nationals, around 75 percent, reside in Italy and Greece.¹²



Burimi: [Organizata e Kombeve te Bashkuara](#)

The annual growth rate of Albanian emigrants by main destinations, 1990-2019.

Fig. 1¹³

This graphic is a valuable addition that I am eager to include in my thesis. It gives information about the INSTAT's statistics as well as observations about the number of Albanian emigrants

¹¹ World Bank Open Data (2025), "Population, total-Albania". At: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?fbclid=IwAR1wm4WrpRsD5G6qZxVvrxEbq6o6VXe0R4-n_IIGvSeOrySBBKX_2sZ8o4&locations=AL&start=1990 (17.05.25).

¹² INSTAT, *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra*. p. 15.

¹³ INSTAT, *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra*. p. 16.

to all the countries mentioned, focusing on the years from 1990 to 2019. It is important to note that especially the first ten years highlight a time of mass migration for the Albanian population. Between 1990 and 1994, the number of Albanian emigrants to these countries grew by approximately 30 percent each year compared to the previous year. This growth rate slowed to around 11 percent annually during the period from 1995 to 1999.¹⁴

This reliable statistical foundation from INSTAT complements the qualitative insights from various interviews, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the Albanian migration phenomenon in both its personal and quantitative dimensions in the thesis in the respectable chapters.

The Stalinist State that led to Migration once it fell

Albanian communism started with the election of Enver Hoxha as the leader of the Party of Labor of Albania (PLA) and changed throughout the time. It is important to take into consideration all the phases it went through, where each of them has different characteristics. All these phases vary and should not be put under one category or a specific term, which is the reason why different scholars and researchers use terms like “communist”, “socialist”, “stalinist”, and “maoist”. They are sometimes employed as synonyms, sometimes as markers of different trajectories. The Marxist-Leninist ideology played a major role in Hoxha's views, as his aspiration was to create a one-party communist state.¹⁵ From the beginning, his inspirations came from the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin, when Albania became an ally of the Soviet Union and began to benefit from Soviet economic and military aid. However, after Stalin's death in 1953, Hoxha's views shifted further, aligning with Maoist China (under Mao Zedong), as his intentions no longer aligned with those of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. With China's revisionist reforms starting in the 1970s, Hoxha entered a more isolationist, Stalinist phase. Throughout these years, the Stalinist state was more fitting to the characteristics of his ideology.¹⁶

¹⁴ INSTAT, *Diaspora e Shqipërisë në Shifra*. p. 16.

¹⁵ Blumi, Isa (1999). *Hoxha's class war: The cultural revolution and state reformation, 1961-1971*. East European Quarterly, Vol. 33. Nr. 3. Academic Research Library. pp. 303f.

¹⁶ Fischer & Schmitt, “*A concise history of Albania*.” p. 289.

The regime was considered “Stalinist” by different scholars, as the most appropriate way to conceptualize Hoxha’s rule. This especially takes into consideration the history Albania had with the Soviets. It represented a mixture of ideologies, which were heavily influenced by Stalinist and Maoist figures. Yet, the use of ‘communism’ as an explanation of the regime as a whole will be used throughout the whole thesis. The primary focus of this dissertation is to trace the evolution of Hoxha’s regime, highlighting how it adapted to changing ideological trends and geopolitical shifts beyond Albania's borders.

Hoxha strategically established his regime through brutal executions. Those forces, individuals, or groups that were considered a threat to his vision of the new state were physically eliminated and labeled as 'war criminals.'¹⁷

The composition of the political party also resembled the Soviet model. According to Soviet principles, the party had to be structured in such a way so that workers remain the dominant element at all times. Eighty-five percent of the APL’s functionaries were workers by origin, background, or current position, and nearly thirty-seven percent of the total party members fit into this category as well. By implementing this structure, Hoxha aimed to prevent the "evil turns" seen in Eastern Europe, where parties had deteriorated into revisionism¹⁸ due to the de-proletarianization of their leading organs. However, it would be useful to elaborate on whether this strategy was purely ideological or also served as a means of consolidating power by limiting access to leadership roles for other social groups.¹⁹

Enver Hoxha, like Joseph Stalin, demonstrated a ruthless commitment to maintaining absolute power, even at the cost of eliminating members of his own family. His actions were not only carefully designed to strengthen his authority, but also to serve as a lesson for the population. During communism, numerous executions happened that were thought to be not only punitive,

¹⁷ Fischer & Schmitt, “*A concise history of Albania*.” pp. 280f.

¹⁸ Revisionism, in the context of Marxist and communist ideology, refers to a deviation from orthodox Marxist principles, often seen as a betrayal of revolutionary ideals.

¹⁹ Bowers, Stephen R., "Stalinism in Albania: Domestic Affairs under Enver Hoxha" (1989). Faculty Publications and Presentations. Paper 87. p. 443. At: http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/87 (17.02.25).

but also strategic, in order to make sure that fear and obedience were present after each act. His measures escalated most of the times, systematically targeting every political-opponent that came out his way, as well as non-communists or war criminals. If a slow and methodical approach failed to achieve the desired effect, he rapidly expanded Albania's security services, creating a vast surveillance and enforcement network to crush dissent more efficiently.²⁰

Hoxha's propaganda initially emphasized democracy and free elections, but as his power grew, these ideals became irrelevant to him. The adaption of the new constitution enabled him to expand his authority. At the beginning of his career, he held positions of General Secretary of the Party and President of the Democratic Front. He then went on to hold titles like Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, Defense Minister and Commander-in-Chief, making him always capable of taking control. Under his rule, Albania ceased to function as a sovereign state, as all defining characteristics of sovereignty were effectively erased.²¹

In 1989, some years after Hoxha's death, his follower, Ramiz Alia was the following leader, yet, he did not achieve his goals to continue ruling the communist party, due to mounting crises and the public unrest. Protests took place and workers started to boycott their working places, leading to the deconstruction of discipline in the public sector. This is when the shift started to be felt. Anger was present daily amongst the population, which mostly led to destruction of public property as well. People from different parts of Albania started flooding into the foreign embassies the first moment they were opened, with the purpose of seeking asylum. Simultaneously, thousands more attempted to flee to Italy, boarding any vessel they could find at the Durrës harbor.²² Following the student demonstrations, led by Sali Berisha (born 1944), Ramiz Alia was pressured to step down and organize new free elections. This led to the formation of the Democratic Party (DP) of Albania, with Berisha as its leader.²³ Under Berisha's leadership of the DP, who later became the President of the Albanian Republic and Fatos Nano (born 1952) serving as Prime Minister, named as such from Ramiz Alia, significant changes took place in Albania. These changes were important, since one of those was the

²⁰ Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania.*" p. 282. ²¹

Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania.*" p. 284. ²²

Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania.*" p. 326. ²³

Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania.*" p. 327.

guarantee of the basic civil rights to the population, as well as freedom to practice any religion. Some basic democratic rules started to be present, like the establishment of another political party, the Socialist Party (SP) under Nano's guidance. Despite many changes that occurred, the country still remained unstable. Basic services collapsed, which led to widespread dissatisfaction and drove thousands of Albanians to seek change or leave the country altogether.²⁴

Albanian history before the mass migration was dominated by these two influential political figures: Ahmet Zogu and Enver Hoxha. Ahmet Zogu served as the King of Albania, while Enver Hoxha was the leader of the Communist Party. The situation for ordinary people was dire. Political oppression permeated every aspect of life. Secret police, informants, midnight arrests, prisons, labor camps, and internal exile became part of the daily reality for many Albanians.²⁵ Interviews will play a significant role in this thesis, as they represent its primary sources. Detailed information about the interviews and interviewees will be provided in the following subchapters. Thinking back to the days of life under the regime, M.Z., one of the interviewees, stated, "There was no right to protest, no right to respond, or anything similar, because doing so meant persecution and imprisonment." Once the regime has accused someone, there was no way to escape the charges. The people of Albania had only two choices: accept the accusation or face punishment.²⁶

History of migration

The twentieth century marked a key part of global history in regards to the migration as a whole process. It was influenced by different incidents, which mainly led to political and economic upheavals of a country. There were different migration phases, like that of post-World War II in 1945, that continued till 2015 and influenced the whole history of migration. During these continuously happening phases, movements of asylum seekers, different refugee seekers, and

²⁴ Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania*." pp. 328f.

²⁵ Fischer & Schmitt, "*A concise history of Albania*." p. 274.

²⁶ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

illegal/ irregular migrants, as well as family reunification and labor migration, changed Europe's economic landscape. In later years, migration dynamics were further influenced by events such as the 2004 EU enlargement and the 2008 economic crisis, with each chapter adding new complexities to the migration narrative.²⁷

Europe, like the whole world in general, is a continent shaped by migration, and Tomáš Sobotka estimates that between 1960 and 2009, approximately 26 million people migrated to the continent. Notably, 57 percent of this total arrived during the last decade of that period (from the late 1990s to the early 2000s).²⁸ When discussing the phases of migration, it is important to note that after the end of World War II, the division of Europe into "East" and "West" by the Iron Curtain was not merely symbolic. This separation significantly restricted movement between the two parts of the continent. However, the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, a new era of intra-European migration was unleashed, often described as “a continent moving West.”²⁹ Alongside Moldova and Ukraine, Albania emerged as one of the top three countries with intense migration during this period, which reached its peak in the 1990s.³⁰ The large influx of migrants into Western Europe resulted from the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern and Central Europe. This wave of migration was driven not only by political upheavals but also by the previous isolation of these countries, which had tightly restricted movement. The fall of these regimes opened migration routes that became accessible to many, leading to significant migratory flows.³¹

As mentioned above, after the end of the communist regime, the situation in Albania changed significantly, making the country highly unstable. International aid and support became significant and was one of the reasons why many families could not continue their life without a strong economical income, which led them to take perilous routes to different destinations. This mass migration continued for years and, even today, persists on a smaller scale.

²⁷ Okólski, Marek., & King, Russell. (2019). Diverse, fragile and fragmented: The new Map of European Migration. *DOAJ (DOAJ: Directory of Open Access Journals)*. p. 9. <https://doi.org/10.17467/ceemr.2018.18> (12.12.24).

²⁸ Okólski & King, “*The new Map of European Migration*.” p. 10.

²⁹ Okólski & King, “*The new Map of European Migration*.” p. 11.

³⁰ Okólski & King, “*The new Map of European Migration*.” pp. 11f.

³¹ Okólski & King, “*The new Map of European Migration*.” p. 17.

Additionally, the collapse of fraudulent investment schemes, in which more than half of the Albanian population had invested and subsequently lost their savings, triggered a severe crisis and a civil war in 1997.³²

P.Z, the interviewee, recalls that in the early years following the fall of communism, the factories, mines and industrial plants, where the majority of workers were men who supported their families with the income they earned, collapsed. These men typically provided not only for their wives and children, but in many cases also for their parents, mostly living under the same roof. The collapse of these workplaces led to complete destruction of jobs, resulting in widespread of insecurity about the stable employment, and consequently the loss of consistent income,

Transitions happened to be very turbulent for most countries, and this was true of Albania as well. During the country's first multiparty election, the Democratic Party was triumphant, which led to the beginning of the institutional reforms generally. The reforms aimed to address past human right abuses and hold those accountable for numerous crimes happening during the communist regime. This was the only way to build a democratic system that had its roots on human rights and freedoms. This period of transition also brought significant changes, such as the shift from a one-party system to a multiparty system. These changes mark the transitional period between 1991 and 1997. Fundamental human rights were restored during this time, including the right to private property.³³

Even though the country was recovering, the need for stability outweighed the reforms and changes implemented during those years. Albanians continued to seek change, even if it meant leaving their homeland and everything they knew behind. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the situation in Eastern Europe remained less stable than that in the West. The United States intervened to provide aid and assistance to Eastern European countries and chose to focus

³² Vollmer, Claudia. (2016). *Verwaltungsmodernisierung im Westlichen Balkan im Kontext der EU-Erweiterung am Beispiel von Albanien, Mazedonien und Montenegro*. Kassel. p. 145.

³³ Trimi, Sidita. (2021). *Dealing with the past: Post-communist Transitional Justice in Albania*. Centro Di Ateneo per I Diritti Umani. <https://unipd-centrodirittiumani.it/en/topics/dealing-with-the-past-post-communist-transitional-justice-in-albania> (11.12.24).

primarily on Yugoslavia due to the civil war taking place there. One notable project was started by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) at the request of USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development). In 1991, UNL was tasked with implementing this project in Albania. This intervention came during a period of dire poverty and hardship in Albania. By the end of 1991, many Albanians were fleeing this extreme poverty by sailing to Italy in search of better opportunities.³⁴ In addition to the U.S., Italy also provided emergency aid to assist Albanian citizens with their needs. This was done as a measure to prevent them from attempting to enter Italy through illegal means. That was the point when the “Vlora” exodus began.³⁵

The Exodus on the Vlora ship

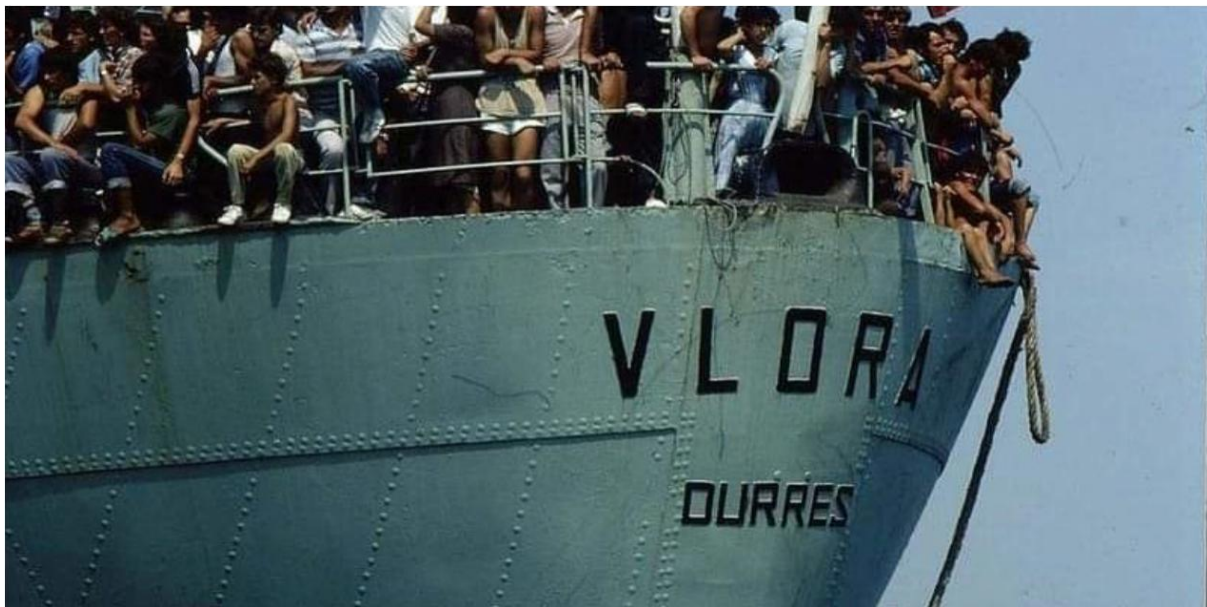


Figure 2³⁶

The cargo ship *Vlora* marked a turning point in the nation's oppressive history and became a defining moment for its people. It even became a symbol for the situation of mass migration in

³⁴ Lee, Sang M., and Silvana Trimi. (2001) "Restructuring the Business Education Infrastructure for Economic Transformation in Albania — A Research Note." *Journal of East European Management Studies* 6, no. 4: 455. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23280537> (11.12.24).

³⁵ Lee & Trimi, "Restructuring the Business Education Infrastructure for Economic Transformation in Albania". p. 456.

³⁶ Vicari, Daniele (2012) *La nave dolce*. Indigo Film, Apulia Film Commission.

Albanian history. The *Vlora*³⁷ ship stands as a powerful example of the early waves of Albanian migration but was only the first of many to come. “Sarà un nuovo anno zero”³⁸ basically translating as “it will be a new year zero”, marked a new beginning and a new chapter for many of them. On the day of 7 August 1991, a blazing summer day in Albania, rumors moved very fast about the cargo ship that was quickly approaching the port in Durrës, and this attracted the attention of many. Everyone was curious about its final destination, and many others just wanted to be present when it docked, to make sure that whatever happened, they would not miss the opportunity. Among the many thousands taking part in this important moment, individuals like Eva Meksi, B.Z., B.K., and Behgjet Braho stood out. For my thesis, I interviewed some of them directly, while for the others, I drew on interviews they had given through various channels. These voices were quick to react to the unfolding news, offering invaluable insights.³⁹ The boat causing the commotion was *Vlora*, a cargo ship carrying sugar, which was returning from Cuba.⁴⁰ As it drew closer to the port, people gathered en masse, ready to jump into the water and board the vessel.

This mass exodus was unprecedented, with 24,000 Albanians in general, and 10,000⁴¹ boarding the ship on that August day;⁴² Albanians from every city and region made their way to Durrës, disregarding distance or obstacles in their path. People of all ages and genders—families, young men traveling alone, men with promising careers, stable jobs and families, as well as young couples—were all ready to leave everything behind.⁴³

Even as the ship became overcrowded, no one was deterred from continuing their journey, whether alone or with loved ones. Most carried no documents, food, or spare clothes. Yet, for those who were not traveling alone, the presence of a family member, or just an acquaintance offered the invaluable comfort in the unpredictable journey. Despite those who boarded the

³⁷ Elia, Christian (2021). *A bordo della Vlora*. Open Migration. <https://openmigration.org/analisi/a-bordo-della-vlora/>

³⁸ Bexhet, Braho (2020), *Il Titanic dall'Adriatico*. p. 19.

³⁹ Interviews from different channels, as well as two made by me.

⁴⁰ Bexhet Braho (2020), *Il Titanic dall'Adriatico*. p. 17.

⁴¹ Haberman Clyde (1991), *Italy moves to stem wave of Albanians*. New York Times Newspaper. Section A, pp. 3. At: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/09/world/italy-moves-to-stem-wave-of-albanians.html> (15.11.24).

⁴² Elia, “*A bordo della Vlora*.”

⁴³ Braho, “*Il Titanic dall'Adriatico*.” p. 29.

ship, there were also others who tried, but for many reasons could not be on time when the ship left. For those left behind, the events unfolded too quickly and too unexpectedly, which left them stranded on the shore of their homeland. The sudden surge of migration that unfolded caught many by surprise. Even the most determined of individuals lost out on the chance to secure a place on the vessel that symbolized freedom and opportunity. This experience of missed prospects and quelled hopes marked the lives of many Albanians, illustrating how unpredictable and chaotic those initial moments of Albania's mass migration truly were.⁴⁴

For most (indeed, probably for all of them), this was their first opportunity to cross the Adriatic. They had heard that life on the other side was markedly different—a world free of political oppression, a place of freedom, and relative prosperity compared to their homeland. Few had specific expectations; however, for the majority of them, they simply were hoping to find a place that was better than the homeland they left behind. What did they have to lose? The communist regime had left deep scars to the daily life of its people, and it was only until after the regime fell that many Albanians began to realize the extent of their isolation from the rest of the civilized world.

What were their expectations? What would they find in this "promised land"? Would it be worth the journey? Would they ever look back, or was this departure final? How long would the voyage take, and how would they communicate with the people on the other side? These questions lingered in their minds, but answers would only come upon arrival. The journey itself was far from easy, though few harbored high expectations, especially given the extreme overcrowding aboard the ship. If there were ever a true test of the word "overcrowded," this voyage would exemplify it. To answer such questions, I will include the film *"La Nave Dolce"* (*The Sweet Ship*)⁴⁵, directed by Daniele Vicari, a poignant documentary that chronicles the journey it took. The movie is like a documentary, and it includes interviews, some of those also the ones used in this thesis, combined with archival footages from the journey. These moments were captured on camera, offering an emotional and detailed account of these people's beginnings, the struggles, and the hope combined with desperation. These moments were

⁴⁴ Haberman Clyde (1991), *Italy moves to stem wave of Albanians*. New York Times Newspaper. Section A, p. 3. At: <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/08/09/world/italy-moves-to-stem-wave-of-albanians.html> (15.11.24).

⁴⁵ Vicari, Daniele (2012). *"La nave dolce."* Indigo Film, Apulia Film Commission.

significant for the Albanian migration story as a whole. It serves as a reminder of the human stories behind mass migration and the impact of political and social upheaval. *La Nave Dolce* provides a detailed and immersive perspective on this historic migration. Among those on board, who are included in the footage, is Kledi Kadiu, a significant figure in Albanian culture. He was one of the thousands aboard the overcrowded ship, who described it under four words "*un mare di gente*"⁴⁶—a sea of people. This phrase accurately captures the incredible mass of migrants who desperately sought the common goal of a better future.

When the *Vlora*⁴⁷ first arrived at Brindisi, Italy, it was not granted permission to dock, which forced the ship to reroute and continue its journey to Bari. The day after the departure from Albania was filled with numerous obstacles and uncertainties for the people on board. The most immediate and challenging barrier was the lack of a common language for communication. Although Albania and Italy were physically separated by only a short stretch of sea, the linguistic divide was enormous. Many Albanians on board had no knowledge of Italian, which complicated basic interactions upon arrival. However, there were a few individuals among them who knew the language, like Bexhet Braho mentions in his diary. Braho's Italian language skills proved invaluable, and he was able to bridge the gap for many, helping them to communicate and navigate this foreign landscape. His Italian was self-taught, not only acquired by watching Italian television shows in secret, but also by attending an Italian course with a private teacher in Tirana. Those like Braho who managed to learn Italian this way were rare. The watching of Italian TV shows was banned in 1973, as the broadcasting of such shows and TV channels was deemed dangerous for the country, according to Hoxha. He exerted all his power to prevent the broadcasts, even launching an official campaign to discourage the consumption of external content. Citizens found in possession of any equipment capable of accessing these channels were arrested. Anyone caught watching or listening to foreign channels faced prison sentences of 8 to 9 years, and even discussing such shows was considered a crime.⁴⁸

Opportunities for studying foreign languages in communist Albania were almost nonexistent, due to the country's political isolation and strict educational controls. Only a fortunate few—

⁴⁶ Vicari, Daniele (2012). "*La nave dolce*." Min 04:58.

⁴⁷ Elia, "*A bordo della Vlora*."

⁴⁸ Gianluca, Deleo. (2021). "*The Albanian migration of 1991*."

often children of teachers, party members, or those with strong social connections—had the possibility to learn foreign languages or even access different educational resources. The communist regime actively acted like they supported education of individuals, yet personal education pursuits were restricted, with a especial emphasis on foreign languages, as they did not serve the interests of the Communist Party. The ambition to pursue the education one wanted or to develop international knowledge, which included the need to study more or learn more about the outside world, were viewpoints that were criticized by the regime as signs of disloyalty and suspicion. Therefore, most people did not have these advantages, and when they moved out and started navigating a new country and language, it was overwhelmingly challenging. Nevertheless, the Albanians showed their resilience and ability to adjust into this unknown country.

The journey of the *Vlora* marked a turning point, setting the stage for a wave of mass migration that would continue for years. The mass departure on that day ignited a migration movement that grew in scale over time (as mentioned above with INSTAT statistics). Italians perceived it similarly; there were two significant migrant waves in Italy originating from Eastern countries, particularly after the fall of Communist/Socialist/Stalinist regimes in 1989. Albanians notably contributed to these migrations, with two major waves etched in Italian history—the first in March and the second in August 1996. Italians even viewed the influx of Albanian migratory movements as an event comparable in significance to the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴⁹

But what of those who remained? What happened to those without a voice, who stayed behind to shoulder the burdens of life in Albania? These included predominantly women, children, mothers, and sisters, who largely maintained their roles within the household. Years of communist isolation left deep traces on all facets of society for the people who remained. The political environment was unstable, and steady employment was a major challenge. Communities lacked both security and prospects. For many Albanians, this sense of stagnation, combined with their innate desire to witness change and arrive at destination of greater opportunity, made migration seem like the only viable path forward. Together, these factors created an enduring legacy of migration.

⁴⁹ Michele Colucci (2023), “*Storia dell’immigrazione straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 ai nostri giorni.*” Roma. p. 93.

The *Vlora* was far from the only escape route that Albanians pursued to flee their country. In the months following the *Vlora*'s departure, many of those who had initially made it to Italy were forcibly returned to Albania. Only a small fraction, about one-tenth, were able to secure a way to stay.⁵⁰ For those who were deported, the experience had changed them deeply; they had seen another world perspective, and returning to their isolated homeland was suffocating. This glimpse of the outside world was the origin for a new feeling of determination among many, leading them to attempt escape through other, often dangerous routes across the Adriatic. During the whole period of time, approximately 28,000 Albanians attempted to reach Italy, initially using small boats, then the ship *Vlora*, and later other types of vessels.⁵¹

The small waves of migration that followed were perilous journeys, due to the method of transportation, such as fishing vessels or speed boats, making the journey across the sea even more dangerous. One of the many reasons of the life loss on the route – was due to the dangerous routes. Most of the boats were overcrowded, navigational equipment was either old or was not generally present and these poor conditions led to fatal consequences. The rough waters of the Adriatic Sea proved especially treacherous to those who could not swim, or to those stranded at sea after a vessel was lost or capsized. These seemingly impossible passages highlighted the desperation and sacrifices of those people fleeing Albania. It proved that even the risk of death did not sway them from the ultimate goal of seeking a better life.

Overview of the scholarship

Albanian historiography remains underdeveloped during the Stalinist era but began to grow and became more prolific in the post-communist period. In the 1990s, historians who had been working on their research during the communist years started publishing their works. Most of these publications were funded either by the state or private donors and honed in on the general and political history of Albania. They not only placed emphasis on Albania itself but also on

⁵⁰ Colucci, "*Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia*." p. 95.

⁵¹ Colucci, "*Storia dell'immigrazione straniera in Italia*." pp. 93f.

Kosovo, exploring the complexity of the cities in both countries, their relationships, and their shared history. In addition to the various historical research and publications, there were significant efforts to publish historical documents during Albania's transitional years.⁵²

This thesis emphasizes Albania's transition period and more insights about Hoxha's life and isolation politics. Notably, Albanian journalist Blendi Fevziu's work provides deep insights about the Hoxha's regime, with deep research into the lifestyle of Enver Hoxha and his family, in which the author incorporates archived documents to depict the regime's repressive control and the consequences and its effect on the society and the political sphere. He focuses on different events during communism that marked the Albanian political history, giving real examples with actual footages from the happenings.⁵⁴ Similarly, Robert Pichler's research gives insights to the profound impact of isolation on Albania. Pichler's point of view was clear, focusing on the transformations that took place during the prolonged isolation. His work highlights how the transformation of the state impacted the population, especially the struggles after the fall of the regime and integration into the post-communist era, which was unknown for many.⁵⁶ The works of these two authors provide essential context for understanding the dynamics that shaped Albanian households during this era and give a full picture of how political isolation and authoritarian rule disrupted not only the nation's growth but also the individual structure and roles within Albanian families.

Pichler's work is extensive, particularly regarding the period after the 1990s. His scholarly examination, in collaboration with Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers,⁵⁷ provides an important analysis of the various transformations Albania has experienced since the end of the communist era. Jonida Barjaba's⁵⁸ work on the other hand, puts the diaspora in focus as well, giving insights about how Albanian diaspora has impacted Albanian society and social structures both

⁵² Brunnbauer, Ulf, (ed. 2004). *Re(Writing) History: Historiography in Southeast Europe after Socialism*. Münster. p. 39f.

⁵⁴ Fevziu, "Enver Hoxha. *The Iron Fist of Albania*." London, New York.

⁵⁶ Pichler, Robert., & Pula, Edit. (2020). *Albania's 90's: Photographs and Narratives. Fotografi dhe Tregime*.

⁵⁷ Pichler, Robert., & Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie. (Eds.). (2014). *Legacy and change: Albanian transformation from multidisciplinary perspectives*. Münster.

⁵⁸ Jonida Barjaba (2019), *Albanian diaspora across the world*. In: Athens Journal of Mediteean Studies. Vol. 5. No. 3.

culturally and economically. Additionally, these works address the challenges Albania has faced in its efforts toward democratization and modernization, highlighting the above-mentioned obstacles encountered along the way.

Besides the focus on migration and diaspora, the study of migration patterns and trends, the social integration migrants experience, and how family dynamics change and vary—it is significant to examine factors on the household level as well. The *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Migration*⁵⁹, edited by Giuseppe Sciortino, Martina Cvajner, and Peter J. Kivisto, brings together various perspectives that help deepen my research into the sociological impact of migration as a whole.

Migration is largely a gendered process, in which men and women tend to have different migration destinations, experiences, aspirations, networks, and modes of integration.⁶⁰ While I have mentioned that both men and women migrated from Albania, the predominance of men in these movements was undeniable, leaving many women behind in the household. Migratory movements are passively connected with the role of women, even if they were not directly part of the migration. Women's roles in migration gained more prevalence when family migration became a central topic. Prior to the 1970s, the focus was primarily on male migration. However, at the turn of the 21st century, women's roles in migration began to change, and their stories became an integral part of migration studies.⁶¹

When mentioning migration, Bexhet Braho's⁶² book about the migration exodus through the “*Vlora*” ship gives interesting insights and points of view from a migrant aspect. Even though the work is not a publication for a researched purpose, his insights and details about the journey in Durrës and Brindisi are a key source for all the insights of the trip, and a foreshadowing of the routes that followed for many after that day.

⁵⁹ Sciortino, Giuseppe, Cvajner, M., & Kivisto, P. J. (Eds.). (2024). *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Migration*. Cheltenham, UK/ Northampton, USA.

⁶⁰ Athina Anastasiadou, Jisu Kim, A. Ebru Sanlitürk, Helga de Valk, and Emilio Zagheni, (2023). *Sex- and Gender-based Differences in the Migration Process: A Systematic Literature Review*, MPIDR Working Paper WP 2023-039 (Rostock: Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research). p. 2.

⁶¹ Anastasiadou, “*Sex- and Gender-based Differences in the Migration Process*” p. 2.

⁶² Bexhet, Braho (2020), *Il Titanic dall'Adriatico*.

The connection between the migrant who leaves the household and the household that remains plays a significant role in the migration process. In most cases, this connection operates as a strategic long-term plan with the aim of achieving specific goals or pursuing the well-being of the entire household. These goals often include providing better education or job opportunities for family members or offering financial support through remittances.⁶³ This interconnected dynamic benefits not only the household but also the country of origin.

The focus on the household is especially relevant here and the role of those who remained behind became just as crucial as that of those who migrated abroad. There was always someone left behind to manage the home, often the individual who would not leave, not because they lacked the desire to migrate, but because the conditions of migration were far from ideal. It was understood that everything left behind could not remain without care and attention. Traditionally, it was the women who were the backbone of the household, taking on the responsibility of keeping things in order while the men worked outside the home. However, this role shifted dramatically in the years following the mass migration.

This topic is highly valuable for the thesis overall. The documentary “Women under Dictatorship – Beyond the Myth of Emancipation,”⁶⁴ by cultural journalist Fatmira Nikolli, highlights the roles women undertook during the communist era, primarily as part of the labor force, which was framed as a tool for emancipation. Nevertheless, there were few women who could enter the workforce in general, as their societal role was at home, in the household.

Ermira Danaj’s⁶⁵ work puts women in focus. According to her work, in times of communism, women’s roles were largely confined to the household but also extended into the labor force. This shift occurred under the guise of emancipation, yet they were still expected to manage domestic duties at home. However in the years after the regime’s fall, especially in the absence of many men who had migrated abroad, the role of women actually expanded significantly. In many cases, they became the head of the household, managing both domestic responsibilities and, increasingly, the financial wellbeing of their families. Women not only took on more

⁶³ Sciortino, “*Research Handbook on the Sociology of Migration*.” p. 329.

⁶⁴ Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture (2024), “*Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit / Women under Dictatorship*” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

⁶⁵ Danaj Ermira. (2022). *Women, migration and gendered experiences: The Case of Post-1991 Albanian Migration*. At: Springer Nature.

leadership within the home but also began to enter the workforce, securing livelihoods for their families in ways that were previously rare. Although support from those who had migrated abroad was available in time, it often followed only after the migrants had settled down in their new countries and found stable employment. In the most difficult transition period at the beginning, those who stayed behind had to navigate various challenges alone, struggling with limited resources and little immediate help from their loved ones abroad.

The household will remain the fundamental framework, since the interviewees provide insights into its diverse facets. To examine this topic in depth, I will rely on firsthand accounts gathered through interviews. To better understand the migration plight of Albanians in general, and those migrating to Italy specifically, I will consider the articles by Marco Stampini, Calogero Carletto, and Benjamin Davis⁶⁶, with a particular focus on the role of family networks and prior migration experiences. I will discuss how family connections and social networks influence individuals' decisions to migrate and their choice of destination countries. These networks often provide vital support to new migrants, such as information about job opportunities, housing, and financial assistance, which can, for example, help Albanians establish themselves in new countries. Additionally, I will examine Besnik Beslimi's⁶⁷ research, which places special emphasis on the Albanian household. Beslimi holds a Doctor rerum politicarum, and his dissertation on the Albanian economy in the post-communist period has captured my interest.

The theoretical framework is another important component of the methodology, where themes like resilience, gender roles, family expectations, and household organization will be identified. These aspects require qualitative analysis, supported by scholarship in the sociology and ethnography of migration and the role of households in general, which will provide valuable insights into the household and migration aspects. *Migration Theory*,⁶⁸ edited by Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield, is a comprehensive book that explores migration from multiple academic perspectives. This thesis will bring my focus in different topics that are connected

⁶⁶ Stampini, M., Carletto, C., & Davis, B. (2008). International Migration from Albania: The Role of Family Networks and Previous Experience. *Eastern European Economics*, 46(2), 50–87.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27740059>

⁶⁷ Beslimi, Besnik. (2004). Öffentliche Finanzen im postkommunistischen Albanien unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der öffentlichen Einnahmen. Doctoral dissertation, Technische Bergakademie Freiberg.

⁶⁸ Brettell, Caroline B., & Hollifield, J. F. (Eds.). (2020). *Migration theory: Talking across disciplines* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

with migration, such as the politics, economy and demographic approaches. It is important to note that migration cannot be understood under only one topic, or a single perspective, but rather from different points of views and angles. The edited volume by Anna Amelina, Kenneth Horvath, and Bruno Meeus,⁶⁹ which focuses on the anthropology of migration and social transformation in Europe, will help me define the anthropological factors that shape societies, both in host countries of migrants as well as for those individuals (mostly women) who remained behind. It observes emigrants' points of views and how they reshape or are shaped by the host societies. This is done by the discussion of different topics, such as labor market or the integration in the respective cultures. This article includes discussions about the societies that were transformed by the continuous and diverse flow of migration.

Women, who were the ones who remained behind, play an essential role in the narrative as well, due to their support in the reshaping of the society. The focus on the household is essential because it shows the strength and adjustability of those who stayed, forming the foundation for social and cultural shifts in the country. It was through these characters and individuals, who managed their new roles within the household, that Albania started to reinvent itself in the absence of the isolationist and authoritarian control.

It is vital to understand how this transformation took place, as it demonstrates how households became agents of change, slowly pulling away from the isolation of the past and setting the stage for democratic values. Democracy is, at its core, about change and the dismantling of barriers, and the evolving role of the household in Albania exemplifies this journey. Julie Vullnetari,⁷⁰ a geographer specializing in Albanian migration, is another researcher whose work is highly valuable for my thesis. She examines the patterns of Albanian migration since the fall of communism, exploring both internal and international movements. Insights of hers that I utilized in my thesis include those regarding the role of family and social networks in migration, which in turn is shaped by various economic, social, and familial factors.

⁶⁹ Horvath Amelina, A., K., & Meeus, B. (Eds.). (2016). *An anthology of migration and social transformation: European perspectives*.

⁷⁰ Vullnetari, Julie. (2012). *Albania on the move: Links between internal and international migration*. Amsterdam.

Another important aspect is circular migration, focusing on those who migrated and then returned. An episode from Edi Rama's podcast⁷¹ focuses on one migration family that began their journey in Italy but decided to return to their home country and make a living by starting a business with their migration savings.

Methodology

The household is the focus of this thesis, and oral history is especially conducive to its understanding. Therefore, first-hand interviews of women who remained in the household prove the importance of an oral history collection in exploring these personal stories and discovering the impact on household dynamics. Recordings of personal stories from migrants and their family members, especially from those who experienced those historical moments of mass migration (departing of the *Vlora* ship and also other migration routes), allows for the preservation of authentic and detailed accounts and a collective identity in the context of migration.

The narrative that comes from these sources provides rich insights on the impacts of the migration. The focus of the research is laid on the conducted interviews with migrants. These includes ones taken from the film from Vicari, Daniele "*La nave dolce*", or other migration stories published in books, like the history of Bexhet Braho, which was a southern Albanian born family that migrated to Italy and returned after almost twenty years. These different interviews help analyze individual migration stories and their broader implications in the context of this thesis. Choosing this topic was a decision that was also impacted by the major role migration plays in Albanian household and how nearly every family has been affected by this phenomenon at least once.

Given the critical role of sources in scholarly research, interviews were identified as a key method for gathering data. These firsthand accounts offer fresh viewpoints on the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of migration. By leveraging connections to individuals with

⁷¹ Rama, Edi. (2024), "*Kurr më në emigracion.*" *Edi Rama Podcast*. (14.03.25).

direct migration experiences, this study seeks to explore the personal and collective impact of migration on Albanian society, providing a nuanced understanding of its complexities. Including interviews in my thesis was a deliberate choice, as it ensures that my work authentically reflects the human stories at its core.

As mentioned, apart from the interviews conducted directly with migrants, it was also important to include the perspectives of individuals who stayed home during the migration process. This persuaded me to conduct two additional interviews with those individuals who played pivotal roles in running the household while their emigrated family members were not present. In this context, two potential participants sprung to mind: the mother and sister of a previous interviewee. Both had remained in Albania during the migration wave and had taken on critical roles within the household. Their interviews, performed in November and December, are particularly valuable as they serve to represent the experiences of many women in Albanian society during the post-transition period. Apart from these interviewees, I sourced other interviews from media outlets, such as TV channels and podcasts. For example, I referenced Eva Meksi⁷⁵, whose migration story was featured in the film “*La nave dolce*”, published by an Italian channel. Similarly, Behgjet Braho, the author of *Il Titanic dell’Adriatico*⁷⁶ provided another compelling perspective. Kledi Kadiu, an Albanian born dancer, shared his account of the Vlora ship exodus on the film “*La nave dolce*”, along with others, offering a valuable lens through which to understand this event.

Beyond these media-based sources, the four original interviews were carried out in September till December via Zoom. I recorded the responses to all the questions I had carefully prepared for each participant. Each interview took place separately at different times. Since Albanian is my mother tongue and was more comfortable for both me and the interviewees, the conversations were held in Albanian. However, I translated all the content into English myself. The recordings remain in Albanian, while the transcriptions are in English, aligning with the requirements of my thesis and facilitating the analysis process.

⁷⁵ Interview of Eva Meksi. At: videoculti. (January 2023). *1991: Arrivano gli albanesi - Documentario* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLutB9gPejU> (Accessed: 25.08.24)

⁷⁶ Braho, “*Il Titanic dall’Adriatico*”

All interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, and the initials used are fictional. My first interviewee, B.K., was directly involved in the Vlora exodus, sharing a firsthand account of this dramatic moment in Albanian migration history. The second interviewee, B.Z., had a different migration story. Though not part of the Vlora incident, his narrative captivated me due to his repeated attempts to flee Albania before finally reaching his destination and establishing a new life abroad. His story offers a unique perspective on the persistence and determination that represented the Albanian migration mindset in this time period.

In addition to these interviews with migrants, I needed another perspective from the ones who remained behind, that is, a perspective of the household. It was important to collect a viewpoint not only during migration and transitional period, but also during the regime, collecting various details from random everyday life stories to the relations family members kept across the borders. All these stories and interviews, intertwined with the film directed by Daniele Vicari⁷⁷, as well as with statistics from INSTAT, which vividly portrays the historical significance of Albanian migration as seen through the eyes of the world, and particularly Italy, help me navigate other perspectives. These new viewpoints focus on building the narrative and being the main focus of all the thesis, as well as offering diverse perspectives on this pivotal chapter of migration history.

By intertwining these interviews, both published and new, and the film, my thesis captures a diverse range of voices and experiences, providing a multifaceted understanding of Albanian migration and its profound impact on households and society.

In addition to interviews sourced from various media outlets, such as TV channels and podcasts, I conducted personal interviews to enrich my research. Through their narratives, I aim to highlight the resilience, adaptability, and often-overlooked contributions of women during this transformative era. To amplify these voices and provide a broader context, I also decided to include a documentary in Albanian titled *Women Under Dictatorship, Beyond*

⁷⁷ Vicari, Daniele (2012). “*La nave dolce*.”

Emancipation.⁷⁸ This documentary offers an in-depth exploration of the roles, challenges, and societal expectations placed upon women during the communist regime and its aftermath. By incorporating these interviews and the documentary, I intend to highlight the essential role of women in shaping the Albanian household and society therewith during a period of profound change.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis, which hones in on various perspectives and demographic groups and categorizes key themes, will provide a multifaceted understanding of how migration has shaped family and household dynamics.

Understanding the situation of women during migration and times of transition cannot be fully understood without considering their role in the family during the communist era. Their position within the household, society, and as laborers can be explored by means of insights into the propagandistic papers and articles written by Enver Hoxha⁷⁹ himself. All of these archives provide valuable information to not only the political landscape but also about the societal and gender dynamics of the time.

Each interview and oral source I have gathered, along with relevant literature, films, and documentaries, will be interpreted through the lens of migration theories. To specify further, in the following chapters, I will use excerpts from the interviews I have conducted in order to provide specific examples that illustrate particular themes and points I wish to focus on. These excerpts will not only serve to illustrate but also offer detailed information and insights into everyday life in Albania during the transition period. The data gathered through oral history has proven to be authentic, and much of the information I extracted from the interviewees' perspectives has not been published in the existing scholarship I consulted. When gathering information from these interviews, I tried to direct attention to specific questions and data relevant to my research. These included the experiences of women who remained behind, their

⁷⁸ "Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwDpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

⁷⁹ Hoxha, Enver. "*Selected Works, Volume VI*." Marxists Internet Archive. p. 698. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works-index.htm>. (22.01.25)

roles within the regime, and how their functions in the family changed after the regime. The emphasis on their perspectives will in turn result in unique and valuable insights. This approach will allow for a comprehensive analysis that integrates both personal narratives and scholarly frameworks, enhancing comprehension of the social and cultural impacts of migration on households.

The structure of the thesis

The focus of this thesis is to have a chronological timetable, that can explore three main perspectives, focusing on the different timespans. It begins with the country's isolation prior to 1990, focusing on the role of women under the communist regime and what role the propaganda played. The second chapter focuses in the mass migration that followed, with the focus on the household as well. Internal and external migration are two different aspects that should be focused on separately. This includes how life changed for women after these mass migration patterns, especially focusing on their roles in the society. The third chapter will focus on Albanian society in the post-1990s era, and how migration impacted families, either back home or in the new countries. This answers questions such as: what role did diaspora play? Why did the Albanian government trying to regulate migration flows and develop a thorough migration management?

These three dimensions are deeply interconnected, each influencing and reshaping the role of the household and migrants' routes. By intertwining these themes together, I aim to uncover how each aspect influenced the household structure and dynamics in unique yet interconnected ways. Mass migration, for instance, had a profound impact on household networks, creating a ripple effect where one family member's departure often led to the migration of others—no matter whether siblings, parents, or extended relatives—following the initial migration path.

In investigating these stories, I will go beyond the initial migration journeys—such as those who "jumped" on the Vlora or traveled via other routes—to explore the broader impact of these departures on families left behind. Migration served as a good household strategy for many of the emigrants, as it led to new family networks abroad, while upholding strong connections

and ties with relatives back home. This being said, the central question remains, whether migrants later helped their relatives or especially their closest family members to bring them over and how regular communication maintained familial bonds or influenced new family expectations. Examining these connections will provide insight into how the household remained a resilient unit amid Albania's social transformation.

Fred C. Abrahams,⁸⁰ a researcher, writer and human rights advocate, brings another perspective, with detailed analysis about Albania's transition period, focusing on the communist era, the years of transition, as well as the early democratic years that followed. Abrahams uses different sources on the book – including personal narratives, different governmental records, as well as firsthand accounts – which he used to document all the transformations and transitions that happened in the society and politics. His work provides invaluable context for understanding the significant upheaval the country underwent during this time. In order to dive deeper into the impacts of Hoxha's reforms, particularly in regards to gender roles and societal divisions, it might be important to consider the insights from Isa Blumi's⁸¹ article. Blumi's analysis will help clarify the impacts of state-led reforms in areas such as industry and agriculture, as well as the ways these policies reshaped social dynamics. In addition, Konstantinos Giakoumis's⁸² paper offers closer insights to the religious perspectives in Albania during communism. This work relies on the collection of oral history, which is a valuable method to record interviews from different individuals, whose voices are not heard or put into the spectrum of necessity. Giakoumis brings to light the hidden resilience of faith of the underground religious communities, under a regime that rigidly banned and suppressed all kinds of religious practices and strictly enforced atheism. Religion plays a significant role in my research, and in Giakoumis' view as well, as he puts religion in the midst of his research. This sheds light on how multiple dimensions – political structures, economic conditions, gender and religious factors – made their contribution to the complex tapestry of a society like Albania under the isolationist pressure.

⁸⁰ Abrahams, Fred. C. (2015). *Modern Albania: From dictatorship to democracy in Europe*. New York.

⁸¹ Blumi, Isa. "Hoxha's Class War: The Cultural Revolution and State Reformation, 1961-1971." *East European Quarterly*, vol. 33 (3), 1999, pp. 303-321.

⁸² Giakoumis, Konstantinos. (2022). Underground Religious Culture under Surveillance in Communist Albania, 1967–1990. *East Central Europe*, 49(2–3), pp. 224–253.

1. The Household and Mobility

1.1 Isolation

Understanding the actual reasons that bring a country to deep stagnation and isolation is not as easy as it may seem on the surface. It requires examining different circumstances that led to different paths and events. A good starting point to that, is the isolation a country experiences from external influences, such as cultural roles in music, art, and fashion, which in one way or another will lead to stagnation. This is what happened to Albania, considering the strategic geographical position it has in the heart of Europe.⁸³ Albanian communism evolved through different stages, shaped by shifting alliances with major communist powers. Initially, Albania maintained close ties with Yugoslavia under Tito (from the beginning of the regime until 1948), aligning its policies with Yugoslav-style socialism. After breaking with Yugoslavia in 1948, Albania turned to the Soviet Union (1948–1961), adopting Soviet economic and political models. However, the relationship with the USSR ended in 1961 when Albania sided with Maoist China, which became its primary ally until 1978. The final rupture with China in 1976 marked the beginning of Albania's era of total isolationism. Cutting alliances, reinforcing border policies, as well as restricting any movement or tightening internal control, was the starting point of one of the most isolated countries in the world. During this time, the surveillance, propaganda and self-reliance policies started to increase. On the other hand, the shift the country experienced was not to be ignored, as it impacted the economy, the society and the international standing drastically, strengthening its repressive and autarkic system.⁸⁴ All foreign investments in Albania up to that year were terminated in 1976 due to a ban.⁸⁵

⁸³ Jonathan Eaton & Elenita Roshi (2014). “Chiseling away at a concrete legacy: Engaging with Communist-era heritage and memory in Albania”. *Journal of Field Archaeology*, 39:3, p. 312.

⁸⁴ Godole, Jonila (2021). “*Understanding Albania's Communist Legacy: An Interview with Dr. Jonila Godole.*” Interview by Willa Davis. *Communist Crimes*. <https://communistcrimes.org/en/understanding-albanias-communist-legacy-interview-dr-jonila-godole> (10.02.25)

⁸⁵ Matraku, Dorina & Marianne Johnson (2020), “*Isolation in Albanian Economic Thought.*” At: Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology: including a symposium of economists and authoritarian regimes in the 20th century. p. 118.

Albania's isolationist character was shaped by different angles and Mentor Beqa⁸⁶ looks at it critically, interpreting it as a policy Albania chose to consider during 1978 to 1991. It was a process in which Albania differentiated itself from other nations, and this regime's aim was to look inward rather than towards institutions and support from the international sphere.⁸⁷ This came through the security the state had built, which did not see any threat of invasion or the need for any alliances in from the international politics.⁸⁸ During this isolation period, and even before that, the communist regime collected various types of data from its own population and chose to keep it for itself. In this way, it could gain insight into the population's opinions about the regime, including criticism and all kinds of dissatisfaction, to better understand how the regime was perceived both internally and externally.⁸⁹

The reason behind Enver Hoxha's decision to cut ties with all three major communist alliances is complex but can be simplified as his pursuit of a policy of rigid self-reliance⁹⁰, driven by Marxist-Leninist ideology. Isolationism in this way was not just the strategy the country used towards foreign policy, but rather than the way how the regime and the state functioned as such.⁹¹ That being said, every time Albania broke ties with another big alliance (like the Soviet Union or China) dire consequences happened. However, the Albanian leadership took the obstacles as tests of strength for the country and reinforcement for the true communism. Such a communism state should remain independent from the outside world and should not depend on external aid. This serves as a strong example of Albania's state propaganda under Hoxha, portraying economic isolation as a deliberate and heroic choice rather than a consequence of rigid ideological policies.⁹²

Isolation was a complex process, and did not happen overnight. Blendi Fevziu's book on Enver Hoxha provides insights into the dictator's life before communist Albania entered total

⁸⁶ Beqa, Mentor (2017). "*A critique of the concept of Isolationism: The case of Albania*". European Academic Research. Vol. 5, Nr. 12. pp. 10705-10715.

⁸⁷ Beqa, "*A critique of the concept of Isolationism*". p. 10706.

⁸⁸ Beqa, "*A critique of the concept of Isolationism*". p. 10707.

⁸⁹ Matraku, "*Isolation in Albanian Economic Thought*". p. 117.

⁹⁰ Matraku, "*Isolation in Albanian Economic Thought*". p. 116.

⁹¹ Beqa, "*A critique of the concept of Isolationism*". p. 10708.

⁹² O'Donnell, James. S. (1999). *A coming of age: Albania Under Enver Hoxha*. p. 86.

isolation. While Albania had already begun limiting foreign influence in the mid-1950s, its international isolation intensified significantly after 1976. Albania had very few, if any, visitors from abroad, and the country had minimal representation in international politics. In order for a country to have continuous relations with the international sphere, it must offer communication channels that are open. In the case of Albania, the downward shift began when Hoxha broke ties with the Soviet Union in 1961, shifting Albania's allegiance to Mao Zedong's China. Yet, the relations with China started to change once China began to improve its relations with the United States in the 1970, which was part of Mao's strategy to counter the Soviet Union. In Hoxha's point of view this was a betrayal to communism principles. The result of this occurred in 1978, when Albania cut ties with all international alliances that existed before that, and paved way to what was called one of the most isolated states in the world. During this time, the construction of bunkers initiated by Hoxha started to occur nationwide, in anticipation of a foreign invasion that never came. These fortifications symbolized the regime's paranoia and self-imposed isolation, which lasted until the collapse of communism in the early 1990s.⁹³

Thus, it is necessary to include a comparison with other communist countries, such as Romania under Ceaușescu. During the communist regime—there, as in Albania—the regime supported rural-to-urban migration as a way to promote industrialization. Even though external migration during communism was very difficult, it was still possible, albeit very limited. In both Romania and Albania, the regime used various tools to repopulate areas that were experiencing depopulation, especially rural regions. The state itself selected specific categories of people, such as students who had completed their studies, for compulsory first-job assignments, which were, in most cases, in small towns and rural areas.⁹⁴ Although the number of individuals changing their residence during communism was restricted and low, it still existed, was present, and was possible.⁹⁵

⁹³ Guzvica, Stefan (2023), *Albanian Communism: Enver Hoxha's Totalitarian Regime. The Collector*. <https://www.thecollector.com/albanian-communism/> (15.03.25)

⁹⁴ Dumitru, Sandru. (2005) "Internal Migration Transition in Romania? On Internal Migration during Communism". *Regional Statistics*. Vol 6. Nr. 1. pp. 42f. <https://doi.org/10.15196/RS06103> (20.04.25). ⁹⁵ Dumitru, "Internal Migration in Romania". p. 43.

In the case of Albania, migration before the fall of communism was not only constrained but also life-threatening, as individuals who attempted to leave faced severe consequences. The economic situation was grave, and those who attempted to escape did so in secrecy, often putting their lives at risk. As P.Z., who lived through this period, recalls, “People were desperate. Those who tried to leave knew they might never see their families again. Many didn’t make it. Some were shot at the border, others drowned at sea.”⁹⁶ That is when the question of mobility comes into play, as moving out of the country was never something everyone could consider, given that the regime had eyes and ears (spies) everywhere. Blendi Fevziu provides a powerful example a family of four – mother and her three sons – who decided to flee communist Albania after the *Sigurimi* (the political police) took one of the sons. In order to secure his release, the regime demanded that the other two brothers become spies. They refused and made the painful decision to flee without their brother, knowing that saving him was impossible. Attempting to do so would have been a trap set by the regime to capture them all and ultimately persecute them all publicly as traitor to the nation. Ekrem Bardha and his two brothers are also examples of people who managed to escape Albania during communism and save their lives.⁹⁷

Despite the immense danger, some managed to flee before communist party was created, establishing new lives abroad. P.Z. remembers hearing about secret messages from those who already left Albania before communism: “A few who survived and reached other countries would send telegrams in secret. They described a life we couldn’t even imagine—shops full of food, jobs where people were paid fairly, and the freedom to speak their minds.” These rare communications provided a glimpse of a world beyond Albania’s closed borders, reinforcing the stark contrast between life inside the country and the opportunities available elsewhere.⁹⁸

The Albanian state considered emigration an act of betrayal, punishing not only those who attempted to leave but also their families. Security forces were ordered to capture or kill defectors, and those left behind often faced imprisonment, job loss, or social exclusion. P.Z. reflects on this fear: “Even if you never tried to leave, just having a relative escape could ruin

⁹⁶ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

⁹⁷ Fevziu, Blendi (2025), Interview with Ekrem Bardha.

⁹⁸ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

your life. The government would watch you, take your job, make sure you suffered.”⁹⁹ Examples of those who faced public shame after attempting to flee were numerous, P. Z. recalls two young men, both in their early twenties, who tried to escape Albania in the 1960s but were captured at the border with Kosovo. At that time Kosovo was more liberalized than Albania, despite the countries being culturally and ethnically similar, with many people across both borders related to one another. After their capture, the regime forced the two young men to walk through their hometown of Kruja, Albania, as a form of public humiliation. People were ordered (or encouraged) to spit them in their faces, branding them as traitors to the nation.¹⁰⁰

Another tool of communism used to control and isolate the country was the Sigurimi, Albania’s secret police. The Sigurimi (English: *The Security*) was the eyes and ears of the country. It was an organization under the command of Enver Hoxha, responsible for monitoring every movement, letter or telegram, phone call, and exchange between the people of Albania. While some of its activities remained within legal boundaries, most of the time it operated outside the law. The Sigurimi existed for 46 years and had around 200,000 operatives. Many were coerced into collaborating, while others volunteered or were enlisted to return favors. Its primary mission was to track individuals considered threatening or problematic by the regime. M. Z. recalls that “(...) under the communist regime, even within the family, you couldn't speak openly because there could be a spy among family members. You had to talk only about the Communist Party.”¹⁰¹

By the 1990s, the Sigurimi had amassed nearly one million files—essentially one for every adult citizen of the People’s Socialist Republic of Albania. These files contained extensive personal information, including political beliefs, sexual preferences, details of personal lives, and even records of infidelity and betrayals. Surveillance was omnipresent, and no one was truly safe from suspicion.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁰⁰ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁰¹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁰² Fevziu, “*Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*.” p. 109.

M. Z. continues her narration by describing everyday life under the regime and how someone could easily fall under suspicion during the years of isolation:

Those who had relatives abroad were able to receive goods from outside the country. Often, even the smallest, seemingly insignificant items—like a simple paper bag that looked different from what was commonly used—could attract unwanted attention. People were frequently questioned about the origin of such items, often facing intense scrutiny. A limited number of packages were allowed, but everything was strictly inspected by the state. Any possession deemed unusual or suspicious could lead to an individual being placed under further surveillance, with a file opened on them. Most of these goods came from Kosovo.¹⁰³

In conclusion, Beqa's point of view is clear: even though Albania is a small country, making it easy to isolate from the world, yet the country could not just ignore every response or opportunities that came from the international system. The decisions the state took were shaped by the global environment, which made it possible for the country to have engaged with the system, even though the engagement was very selective.¹⁰⁴

When the regime in Albania fell in 1991, the government decided to destroy the files. Decades of state surveillance fostered a culture of fear, secrecy, and mistrust that did not simply vanish with the fall of communism. Families and friendships had been torn apart by suspicion, and the knowledge that nearly every citizen had been watched or reported on created wounds that would take generations to heal.¹⁰⁵

A complex aspect of this isolationist structure was also the religion. In 1967, Albania declared itself the first atheist country in the world, which was an announcement seen as a positive step by many. Such a step was presented as a form of liberation that could only be gained by means of communist governance. This combination of control and propaganda had the result that many Albanians believed that such measures were for their benefit and part of the country's

¹⁰³ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁰⁴ Beqa, "*A critique of the concept of Isolationism*". pp. 10713f.

¹⁰⁵ Fevziu, "*Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*." p. 109.

evolution.¹⁰⁶ P. Z. describes the difficulties she faced at her workplace during religious festivities, such as fasting during the holy month of Ramadan:

Religion was nearly impossible to practice. Places of worship were destroyed, yet people refused to abandon their faith. They secretly visited sites that had once been sacred. Women who fasted during Ramadan would bring food with them and eat in secret at work. Christians would also visit holy sites in secrecy, despite the fact that every religious building had been demolished.¹⁰⁷

Surveillance extended even to famous Albanians abroad, that is, those who left the country before the communist regime was formed. Another striking example of this isolation was in the case of Mother Teresa, which will be explored more in depth later in this chapter. Hoxha's resistance against religion was one of the cruelest chapters of his regime, intensifying even further during Albania's period of isolation. However, in 1944, even before Hoxha had fully consolidated his power, his persecution of clerics had already begun. Many clerics were executed on his direct orders, while others were either arrested or brutally tortured.¹⁰⁸

On November 22, 1967, the official Albanian newspaper published Decree No. 4,337, which banned the practice of religion nationwide. From that moment onwards, all holy places were shut down, and further actions were taken to enforce the ban.¹⁰⁹ These executions led most Western democracies to stop inviting Albanian diplomats to official meetings and receptions, further severing any remaining international ties Albania had left. The ban of religion marks one of the few steps that led the country to stagnation and total isolation.¹¹⁰

Persecution extended beyond executions and imprisonments—those who survived were often placed under strict house arrest. Religious figures were forced into isolation, unable to leave their homes or participate in the community entirely. M.Z. recalls how her father, a devout Muslim cleric, was given an ultimatum by the government: his children had to become

¹⁰⁶ Pichler Robert, (2020). First encounters with Albania in 1989. In: Pichler, Robert., & Pula, Edit. *Albania's 90's: Photographs and Narratives. Fotografi dhe Tregime*. pp. 89.

¹⁰⁷ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Fevziu, "Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania." p. 178f.

¹⁰⁹ Fevziu, "Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania." p. 183.

¹¹⁰ Fevziu, "Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania." pp. 182f.

communists if he himself wanted to avoid persecution for his religion. In return, he was permitted to remain alive but remained under house arrest for over a decade, until the fall of the regime.¹¹¹ Religious restrictions also extended to cultural traditions. Women were strictly prohibited from wearing *dimiqe*—a traditional Albanian garment—which, despite its deep cultural roots, was deemed incompatible with communist ideology.¹¹²

In public, examples were made of clerics, including priests, imams, and dervishes. Their beards were shaved off in front of crowds, and such scenes were broadcast on television as a warning to others. M.Z. still recalls witnessing these moments on TV as she grew up, a chilling reminder of how the regime sought to erase faith from society.¹¹³

As mentioned previously, Mother Teresa's story serves as a powerful example of how Hoxha's communist ideology and the fear of Western influence kept families apart in times of need. Mother Teresa, born as Agnes Gonxhe Bojaxhiu in Skopje and raised in Albania, devoted her life to caring for the sick and poor. She became a nun in Calcutta, India.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, her mother, Drane, and sister, Age, remained in Albania. When Mother Teresa learned from her brother—who had left Albania during World War II and settled in Palermo, Italy—that their mother was on her deathbed, she desperately sought to reunite with her. In 1968 she sent a letter to the Albanian embassy in Rome, explaining her mother's illness and requesting permission to bring her to Italy for treatment. Given her mother's advanced age (80 by then), Mother Teresa assured the authorities that she would personally care for her in Italy, which was geographically close to Albania.¹¹⁵

When the regime declared punishment for all religious faiths, Mother Teresa's mother and sister continued to practice their faith in secret. Even as Drane's health deteriorated, they avoided writing to Mother Teresa, knowing that any communication with her would put them

¹¹¹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹¹² Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹¹³ Fevziu, "*Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*." p. 182.

¹¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica. (2024), "*Mother Teresa*." <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mother-Teresa> (26.03.25).

¹¹⁵ Fevziu, "*Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*." p. 175.

in grave danger the moment the *Sigurimi* (Albania's secret police) discovered it. Instead, they wrote letters to Lazër, who was in Italy. Despite the risks, Mother Teresa had long wished to visit Albania, but the country had remained a forbidden land for years. In an effort to reunite with their mother, Mother Teresa and Lazër sent a letter to the Albanian embassy in Rome, but they received no response. A second letter, this time sent on their behalf by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs—urged by the Vatican—also went unanswered. Hoxha implied that if they had truly cared for their mother, they would not have left her alone or abandoned her in the first place.¹¹⁶

This story received considerable coverage in the Western media, and nearly all the countries that had good relations with Albania tried to intervene, urging the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take action. Feeling pressured by the flood of letters from foreign ministries urging him to grant Mother Teresa a visa, Hoxha justified his refusal by branding her as a potentially dangerous agent, using this claim to impose surveillance on her mother and sister as well. As a final attempt, Mother Teresa requested permission to enter Albania for just one week, but her visa was denied. All she could do was pray for her mother's health.

Two days after her mother's passing, on July 14, 1970, Mother Teresa received a telegram from her brother with a simple message: *"Pray for our mother, she has passed away."*¹¹⁷

It was not until 1990, after the collapse of the communist regime, that Mother Teresa was finally able to visit Albania and the house where her mother and sister had spent the rest of their lives.¹¹⁸

The fall of Hoxha's regime may have ended Albania's physical isolation, but the scars of control and surveillance persisted. The challenge for post-communist Albania was not only to rebuild its international connections but also to heal the divisions created by decades of mistrust. The question remains: How does a society move forward when its past was built on secrecy, isolation, and fear?

¹¹⁶ Fevziu, *"Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania."* p. 176.

¹¹⁷ Fevziu, *"Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania."* p. 177.

¹¹⁸ Fevziu, *"Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania."* p. 178.

1.2 Women's Emancipation Under Hoxha's Regime

Women in 20th-century Albanian history were marked by oppression, a reality that Enver Hoxha recognized and used to his advantage. Embracing the participation of women in the partisan movement was a good propagandistic method by the Albanian Communists. This method was very progressive, as it included the participation of women in the public sphere yet was actually a strategic necessity. In this society, where patriarchal norms often confined women's position in the household and domestic duties, the involvement in armed resistance and political organization contributed to the Communist movement with a broader support base. Women's participation to the struggle was seen as a good action and the Communists expanded their influence beyond the stereotypical male-dominated resistance movements. Furthermore, the society generally encouraged a sense of pioneering or revolutionary duty that commanded the engagement of entire societies and families. This was the propaganda surrounding women in the Albanian Communist movement, seen as a strategic tool to promote gender equality, while planning to use their involvement as a progressive aspect.¹¹⁹ The praise given to women and men who achieved exemplary success as workers was utilized as a form of propaganda in the media. Any extraordinary female accomplishment that was discovered, such as a woman becoming a tractor driver, was highlighted, which caused the propaganda to reach the correct audience. Women were thus led to believe that working and excelling in male-dominated fields, while at the same time fulfilling their roles as mothers and ignoring societal opinions, was possible. However, this was all part of the government brainwashing, and it was only portrayed in this manner in the media. In reality, most women had little more than primary education and therefore balancing a career with household responsibilities was extremely difficult. Moreover, women had little to no say in choosing their own professions.¹²⁰

In contrast to other Eastern Bloc countries, the position of women in Albania lagged significantly behind. High rates of illiteracy were evident among women, as were their almost nonexistent roles in public job positions. At the beginning of World War II, the entire country had only 21 female teachers, and less than 3% of secondary school students were female.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ O'Donnell, "*A coming of age: Albania Under Enver Hoxha*." p. 101.

¹²⁰ O'Donnell, "*A coming of age: Albania Under Enver Hoxha*." pp. 103-105.

¹²¹ Vullnetari & King, "*Washing men's feet*". pp. 202f.

From this perspective, Hoxha's regime capitalized on the existing conditions in Albanian society, in which women's roles were largely dependent on their family patriarchs, to promote propaganda around emancipation. Women's liberation and equality with men, according to the regime, would only be achieved if they actively participated in the paid labor force. By 1989, nearly half of all women in Albania were employed. While more women were entering paid labor, often in factories or collective workplaces, there was no sign of men in turn taking on household or caregiving responsibilities. In this case women had to manage both their professional duties and their traditional domestic roles at the same time.¹²²

Women's rights were addressed in *Articles 40 and 41* of the 1976 Constitution of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. The articles stated that all citizens are equal before the law, with no distinctions based on sex. Specifically, *Article 41* highlighted the role of women, emphasizing their active participation in the revolution. Women were guaranteed equal rights with men in various aspects of daily life, including work, the labor force, holidays, education, and family. Furthermore, special care and protection were awarded to mothers and children.¹²³

Although these matters were documented regarding women's roles in society, women themselves perceived them differently, as they were the ones who directly experienced them. One of the interviewees, M.Z., makes this point very clear, stating that “(...) *women were required to manage the household*”. This reflects the traditional gender roles imposed on women, meaning that they were primarily responsible for domestic duties. Additionally, M.Z. states that “(...) young girls and boys were only allowed to live together if they were married.” Decision-making was the responsibility of the elders in the household, and women were completely excluded from this process. They were considered equivalent to children, who were also not given a voice. Falling in love was considered to be “western” and “marriages were arranged in 90% of cases”. Financial matters, on the other hand, were also controlled by the

¹²² Vullnetari & King, ‘*Washing men's feet*’. p. 204.

¹²³ O'Donnell, “*A coming of age: Albania Under Enver Hoxha.*” pp. 100f.

head of the household – typically by the grandfather, granted that he lived with the newlywed couple, or otherwise by the husband.¹²⁴

By presenting a reality that clearly conflicted with the legal imperatives, the afore-mentioned quotes alert us to the role of propaganda. To describe this more accurately, the documentary *"Women in Dictatorship: Beyond the Myth of Emancipation"*¹²⁵ offers a different perspective. Although women were employed in the paid labor force, they were not free to choose their profession. According to the women interviewed in the documentary, despite significant changes and constant media coverage about women's participation and how society had shifted, from a majority of illiterate women (90%, as mentioned) to active participants in the labor force, this narrative is misleading.¹²⁶

There is a sequence in the documentary, that shows Vito Kapo, the president of the *Bashkimin e grave te Shqiperise* (English: "*Albanian Women's Union*"), being used by the regime to spread propaganda among women with her voice:

"Mentioning the increasing of professional, educational and cultural level of women, as well as the creation of a new role of women as equal not only in the society, but also in the family. Women are becoming more responsible that true emancipation is only achieved in the process of economic and societal development of the country. (...)"¹²⁷

Although this sequence in the documentary portrayed this perception, other women who lived under the regime explained that it was merely a façade, portraying an illusion of choice. Some women may have removed their headscarves or chose their life partners, but in reality, they were seen only as a labor force, as pure workers and nothing more. These actions, while giving

¹²⁴ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

¹²⁵ "Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwDpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

¹²⁶ "Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit." Min: 5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwDpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

¹²⁷ "Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit." Min: 5:46 – 6:10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwDpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

women a form of freedom, ultimately confined them to a closed life, with no real importance in society beyond their role as workers.¹²⁸

Politics also became a space where women found opportunities to work, and in 1943, when the party was founded, three women made it to the Politburo¹²⁹. Liri Gega, Naxhije Dumo, and Ollga Plumbi were among the first female members of parliament in Albania's communist history. Despite propaganda portraying them as equals to their male counterparts, a mere four years later, none of them remained in parliament. Liri Gega was even executed in 1956 on charges of being a spy for the Yugoslavs.¹³⁰

Party members frequently wrote about women during their meetings with the secretaries. These documents are now accessible and provide the scholars with insights into their projects. One such document, written during a scheduled meeting on January 21st, 1983, reflects Enver Hoxha's directive to more actively involve women into Albania's communist projects (in the words of the terminology from the document). Such plans aimed to empower women to participate and integrate fully into society, the economy, and the family as equals. The document highlights the significance of women's work and their role in agricultural cooperatives, particularly in the rural Highlands.¹³¹

“In the first place, women should become conscious of their social value and their leading and productive capacity in the economy, because this is how their authority is enhanced and strengthened. In this manner they will be able to join their economic strength with their husbands' and no longer remain under their ‘chains’.”¹³²

Hoxha emphasizes the need for women to recognize their own worth and capabilities. He also petitions them to move beyond patriarchal dominance by directly contributing to economic

¹²⁸ “Grate ne diktature. Pertej mitit te emancipimit.” Min: 5:20 – 5:40
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwDpLLFh7II> (13.11.24).

¹²⁹ Politburo (Political Buureau) was the highest decision-making body within a communist party.

¹³⁰ Guzvica, Stefan (2023), *Albanian Communism: Enver Hoxha's Totalitarian Regime. The Collector*. <https://www.thecollector.com/albanian-communism/> (15.03.25)

¹³¹ Hoxha, Enver. “*Selected Works, Volume VI*.” Marxists Internet Archive.
p.698. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works-index.htm>. (22.01.25)

¹³² Hoxha, Enver. “*Selected Works, Volume VI*.” p. 698. (22.01.25)

goals. One can see from this that while the rhetoric promotes women's empowerment, it aligns with the regime's utilitarian viewpoint on women's roles and the emphasis laid on their practicality as laborers rather than as autonomic individuals. This places the emphasis on the authoritarian nature of these policies, in which emancipation was superficial and dictated rather than attained in reality.

During the communist regime, several policies were implemented to enhance the role of women, in order to include them in various sectors of the labor force and seemingly promote of gender equality. Additionally, the minimum legal age for marriage was raised to 18 for both genders.¹³³ Before 1944, the illiteracy rate among women in Albania exceeded 90 percent, largely due to their exclusion from public activities and educational opportunities.¹³⁴ As part of their propaganda policies, the regime emphasized the involvement of women in addressing societal issues and integrated them into the workforce, particularly in agricultural cooperatives. The regime made sure that in the public eye of the middle class, people were treated equally. However, P.Z., one of the interviewees states that: "...it was all a form of propaganda to convince ordinary people that the state treated everyone equally, while in reality, a privileged group of people lived in luxury. Spies and council leaders had higher incomes than anyone else..."¹³⁵ Considering this, people were in most cases aware of the unfair disparities and the role propaganda appeals played in society, yet cooperation with it was unavoidable.

In numerous formal letters from the Central Committee (CC) of the Party of Labor of Albania (PLA), women were highlighted as valuable contributors, underscoring their importance to both the nation and the party. These letters sought to raise the awareness of women and focus on their significance and necessity in the country's economy through their cooperative labor.¹³⁶

¹³³ Danaj Ermira. (2022). *Women, migration and gendered experiences: The Case of Post-1991 Albanian Migration*. Springer Nature. p. 60.

¹³⁴ Danaj, "Women, migration and gendered experiences" p. 59.

¹³⁵ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹³⁶ Hoxha, Enver. (1974). We must involve the woman more actively in the problems of society. 21 January, 1983. In E. Hoxha (Ed.), *Selected works*. Vol. VI, p. 698f. 8 Nëntori

Even though women experienced some advancements under the regime, patriarchal concepts remained as deeply entrenched and as strong as before. The progression of women varied significantly between regions; for instance, in some mountainous areas, women were less likely to speak out compared to those in urban or less remote areas. By using letters addressed to the people, the regime highlighted achievements in various sectors and accentuated the aim of pursuing societal changes, which included the emancipation of women. In the different definitions of women's emancipation were firmly established in the time of the National Liberation War, during which two main objectives for women materialized: the liberation of the country and the construction of a socialist society.¹³⁷

In times before these, the role of women was not as significant. The media often proclaimed propagandistic statements like, "Now Albanian women are emancipated," which were used to sway public opinion and reinforce the regime's narrative. These letters shed light on how the party supposedly cared about the role of women in society, advising them on how to interact with their husbands and encouraging mutual respect. This propaganda sought to shape perceptions and behavior, portraying the party as a champion of gender equality while at the same time reinforcing its ideological control.¹³⁸

During communism in Albania, discrimination took many forms, particularly against women. P.Z. recalls how women were expected to work, as families in which women did not participate in the workforce were labeled as *bourgeois*, a term that carried severe consequences. "If a woman did not work, the family was labeled as bourgeois. Bourgeois families were either imprisoned or exiled. Their children were denied scholarships or categorically prohibited from attending school,"¹³⁹ she explains.

To enforce ideological conformity, the government implemented policies to encourage or mandate women's participation in various areas of the workforce, including agriculture,

¹³⁷ Hoxha, Enver. (1974). We must involve the woman more actively in the problems of society. 21 January, p. 700.

¹³⁸ Hoxha, Enver. (1974). We must involve the woman more actively in the problems of society. 21 January, p. 703.

¹³⁹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

industry, and public administration. Employment was set forth as a means of female empowerment, offering women financial independence and a role in the undertaking of constructing the nation. However, this approach tended to overlook the dual burdens that women faced, as they continued to bear primary responsibility for domestic tasks alongside their professional functions.¹⁴⁰

Nevertheless, unlike other countries, Albania did not have a feminist movement or organization, not even during the communist era. It is however important to note that the Albanian Women's Union, established in 1943, worked to involve women in various aspects of public and political life, extending their roles beyond the domestic sphere.¹⁴¹

Continuing with the topic of propaganda, one of the most emphasized aspects of women's role in the eyes of the regime was their function as mothers and child-bearers. This contribution was particularly hailed during the early years of communism, with women who gave birth to six or more children given the honor as "heroic mothers" (*nëna heroína*), thereby promoting high fertility and underscoring their central role in the family.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Danaj, "*Women, migration and gendered experiences*" p. 61.

¹⁴¹ Danaj, "*Women, migration and gendered experiences*" p. 61f.

¹⁴² Danaj, "*Women, migration and gendered experiences*" p. 62.

1.3 The Role of Networks in Albanian Transition

To achieve the level of desired openness of the country, Albania needed to take additional critical steps beyond stabilization and liberalization. Following the mid-1992 reforms, policymakers prioritized macroeconomic restructure as the most critical first step. Similar to many post-isolationist states, Albania faced severe economic imbalances, including inflation, monetary instability, and budgetary deficits. The government took on a reform strategy that emphasized stabilization in these key areas to rebuild a functional economy. While this approach aligned with broader neoliberal economic policies of the time, other potential strategies for opening the country were also available, though they were ultimately not pursued.¹⁴³

As a result of the critical reforms, Albania began to see gradual improvements. From 1992¹⁴⁴ onwards, unemployment began to diminish as measures were implemented. Monetary policy also underwent a significant transformation. The entire banking system began to operate more effectively, thanks in part to the state's decision to allow private banking in 1995.¹⁴⁵ However, the financial market outside of the banking system continued to be underdeveloped until 1996, when the Tirana Stock Exchange came into being, marking a pivotal step in the creation of a financial infrastructure.¹⁴⁶ These economic reforms played a crucial role in opening Albania to international engagement. They also facilitated monetary exchanges, particularly through remittances sent by Albanian migrants abroad, which became a vital source of income for the country.

Migration is widely debated among researchers, particularly in efforts in understanding the reasoning behind why liberal states regulate and, in part, facilitate migration despite pending

¹⁴³ Marta Muço (1997). *Economic transition in Albania: political constraints and mentality barriers*. p. 21.

¹⁴⁴ The period after 1992 marked Albania's transition to a market-oriented economy under the government led by the Democratic Party. These reforms were guided by international organizations, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The reforms aimed to stabilize the economy, attract foreign investment, and integrate Albania into the global economy.

¹⁴⁵ Muço, "Economic transition in Albania" p. 22.

¹⁴⁶ Muço, "Economic transition in Albania" p. 23.

political resistance. For instance, why did Western European countries, such as Italy, allow and manage the influx of Albanian migrants commencing in the 1990s? While most countries maintained strict border controls which targeted the limitation of irregular immigration, these measures did not lead to an immediate or sharp decline in migration but rather to a gradual decrease. Many scholars attribute this to a combination of political treaties, economic cooperation agreements, and informal international networks that influenced migration policies. Rather than viewing migration governance as a complete loss of state control, European liberal states approached it as a strategic delegation of authority—balancing domestic political pressures with international obligations and economic considerations.¹⁴⁷

It is also important to mention the notion of “migration regime” and the significant role it plays in this context, in order to determine if the arguments support stricter policies or highlight the weakening of borders between citizens and foreigners who entered the country through various paths¹⁴⁸. In this context, a “regime” refers to a process in which public and private organizations, along with policymakers and administrative agencies, cooperate fully to align their goals and expectations. This collaboration has the target to creating and implementing decisions in order to manage and govern effectively.¹⁴⁹ In this case, the role of international obligations that states must fulfill gains extreme relevance. Proponents of the importance of state sovereignty fixated more on labor and family-reunification policies, areas where international rules and organizations have been noticeably less influential. This highlights two perspectives on the issue. Treating the concept of the “migration regime” suggests it is associated with a world society shaped by globalization. The “regime” is understood as a transnational phenomenon rather than merely an international one.¹⁵⁰

Migrants have always played a significant part in human history. `Migrants` motivations differ due to political, economic, social, or cultural reasons, but their ultimate goal is often the same:

¹⁴⁷Cvajner Martina, Gabriel Echeverría, and Giuseppe Sciortino, 2018. “What Do We Talk When We Talk About Migration Regimes? The Diverse Theoretical Roots of an Increasingly Popular Concept,” in *Was ist ein Migrationsregime? What Is a Migration Regime?*, ed. A. Pott Wiesbaden. pp. 70f. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-20532-4_3 (10.12.24).

¹⁴⁸ Cvajner, “*What Do We Talk When We Talk About Migration Regimes?*”. p. 71.

¹⁴⁹ Cvajner, “*What Do We Talk When We Talk About Migration Regimes?*”. p. 73.

¹⁵⁰ Cvajner, “*What Do We Talk When We Talk About Migration Regimes?*”. p. 72.

the searching and finding of opportunities for a meaningful life. Refugees are specifically defined by the numerous reasons for their displacement and the diverse destinations they reach. Some go to places where they have relatives, while others end up in unfamiliar locations where they know no one—sometimes with a clear end in sight but often with no hope of returning home. Their experiences and significance vary greatly, depending on factors such as their destination, if they have connections there, displacement factors, and the severity of the situation in their home country.¹⁵¹

Agreements between two countries, in this case, Italy and Albania, are typically put into place to manage situations as they arise, with the goal of handling challenges effectively and finding the best possible solutions. When it came to making connections in the destination country, Braho did everything he could to stay in his first attempt with the Vlora. However, after he discovered that his connections were weak and his resources limited, he ultimately had no choice but to return home and wait for another, hopefully better, opportunity to cross the Italian border. Later, through stronger connections, his life changed permanently. In subsequent years, he was able to bring his wife to join him in Italy. His determination and perseverance, as demonstrated in his writings, conveyed to others that with patience and persistence, one can achieve their goals.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Haines David, (2019). *Refugees and geopolitical conflicts*. In: Routledge international handbook of migration studies. 2nd Edition. Ed. by Steven J. Gold and Stephanie J. Nawyn. p. 88.

¹⁵² Braho, “*Il Titanic dall’Adriatico*”. pp. 96-98.

2. Impacts of Migration on the Household

2.1 The household as a lens for analyzing migration

Oded Stark and Edward Taylor provide an interesting perspective regarding the role of households in the migration process and the relative deprivation hypothesis.¹⁵³ In their hypothesis, Stark and Taylor highlight that the migration process may be initiated not only to increase household income but also to improve the household's relative standing within the community. They explain that if there are significant differences in income among families in a town or village, the probability of migration increases for those experiencing relative deprivation, which in this case means those who perceive themselves as disadvantaged or deprived compared to others. Conversely, families with higher incomes are less likely to feel the need to migrate. This concept stems from the evaluation that families undertake when comparing disparities within their community.¹⁵⁴

Different factors drove immigrants to the borders, and the lack of income arose as one of the primary motives behind the decision to migrate. General economic hardship affected the migrants' choices, strengthening the significance of financial tension in all their decisions. However, the tales of international migration reveals that migrants often convey a degree of social protection which is rooted in their original communities and that helps them preserve their social and cultural identity. Partially due to this fact, migrants do not always seamlessly integrate into their host countries. This lack of integration can result in limited interaction and a type of social distance to natives of the country as migrants may struggle to adapt to a new environment where they do not feel a sense of belonging. This phenomenon is particularly common during temporary migration, in which the primary purpose is often to meet immediate economic needs rather than to establish long-term social connections. Temporary migrants may

¹⁵³ Stark, Oded, and J. Edward Taylor. (1991) "Migration Incentives, Migration Types: The Role of Relative Deprivation." *The Economic Journal* 101, no. 408. p. 1163. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2234433>.

¹⁵⁴ Stark, "Migration Incentives, Migration Types." p. 1165.

for example prioritize sending remittances to their families or achieving certain financial goals to this end, which can additionally limit their engagement with the host society. In contrast, permanent or long-term migration presents a different dynamic. Such migrants' households are often split between the home country and the destination country. Thus, members may gradually attempt to blend their cultural identity with their new environment. This integration can foster a sense of dual belonging, though it is not without its challenges. For permanent migrants, achieving full integration may take years or even generations, depending on the social and economic conditions of the host country. This clear distinction between the aspects of temporary and permanent migration underscores the complex interaction between economic motivations, social identity, and the further challenges of adapting to a new cultural landscape.¹⁵⁵

The household plays a critical role in this analysis, as all decisions made before, during, or after migration—such as those described in the interviews conducted for this research—are intrinsically tied to family dynamics. For instance, in one of the cases included in this study, remittances emerged as a pivotal factor enabling families to withstand the economic hardships that followed the fall of communism and the transitional period. These contributions, regardless of their form, provided essential support.¹⁵⁶ This included basic needs such as food supplies, medicine, home repairs, and educational expenses for younger family members. Additionally, remittances often facilitated informal savings, ensuring families had resources to address future challenges such as illness or poverty.¹⁵⁷

Factors such as communities and migration networks play a significant role in sustaining migration. These aspects are central to the continuation and progression of migration and are rooted in three key concepts: the new economics of labor migration theory (NELM), cumulative causation, and migration networks.¹⁵⁸ Looking more closely at the matter, there are also direct challenges that migrants face after the decision to relocate, such as the lack of

¹⁵⁵ Stark, “*Migration Incentives, Migration Types*.” p. 1166.

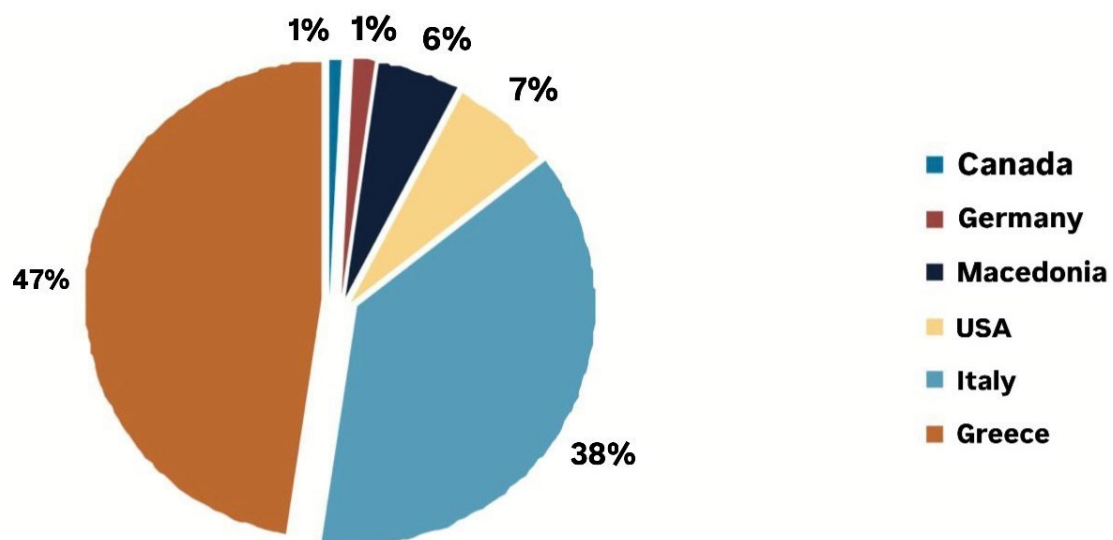
¹⁵⁶ Vullnetari, “*Albania on the move*”. p. 165.

¹⁵⁷ Vullnetari, “*Albania on the move*”. p. 166.

¹⁵⁸ Remus Gabriel Anghel. (2024) *Migration chains and migration networks: researching migration as a social process*. In: Sciortino, Giuseppe, Cvajner, M., & Kivisto, P. J. (Eds.). *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing. p. 61.

essential resources, which includes and is not limited to jobs, accommodations, and basic information about their destination. This sheds light upon the fact that the majority of migrants often come from middle- or lower income classes. When one member of a household migrates, they frequently send financial support to those left behind, be they family or community members, thereby enabling others to migrate in subsequent stages.¹⁵⁹

Remittances, primarily sent regularly serve as a steady flow of financial support that directly contributes to the country's GDP. By channeling resources back to their families, migrants help improve the economic stability of their home communities while simultaneously strengthening the broader national economy.¹⁶⁰



Remittances from abroad in 2011 by country of emigration, in (%).

Fig 3¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Remus, "Migration chains and migration networks" p. 61f.

¹⁶⁰ INSTAT, "Migracioni në Shqipëri". p. 43.

¹⁶¹ INSTAT, "Migracioni në Shqipëri". p. 44.

The pie chart illustrates the distribution of remittances sent to Albania in 2011, categorized by the country of emigration. The data indicates that Greece and Italy were the main sources of remittances and account for 47% and 38%, respectively. When looking at the two countries in combination, one sees that they make up the vast majority of remittances, which reflects the significant presence of Albanian migrants in these nations. The larger percentages also suggest that migrants in these countries were able to secure jobs or resources, enabling them to send money regularly back to their families in Albania.¹⁶² Even though the chart is specifically about the year 2011, there were almost certainly sent in prior years, according to the interviewees.¹⁶³

It is important to note that, as mentioned earlier, the majority of emigrants were men who left their wives and families behind, often reuniting only years later. By 2011, the year of the diagram, most of those who had migrated during the 1990s had already established their families abroad, either by inviting their spouses and children to join them or forming new households. Despite the possible changes in family structure, they maintained strong ties with their family members who remained in Albania and ensured continued communication and support. B.Z. confirms this in the interview, highlighting his continuous support for his family in Albania across the years: *“I helped them continuously. I helped my brothers and their families with money”*.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² INSTAT, *“Migracioni në Shqipëri”*. p. 45.

¹⁶³ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

¹⁶⁴ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

2.2 Sharp rise in internal migration

No other country in the Balkan region has experienced such a rapid surge in migratory movements, both within and beyond its borders, in such a short period. Urban areas saw a significant increase in population during the first migration waves, with more than half of the population (approximately 53.7%) residing in cities. In Albania, the distinction between rural and urban life has become increasingly blurred, particularly in peri-urban areas, where people navigate a hybrid existence. Many residents sustain themselves through a mix of urban and rural livelihoods. For example, men often work in construction while women will tend livestock. Many people maintain dual lives—living in urban areas while continuing to produce goods in their villages and selling them in the cities. However, urban expansion has not always gone hand in hand with improved infrastructure. Many roads were in poor condition, access to clean water remained limited, and some city outskirts resembled villages due to the lack of proper development.¹⁶⁸

During the communist years, as mentioned, international migration was strictly forbidden and considered an act of treason if someone was caught crossing the border. Internal migration was also heavily controlled and restricted. However, in the 1960s, the government itself planned internal movements to support industrialization projects across the country by providing the necessary labor force. Industrial centers such as Laç, Bulqizë, Ballsh, and Kurbnesh, where energy resources and metal extraction took place, became hubs for these state-organized relocations. However, with the closure of these centers in 1989, they turned into areas of mass abandonment, leaving many workers displaced and unemployed.¹⁶⁹

During the communist era, two important phases in the political timeline corresponded with large-scale domestic migration, which then played a major role on the country's demographic and economic landscape. The first of these mentioned phases was characterized by the process of urbanization, in which the state heavily controlled any migration, and which linked to the country's growing industrialization. The regime strategically directed labor to urban centers,

¹⁶⁸ Vullnetar, Julie. (2011). "Internal Migration in Albania: A Critical Overview." In *Legacy and Change: Albanian Transformation from Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Robert Pichler. LIT Verlag. p. 47.

¹⁶⁹ Vullnetari, "Internal Migration in Albania". p. 58.

where most of the industrial projects were located. As a result, many new towns and cities were established artificially to accommodate this influx, which culminated in the transformation of previously rural or undeveloped areas into livable, industrialized hubs. This urban growth was necessary to reinforce the state's industrial ambitions. The majority of internal migrants during this period were young men, who were often recruited for manual labor in factories and construction projects. Additionally, women aged 20 to 34 also made up a significant portion of internal migrants, particularly those seeking employment in the newly developed industrial sectors.¹⁷⁰

However, it wasn't just industrial laborers who were affected by this system of migration. Those who were educated were also required to practice their professions away from their place of residence, often in remote or rural areas. As P. Z. recalls, her uncle, who was an engineer, lived in Tirana but was forced by the regime to work in a village in central Albania to practice his profession. This enforced migration was one way the state endeavored to spread educated professionals across the country, in order to ensure that even the most remote areas would have access to technical expertise. For P. Z.'s uncle, this meant the departure from the urban environment of Tirana and relocation to a rural village far from home, which represented a common experience for many skilled workers during the period. These migration patterns were part of the regime's broader effort to achieve their industrial and economic goals, contributing to the rapid urbanization and regional redistribution of labor across Albania.¹⁷¹

The most desired city in particular for young people was the capital Tirana, yet it was out of reach for most of them. Since migration to the capital was nearly impossible, many who wanted to live there managed to migrate to the rural cooperatives nearby. Durrës was another highly desirable city, and a few years before the fall of communism, these areas were home to one-third of Albania's total population. With the fall of the totalitarian regime, migration was no longer a crime but rather recognized as a fundamental human right. In 1993, Article 22 of the Law on Amendments to the Constitutional Provisions officially granted Albanian citizens the

¹⁷⁰ Vullnetari, "*Internal Migration in Albania*". p. 62

¹⁷¹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

freedom to choose their place of residence, move freely within the country, and emigrate abroad.¹⁷²

Nevertheless, after the regime, internal movement began rapidly. Reasons to move from villages to the cities were different, mainly in search of better opportunities, and this shift became increasingly visible. Meanwhile, in the countryside, communities began to shrink. Fewer people stayed behind as most of them left the villages and moved abroad, leaving behind them an aging population struggling to maintain local traditions and economic activity. The lack of investment and services in these areas deepened the gap between rural and urban life, making it even more difficult for those left behind to access healthcare, education, and job opportunities.¹⁷³

Meanwhile, in the cities, the post-regime influx of migrants brought both progress and challenges. Urban centers like Tirana and Durrës saw a rise in skilled workers and increased economic activity, which contributed to the rapid growth of industries and services. However, this expansion came at a cost. Many newcomers struggled to integrate, as they faced cultural barriers and limited job prospects, in particular those with little formal education. Informal settlements sprang up on the outskirts of major cities, and this in turn sparked new social and economic pressures. Issues such as overcrowding, rising unemployment, and mismatches in the labor market became daily realities, straining urban infrastructure and social services.¹⁷⁴

Despite these challenges, migration continued to shape Albania's continuing development. While cities benefited from fresh talent and the new economic investment, the long-term impact on rural communities remained uncertain. The steadily growing divide between urban and rural areas raised urgent questions about sustainability and inclusion and underscored highlighting the need for balanced regional policies. Without intervention, internal migration would continue to be both a driving force of progress and a source of deepening inequality.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Vullnetari, "Internal Migration in Albania". pp. 59f.

¹⁷³ Balla, Anisa, and Blerta Avdia. (2022), "Internal Migration and Population Distribution in Albania – the Case of Durana." *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 25, no. 1. p. 81. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27299979>.

¹⁷⁴ Balla & Avdia. (2022), "Internal Migration" p. 82.

¹⁷⁵ Balla & Avdia. (2022), "Internal Migration" p. 83.

2.3 Women's challenges and the evolution of migratory roles post-1990s

As previously mentioned, with the fall of communism, policies and discourses shifted, in turn leading to changes in women's roles. It was a transformation seen not only in Albania but also in Central and Eastern Europe. In Albania, many women chose to leave the political sphere and take a step back from the labor market. A significant number of women appeared to re-welcome the idea of the domestic sphere, using the opportunity to care for their families during these changes.¹⁷⁶

After the fall of communism, between 1991 and 1993, the first NGOs in post-communist Albania were instituted. The establishment of these non-governmental organizations showed itself as a positive sign for women's issues and shed light upon their conditions and those of children, with a focus on violence, trafficking, and abuse. Since the fall of communism, Albania has made significant improvements in various areas in regards to women's rights, especially after it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. However, although progress began immediately after the fall of the regime, it did not mean that changes occurred instantly or that the country improved overnight. The process was slow, with the full implementation of laws taking time. Even today, the advancement of women's rights continues to require ongoing improvement.¹⁷⁷

P. Z. recalls how, in the years that followed, Albanian women increasingly took control of their own lives. "Women no longer asked anyone for permission; they made their own decisions and took charge of their future,"¹⁷⁸ she stated. Many began to break away from traditional roles, pursuing education and independence in ways that had once been unthinkable. Those who emigrated played a crucial role in shaping this transformation, as they brought back home ideas of gender equality and individual rights that served as precedents for women in Albania. With the increasingly widespread use of telephones, communication became easier, both within Albania and internationally. This newfound access to information and support networks

¹⁷⁶ Danaj, "Women, migration and gendered experiences." p. 63.

¹⁷⁷ Danaj, "Women, migration and gendered experiences." p. 64.

¹⁷⁸ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

empowered women to make bolder choices in regards to their lives. Divorce and abortion, once conducted in secrecy and with social stigma, were now legally recognized. “Under communism, it was nearly impossible for a woman to leave an abusive marriage,” P. Z. explained. “But after the 2000s, everything changed—women no longer had to tolerate violence in silence.”¹⁷⁹

During the dictatorship, abortion was illegal and often performed in dangerous conditions, resulting in the deaths of many women. “I remember stories of women undergoing abortions in secret, risking their lives because they had no other choice,”¹⁸⁰ P. Z. recalled. The post-communist era therefore marked a turning point and granted women greater autonomy over their bodies and choices. While numerous challenges remain yet to be conquered, the slow but steady progress in regards to women's rights have already reshaped Albanian society and has opened the door for future generations of women to live with greater freedom and dignity.

The concept of gendered migration first gained attention in the late 20th century and early 2000s, likely due to a growing awareness of women's roles and experiences. Women began to be recognized as integral to the migration process, even though many were left behind and, in such cases, experienced migration's effects indirectly.¹⁸¹

Additionally, women, particularly wives who were left behind, later rejoined their male partners once their situation abroad had stabilized. Migration became a central topic in their daily lives after their husbands left to seek opportunities elsewhere. There has been extensive debate about socialism (referring here to all kinds of isolationist regimes) and the role it played in the emancipation of women—if it did so at all. According to Julie Vullnetari and Russel King's scholarship, the Marxist-Leninist doctrine provided a unified ideological framework for socialist societies, referring to it as the "socialist gender order."¹⁸² Alongside other forms of

¹⁷⁹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁸⁰ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

¹⁸¹ Casas, L., & Garson, J.-P. (2005). The feminization of international migration. At: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=3304&langId=en> (10.01.25)

¹⁸² Vullnetari & King “*Washing men's feet.*” p. 202.

differentiation that emerged under communist doctrines, such as ethnic and class distinctions, the state attempted to address and eliminate gender inequality.¹⁸³

Albania underwent a dramatic shift from being a highly isolated, self-sufficient (autarchic) country to one that experienced a massive wave of emigration in the early 1990s. After four decades under a regime that tightly controlled movement and maintained extreme isolation, the fall of communism unleashed widespread migration. Initially, men were the primary emigrants, but over time, women also joined the movement.¹⁸⁴

When considering migration as a holistic process, it is essential to acknowledge that it involves not only the act of migrating but also the stages leading up to it and following it, including decision-making, as well as the pre-migration and post-migration phases. During the 1970s and 1980s, terms like "migrants and their families"¹⁸⁵ were commonly used, which essentially referred to male migrants and their wives and/or children. However, after this period, women's roles in migration history began to gain more attention, marking a shift in their traditional roles and values. Although researchers began to show interest in women's roles in migration, they did not get to the crux of matter in regards to motivations behind migration, the integration process, or why individuals moved and where they settled. Differences between men and women were often analyzed and explained as distinctions between their respective roles. Women were believed to be influenced primarily by their maternal and spousal roles when deciding to migrate or join their husbands.¹⁸⁶

The pre-migration stage of women is crucial and varies depending on several factors, including age, marital status (single, married, divorced, or widowed), race/ethnicity, rural or urban background, role within the family (wife, daughter, or mother), position in the household, skills, educational status, and labor force experience. In other words, every women's decision—whether made by the individual herself or by her family or husband—is influenced

¹⁸³ Vullnetari & King "Washing men's feet." p. 202.

¹⁸⁴ Vullnetari & King "Washing men's feet." pp. 206f.

¹⁸⁵ Boyd Monica & Grieco, Elisabeth. (2003). Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into Inter- national Migration Theory. pp. 1f.

¹⁸⁶ Boyd & Grieco, "Women and Migration." p. 2.

by these factors. Furthermore, the ability to migrate, even after a decision has been made, depends on whether she can act independently or if others are involved in the decision-making process.¹⁸⁷

In the second stage, when women migrate, they often encounter policies in the host country that differentiate their role from that of men. Men are typically labeled as "independent" migrants, while women are categorized as "dependent," placing them in a "family role" rather than a "market role."¹⁸⁸ Thirdly, women's roles and stereotypical perceptions often influence their employment opportunities, confining them primarily to domestic service or nursing positions.¹⁸⁹ The post-migration stage is shaped by various factors, including the host country's ability to facilitate integration and provide settlement opportunities, the effect of migration on the social and economic status of both women and men, and their success in integrating into the labor market.¹⁹⁰

The result of mass migration was the separation of husbands from their wives, or the older generation being left behind due to the migration of the younger generation.¹⁹¹ Due to irregular migration, the reunification of family members left behind—primarily wives and children—with husbands abroad occurred only after many Albanians obtained the necessary documents to bring over their families and settle for longer periods. Albanian men predominantly worked in the construction sector, while women often found employment as domestic helpers. However, many Albanians lost their jobs during the economic crises of the late 1990s and early 2000s, particularly in Greece and Italy, making the reunifications and long-term settlements even more difficult.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁷ Boyd & Grieco, "*Women and Migration*." p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ Boyd & Grieco, "*Women and Migration*." p. 5.

¹⁸⁹ Boyd & Grieco, "*Women and Migration*." p. 6.

¹⁹⁰ Boyd & Grieco, "*Women and Migration*." p. 7.

¹⁹¹ Vullnetari & King "*Washing men's feet*." p. 198.

¹⁹² Vullnetari & King "*Washing men's feet*." p. 200.

2.4 The Influence of Family Connections on Migration Decisions

Migration can be a forced or is a voluntary movement undertaken by an individual or a group of people; however, various constraints can limit the true voluntariness of mobility. Migration is often a collective decision and is mostly shaped by family dynamics, economic structures, and state regulations. There are factors like gender roles, age and responsibilities that influence who migrates and for what reasons, as well as the ways in which family members support them by remaining behind. Aspects such as demographic patterns and social networks also play a role in how migration is decided upon. Additionally, perspectives on migration can be different depending on whether one takes the country of origin into account or the final destination. From the viewpoint of the country of origin, migration often leads to a division of social structure or separation: some individuals migrate, while others, as in the case of household members, remain behind. From the viewpoint of the destination country, migrants are often seen as those to be accepted or rejected, depending on various criteria like, such as economic needs, legal frameworks, or social policies.¹⁹³

During 1997, the situation in Albania was unstable, due to the collapse of pyramidal schemes in Albania. M.Z. recalls the time in 1997 when people were deceived by the pyramid schemes. There were many companies that misled people, giving them false hope that they would triple the amount they invested (for example, investing 1 million old lek to earn 3 million/ 1 million lek = 1 thousand Euro), which was a lie. These pyramid schemes initially distributed a small percentage of returns to build trust, until they collected a large sum of money. In the end, they declared bankruptcy and left people with nothing. There was no stable state to enforce regulations, and everything was done through these pyramid banks, which were fake and operated without paying taxes to the state. In this way, certain individuals became rich. By the time the state intervened and blocked them, they had already purchased properties.¹⁹⁴

Due to the turbulent years of 1997, many families struggled to remain loyal to their country. Trust in national institutions was lost, leaving family and kinship networks as the only reliable

¹⁹³ Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield, (2014) eds., *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, 3rd ed. New York. p. 118.

¹⁹⁴ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M.Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

and effective means of coping with the crisis.¹⁹⁵ Decades of strict state control were abruptly superseded by lawlessness, economic instability, and political uncertainty. The Albanian people, who had long relied on state-imposed order, suddenly found themselves without any clear direction in life or politics and were suddenly stripped of the rules and security mechanisms that had shaped their daily lives. This transition was not gradual—it was a rupture, that is a sudden and profound shift in which deeply ingrained socialist values lost their significance, and long-standing social norms unraveled, which led to chaos and migration.¹⁹⁶ Many decisions regarding migration were made collectively, as illustrated by the events surrounding the *Vlora* ship. In this instance, numerous individuals boarded the vessel not necessarily as a result of a well-planned decision but simply because others were doing the same.¹⁹⁷ Once they arrived at their destination, many migrants relied on connections with relatives or financial support through remittances to help them settle until they could obtain their residence permits.¹⁹⁸

An insightful perspective on this experience comes from B.K., who recounts the struggles of his first year as a migrant. He recalls the defining moment when he left the stadium, carrying no money and depending on the kindness of strangers who offered him assistance. “I tried so hard the first year. The moment I left the stadium was very decisive in my life. I did not have any money with me. I remember someone who helped me with some Lira. I remember people would give me their clothes. Till the moment I could ask for refugee help, take asylum.”

B.K.'s journey underscores the significance of social connections in living a stable life as a migrant. He explains how having a specific person of contact—albeit a relative, an acquaintance, or a friend already established in Italy—was a key criterion in obtaining legal residency. “The moment you had a specific person, a relative, an acquaintance or friend, who was either Italian or living in Italy, you could get the permission to stay.” He considers himself fortunate to have met generous individuals through his work as a cleaner: these were people

¹⁹⁵ Pichler, Robert., & Schwandner-Sievers, Stephanie. (Eds.). (2014). *Legacy and change: Albanian transformation from multidisciplinary perspectives*. Münster. p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ Pichler & Schwandner-Sievers, “*Legacy and change: Albanian transformation*” p. 5.

¹⁹⁷ Vicari, Daniele (2012). “*La nave dolce*.” Min: 03:05.

¹⁹⁸ Vicari, Daniele (2012). “*La nave dolce*.” Min: 18:20.

who, though not related by blood, offered him guidance and support. These relationships ultimately helped him navigate the complex process of settlement and integration.¹⁹⁹

When discussing the communist rule in Albania, it is crucial to consider the mindset shaped by decades of oppression. The fall of communism not only transformed Albanians lifestyle but also their perspective on freedom, as they began to understand the stark difference between authoritarian control and democracy. A compelling perspective on this transformation is provided by M.Z., who describes the desperation and risks people faced in their pursuit of a better life:

“The extremely poor economic situation and the few people who had managed to leave before the fall of communism secretly sent telegrams describing how life outside Albania was completely different. Most of those who had attempted to emigrate or cross the Albanian border during communism were killed or died while trying to escape. The few individuals who managed to survive and leave the country succeeded in building a life outside of Albania and were able to secretly send telegrams detailing what life was like abroad.”²⁰⁰

These accounts bring into spotlight the immense sacrifices Albanians made in their quest for freedom. Those who remained behind lived under strict ideological control, while the atypical few who successfully escaped were able to offer a glimpse of the outside world through covert telegrams. This contrast between isolation and the hope of a different life further fueled the collective desire for change and ultimately sculpted the post-communist mindset and Albania’s transition to democracy. Family structure plays a crucial role in determining the timing and patterns of migration.

2.5 Albanian-Italian intercultural dynamics in the 1990s

Even though the general population in Albania began to decline during the initial years of mass migration, the number of separate households continued to increase between the years of 1989 and 2001. This can serve as one indication, among other causes, that individuals migrated, rather than entire households. However, it is important to note that, compared to earlier decades, the overall number of households began to decline at a steady rate. This decline was

¹⁹⁹ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

²⁰⁰ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with M. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024.

reflected in the reduction of the total number of persons per household and a decreasing fertility rate, which contributed to smaller family sizes.²⁰¹

To estimate the total number of male migrants and how this changed over time, it is important to reference permit data for Albanians in Italy during the 1990s. The number of immigrants grew from 26,831 during the first migration wave to 63,976 in 1996 and 144,130 in 2001. Based on these figures, Albanians became the second-largest immigrant group in Italy (after Moroccans), comprising approximately 10.6% of the immigrant population. However, these numbers do not represent the entire Albanian migrant population, as many were undocumented, including children who did not have separate permits. Authorities estimate the total number of Albanians in Italy to be around 200,000, though some sources suggest it could be as high as 250,000, accounting for those who remained undocumented for extended periods.²⁰²

The mention of males earlier in this work is significant because, according to permit records, in 1995, 82.7% of Albanian immigrants in Italy were male. By 2000, this percentage had decreased to 65.9%, reflecting the trend of family reunification as families settled in the host country. This shift indicates that, while most women initially remained in their households in Albania, their migration numbers increased significantly after 2000.²⁰³

Economic adaptations, on the other hand, play a significant role as well. To explain this, it is important to understand the fields of work and the types of employment in which these immigrants were engaged. The most preferred locations for Albanians to settle included both rural areas and urban and metropolitan centers, such as the cities of Rome, Milan, and the regions of Piedmont, and Tuscany. In general, those who sought work abroad, particularly in the two countries with the largest numbers of Albanian migrants (Italy and Greece), primarily filled roles as replacements in the labor force. Most of the jobs they took were ones that had become unattractive to native workers. They worked in agriculture and farmlands, construction

²⁰¹ Russell King. (2018). Albania: interrelationships between population, poverty, development, internal and international migration / Albanie: relations entre population, pauvreté, développement, migrations internes et externes. In: Méditerranée, tome 103, 3- 4-2004. Transitions balkaniques. p. 40.

²⁰² King, “Albania: interrelationships between population, poverty, development.” pp. 42f.

²⁰³ King, “Albania: interrelationships between population, poverty, development.” p. 43.

as general laborers, small factories and shops, and the hospitality sector, which included in kitchens, as cleaners, as babysitters, and as carers for the elderly. Even though their contributions are often overlooked, Albanian migrants played an indispensable role in the economy and labor force of these countries.²⁰⁴

At a certain point by the mid-1990s, after many attempts and waves of migrants, unregulated traffic and migration across the Straits of Otranto became a significant problem, not only for the police but also for public opinion overall. Law 563 of 1995, the so-called “Apulia Law,” established control centers to manage the influx of immigrants and undocumented individuals coming from the Balkans. Another important step by the Italian government was forming an agreement and cooperation with Albania. This cooperation was one of the reasons why Albania became a recipient of foreign aid, which in total amounted to 600 million euros between 1992 and 2005, provided by the Italian government to help stabilize the situation in the country and reduce criminal activity. During those years, as a result of Italian police interventions, thousands of Albanians were sent back before they could even set foot on Italian shores. Many tragic accidents occurred during these years, such as one particular case in 1997, in which numerous immigrants lost their lives by drowning.²⁰⁵ While such activities may have existed earlier, they reached a tipping point in the 1990s, necessitating immediate action. The Italian government’s response through the “Apulia Law” of 1995 is presented as a reactive measure, illustrating that the authorities were struggling to contain the sheer scale of migration rather than proactively addressing its root causes.²⁰⁶ By the mid-1990s, unregulated traffic across the Straits of Otranto had become a major concern for Italy. In response, the afore-mentioned 1995 “Apulia Law” established temporary reception centers for migrants from Albania and the Balkans.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ King, “*Albania: interrelationships between population, poverty, development.*” p. 43.

²⁰⁵ Chaloff, Jonathan. *Albania and Italy: Migration Policies and Their Developmental Relevance*. Working Paper No. 51. Rome: Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI), 2008. pp. 6f.
https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/documenti/wp_51-albania_and_italy-chaloff.pdf(24.01.25)

²⁰⁶ Canan Tercan, Naweedullah Moheb. (2023). Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy between 1924 to 2020. In: *EURAS Journal of Social Sciences*. Istanbul. p. 50.

²⁰⁷ Chaloff, “*Albania and Italy: Migration Policies*”. p. 8.

In 1997, Italy led a multinational “stabilization” mission, supported by other European countries like France, Greece, Spain, Romania, Austria, Denmark, and Turkey. The mission aimed to ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid and supplies. As part of the “Operation Alba,” 3,000 Italian soldiers were deployed to Albania. After this mission, the Italian military continued its assistance by means of the Delegation of Italian Experts (DEI). DEI operated under a protocol signed by both Albania and Italy, with both nations’ Ministers of Defense formalizing the agreement in Rome on August 28, 1997. The DEI’s new role involved assisting and organizing the Albanian Army, Air Force, Navy, and Police. DEI remains active in Albania today, with 25 members still operating in the country.²⁰⁸ The failure of Albania’s pyramid schemes in 1997 is framed as a major trigger for migration, with the phrase “public uproar” indicating widespread social unrest. Migration was not solely driven by economic factors but also by political instability and a loss of trust in the Albanian government.²⁰⁹

Other agreements were also established between the government of the two countries, such as the Readmission Agreement on November 18, 1997, which was strategically designed to provide the government or relevant authorities with a basis to address unregulated or illegal migration. Both agreements aimed to give the Italian government a sense of expectation that Albanian migration could be curtailed. Subsequently, other agreements were made among Balkan countries to stabilize the region, and Italy actively supported such initiatives.²¹⁰ Between 1992 and 2005, Italy allocated 600 million euros in aid to Albania, focusing on military and police cooperation. In 1999, Italy formalized its support for Balkan stability with Law 84, which was eventually signed on March 21, 2001. The law prioritized aid distribution rather than migration management yet indirectly influenced policies. While Albania is today no longer a primary migration concern for Italy, economic ties remain strong, with Italy receiving 74.8% of Albania’s exports and supplying 31.5% of its imports. However, investment has in the meantime been limited to small and medium enterprises due to market risks. Italy still maintains a significant diplomatic presence in Albania, with its embassy in Tirana being its second largest after that in Washington, D.C.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Chaloff, “*Albania and Italy: Migration Policies*”. p. 7.

²⁰⁹ Tercan & Naweedullah, “*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*” pp. 49f.

²¹⁰ Chaloff, “*Albania and Italy: Migration Policies*”. pp. 7f.

²¹¹ Chaloff, “*Albania and Italy: Migration Policies*”. p. 8.

It is important to understand the Italian public opinion, which according to Tercan and Naweedullah, stated that the migration wave "deeply scared the Italian people."²¹² This phrase shifts the focus to the perception of migration as a security rather than as a humanitarian crisis. As shown here in regards to the fear within Italy, public sentiment played a key role in shaping government responses and reinforced the portrayal of migration as a crisis that needed to be contained rather than a phenomenon that could be integrated into already-structured policies. One response to this wave of migration was the establishment of militarized border control. The development of an Italian paramilitary presence, particularly in the port of Vlore, reflects a shift from humanitarian aid to a securitized approach interested in protecting its country. This shift aligns with broader European trends in previous and current times in which migration management becomes heavily focused on law enforcement and border security rather than long-term integration or economic cooperation.²¹³

Furthermore, media depictions of overcrowded boats create a sense of “invasion,” and are influential in shaping public fear and restrictive policies. The high number of deaths at sea from 1991 to 1997 underlines the ongoing risks faced by migrants and puts into question the effectiveness of enforcement measures. Italy’s response, which included building reception centers and issuing short-term visas, is framed as reactive rather than strategic and contributes to a continuous pattern of temporary solutions.²¹⁴ One of those developments was the emergency measure introduced by the Italian government in 1997, who granted 90-day residence permits to Albanians as a form of state protection. These permits were subsequently renewed several times, until Italy eventually started a campaign to remove Albanian citizens who were residing in the country illegally.²¹⁵ The shift in visa policies reflects a reluctant adaptation when it became clear that migration could not be fully stopped and was furthermore put under scrutiny by other EU nations concerned about secondary movements. The expansion of various smuggling networks highlights the unintended consequences of restrictive policies and makes evident that the closure of legal routes only fuels illegal migration. The use of

²¹² Tercan & Naweedullah, “*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*” p. 50. ²¹³

Tercan & Naweedullah, “*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*” p. 50. ²¹⁴

Tercan & Naweedullah, “*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*” p. 50. ²¹⁵

Tercan & Naweedullah, “*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*” p. 60

military measures, like Albania's naval blockade, is portrayed as a persistent but ineffective deterrent. Migration policies in general remain cyclical, raising doubts about whether past lessons have been learned or if history is repeating itself. The debate continues on whether strict enforcement alone can control migration or if more humane, long-term approaches are necessary.²¹⁶

According to a report from 2002, approximately three percent of Italy's total population were considered foreign nationals. The majority of these individuals had been living in Italy for more than ten years, with a significant portion having arrived between 1992 and 2002. Given this timeframe, a considerable number of these foreign nationals were of Albanian origin. The important presence of Albanian nationals in Italy created the foundation of further bilateral agreement between both countries.²¹⁷ That being said, Italian-Albanian relations have evolved in the last decades from crisis management to long-term cooperation in security, migration, and economic development. While migration flows have declined over time, Italy continues to play a crucial role in Albania's stability and development.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Tercan & Naweedullah, "*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*" p. 53. ²¹⁷ Tercan & Naweedullah, "*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*" p. 59. ²¹⁸ Tercan & Naweedullah, "*Analysis of the political changes in the migration of Albanians to Italy*" p. 58.

3. Albania in 21st Century/ Social and Economic Transformations

3.1 Migration and Household Structures in the 2000s: Economic and Social Transformations

One sentence can be used to describe Albania in the aftermath of communism: it is a country on the move.²¹⁹ This continues to be a central feature of the Albanian society today, shaping household-level strategies that undergo significant changes each decade. The large migration movements caused destabilization across the country, not only politically but also economically. Due to the financial crisis, in the late 2000s, public debt increased and became even more evident between 2007 and 2010. GDP peaked in 2008 at 7.7% but dropped by half in 2009 and 2010. Yet, despite the impact of the financial crisis, Albania's economy continued to grow, maintaining a positive, albeit slower, growth rate.²²⁰ Migration, whether from rural to urban areas or internationally to Italy and Greece, served as a key coping mechanism for the high unemployment and economic difficulties that followed the fall of communism.²²¹

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Southern European migration model was spurred on by the demand for cheap, hard-working, and informal labor. Migration remained to some extent illegal, even though it was later regularized. However, in this transition period, it fostered a climate of marginalization, abuse, and exploitation. This was also the case for Albania, where migrants were frequently criminalized and stigmatized by the media, making them the primary scapegoats for crime, far more than other immigrant groups. These stigmas

²¹⁹ Carletto Calogero, Benjamin Davis, Marco Stampini, and Alberto Zezza. (2006). "A Country on the Move: International Migration in Post-Communist Albania." *The International Migration Review* 40, no. 4. p. 767. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27645634>.

²²⁰ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. p. 767.

²²¹ Vollmer, Claudia. (2016). *Verwaltungsmodernisierung im Westlichen Balkan im Kontext der EU-Erweiterung am Beispiel von Albanien, Mazedonien und Montenegro*. Kassel University Press. pp. 146f.

followed Albanian migrants in later years, negatively impacting their ability to integrate into their host societies, particularly in Italy.²²²

Migration has in general profound implications for household structures and economic well-being. Among households that were surveyed in Albania, 38% had at least one member who migrated internationally. The highest percentage of migrants moved to Italy (30%), indicating that migration often led to the fragmentation of inner family units. Remittances played a crucial role in improving household economic conditions, particularly for families with migrants in Italy. Household income from remittances accounted for 14% of GDP, exceeding the value of exports and foreign investment.²²³ While the initial migration involved young male labor migrants, later trends show an increase in female participation, largely due to family reunification. The economic benefits of migration, particularly through remittances, have contributed to poverty reduction and improved household consumption, though challenges such as labor market segmentation and household fragmentation remain significant.²²⁴

The origins of migration in Albania originated in a stable household strategy. As mentioned in the second chapter, the economy declined in the early 1990s due to a fall in GDP and rising inflation. However, by 2002, economic recovery had begun, allowing the government to better regulate migratory outflows. By the end of 2001, Albanians made up 10.5% of all immigrants in Italy, prompting many families to begin reunification processes, primarily for wives and children left behind. In 2000, 127,000 Albanians were registered in Italy, a number that surged to 164,000 within a year. In addition to this rapid increase, a significant number of Albanians continued to reside illegally. This process of migration and family reunification not only reshaped household dynamics but also had profound implications for gender roles, as women increasingly navigated new social and economic realities both at home and abroad.²²⁵

²²² Calogero, "A Country on the Move. pp. 772f.

²²³ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. p. 768.

²²⁴ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. p. 778.

²²⁵ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. pp. 770f.

One of the most well-known Albanian newspapers, “Gazeta Shqiptare” (which translates to Albanian Newspaper) wrote an article about the widespread migration of Albanians, even 20 to 30 years post the fall of the communist regime. As a result of this large-scale migration, numerous sectors of the Albanian economy have suffered significant reductions in terms of manpower, which refers to people who are able and willing to work. After the collapse of the regime, the Albanian population was largely comprised of the younger generation, which also contributed to the widespread of migration pattern. This, however, could be seen to benefit other countries—Italy, in our case—by providing them with a young labor force across different industries.²²⁶

As Albania’s political and economic transitions unfolded, so did the role of women. In many Western countries, democracy evolved side by side with economic liberalization and the reformation of a participatory public sphere. However, Albania’s alternative transition challenges this conventional framework and demonstrates that democratization can take different paths depending on historical, social, and political contexts. A key concept of this transformation is the emancipation of women, which was one of the most radical forms of public dissent. Historically, in Europe, the expansion of democratic governance was closely tied to the emergence of the public sphere, in which ideas of citizenship and rights were debated and defined. The struggle for women’s rights—especially for their full inclusion in political and civic life—became a demanding challenge to the existing nation-state structures. If one links Albania’s democratization to the broader historical context of European democratic development, one finds that women’s struggle for equality is not just a social issue but also a fundamental political movement. Their fight for rights and representation reshapes the public sphere, forcing states to redefine their concept of citizenship and democracy.²²⁷

Rather than assuming that democracy naturally leads to gender equality, Albania’s transition illustrates the inherent limitations of democratization in transforming deeper social structures. Even in well-established democracies, a type of gender inequality usually persists. This reveals that liberal democracy often operates at a superficial level and is not sufficient to dismantle

²²⁶ Gazeta Shqiptare (2022), “*Alarmi i Emigracionit! Lufta e Heshtur e Shqipërisë.*” *Gazeta Shqiptare*. <https://gazetashqiptare.al/2022/10/28/alarmi-emigracionit-lufta-e-heshtur-e-shqiperise/>. (24.04.25)

²²⁷ Calloni, “*Albanian Women after socialism and the Balkan war*”. p. 4.

deeply entrenched systems such as patriarchy. The case of Albania highlights how political and economic reforms often take precedence over social change and therefore leave fundamental inequalities intact. Democratization alone is not enough to ensure gender equality. Without deliberate, targeted efforts to promote women's participation in politics and decision-making, democracy remains incomplete offering only formal rights yet failing to challenge the structures that continue to marginalize women.²²⁸

Despite the global advancements in gender equality and the burgeoning feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically the second wave of feminism and the sexual revolution, Albanian women faced harsh restrictions under the regime. They were subjected to government policies that suppressed individuality and any form of personal freedom. While women in many Western countries were fighting for reproductive rights, workplace equality, and sexual liberation, women in Albania were battling for basic rights such as access to education, employment, and healthcare under a totalitarian regime.²²⁹ This was also acknowledged by P.Z., who stated, “*During communism women were equal to men only in fighting; nothing else was equal, even though it was said that they were equal by the communist state.*”²³⁰

Albania's transition was also marked by internal instability, driven by various factors, like organized crime, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration, all of which continued to persist into the new century.²³¹ For a country in transition like Albania, socioeconomic and political transformations also brought shifts in gender roles, similar to those of global trends. The political landscape, long dominated by a single party, began to change, which gradually paved the way for an uncontrolled market economy. These factors, alongside the change in traditional masculine roles due to post-traumatic phases, reshaped the country's social and economic structures.²³² Migration became integral to household survival, with remittances providing

²²⁸ Calloni, “*Albanian Women after socialism and the Balkan war*”. p. 5.

²²⁹ "The Roots of Resistance, A Documentary About the Feminist Movement in Albania." *Citizens.al*. Last modified March 29, 2025. <https://citizens.al/en/the-roots-of-resistance%2C-a-documentary-about-the-feminist-movement-in-albania/>

²³⁰ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with P. Z. via Zoom, Nov-Dez 2024

²³¹ International Security Network (ISN). *January 2000 Report*. Zurich, 2000. https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/38626/2000_Jan.pdf.

²³² Marina Calloni. (2002), *Albanian Women after socialism and the Balkan war*. In: *The Making of European Women's Studies*, p. 3.

financial stability for many families. P.Z. emphasizes this, stating: “*If you had no one living abroad, if all your family members were in Albania, you were considered a poor family because your earnings were not enough to start building a house or a business.*” By saying this, the interviewee highlights the significant role of migration in household economic stability. While migratory movements reached their peak during the first two waves in the 1990s, they continued at a steady pace even in 2001 and beyond. Migration remained a crucial livelihood strategy for many Albanian families. Overall, nearly half of all Albanian households had access to migration networks, either via a family member who had migrated or via children living abroad, underscoring the long-term impact of emigration on household economies.²³³

Migration evolved fast and was even more than a response to the economic hardships and state-wide unemployment. Whether the migration occurred in rural-to-urban areas or even across international borders, it became a socioeconomic phenomenon. Unemployment rates rose due to the collapse of state-controlled industries, as well as in the absence of a stable economic transition. For many emigrants, migration was not just a choice to hope for a better life, rather a necessity for survival. Households benefited directly, as the remittances were viewed as the most secure source for a stable financial life and a foundational source of earnings. However, when migration was relied on for a longer period the results pointed to deeper structural weaknesses within the state’s economic foundation. In other words, many families relied heavily on the remittances, which started to strengthen the economy of the country. Thus, one could say that the economic growth was tied to external income and the government did not concentrate much on the state’s internal development and progress. Furthermore, migration altered Albania’s demographic landscape, as it depleted rural areas of their workforce while simultaneously had a hand in urban overcrowding and building informal labor markets. Over time, this phenomenon had both economic and social implications, affecting family structures, gender roles, and national identity. Thus, while migration provided immediate relief, it also posed long-term challenges that continue to shape Albania’s post-communist trajectory.²³⁴

²³³ Calogero, “A Country on the Move. p. 782.

²³⁴ Likaj, Matilda. (2014), “*Migration as a Challenge for Albanian Post-Communist Society.*” *Journal of Educational and Social Research.* p. 145.

To further understand how migration has reshaped Albanian households, the 2002 LSMS (Living Standards Measurement Survey) can be consulted, which offers key indicators of individual and household characteristics, illustrating the socioeconomic factors that influence migration trends.

INDIVIDUAL AND HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WHO HAVE LEFT THE HOUSEHOLD

	Place of Current Residence				
	Albania	Greece	Italy ¹	Other	Total
Individual characteristics (obs = 6,058)					
Percent of observations	65	17	15 38	3	100
Age in years (in 2002)		32	30	33	36
Education (years of schooling)	9.68	9.83	10.04	11.63	9.81
% of females	64	38	31	43	54
Household characteristics (obs = 1,878)					
Percent of households (furthest migration)	38	25	30	7	100
Household size	4.85	3.85	3.78	3.77	4.21
Average adult education (years)	7.7	7.3	7.8	9.6	7.8
Per-capita consumption (lek/month)	7,038	8,609	8,582	9,478	7,956
% households in wage work	38	30	37	52	37
% households in agriculture	61	67	53	31	58
% households with nonagric. business	16	10	13	20	14
Poverty headcount	32	19	15	22	24

Note: ¹Includes other parts of Europe.

Source: 2002 LSMS.

Fig. 4²³⁵

When homing in on the migration of younger generations, one can see that this has led to demographic shifts, altered labor market dynamics, and affected poverty levels. Among children who have moved out of their households, the majority (65%) remained in Albania,

²³⁵ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. p. 778.

while 35% migrated abroad with 15% alone in Italy. The average age of migrants in 2002 was 36 years, with those staying in Albania being the oldest (38 years) and those in Italy being the youngest (30 years). This suggests that younger individuals were more likely to pursue international migration, possibly due to greater employment opportunities or fewer family responsibilities. Education levels also vary across migrant destinations. Those who migrated to Italy had the highest number of average years of schooling (10.04), followed by migrants to other European countries (11.63). These statistics suggest that migration to Italy and beyond was often pursued by individuals with slightly higher education levels. This coincides with either a greater number of job opportunities abroad requiring formal skills or a more selective immigration policy. Gender distribution further highlights differences in migration patterns. While 64% of the younger generation of migrants remaining in Albania were female, 31% of those migrated to Italy were female. This suggests that migration, especially to Italy (and Greece), was initially male-dominated, with women joining later, primarily through family reunification programs.²³⁶

These factors, along with general negative attitudes toward Albanian immigrants and increasingly restrictive immigration policies from 2002 onwards, reduced the appeal of migration into foreign countries. Migration patterns have evolved naturally in response to policies that have both restricted and facilitated migration. Although efforts have been made to reduce migration pull factors, Albanian migrants have successfully obtained legal status in large numbers, particularly in Italy. Firstly, to emphasize this, it is important to note that Albanians have taken advantage of periodic immigration regularization programs, making them the second-largest legally recognized immigrant community in Italy. Secondly, the presence of women in migration has increased: Albanian women accounted for 18% of legalized migrants in 1994, with the percentage rising to 34% by 2000, primarily through family reunification permits. This trend indicates a shift from labor migration to more stable, long-term settlement.²³⁷ Thirdly, children of Albanian migrants form the largest immigrant group in Italian schools, which reinforces the already-explained idea of family-based migration and integration. Additionally, Albanians received the highest number of residence permits for

²³⁶ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. pp. 777f.

²³⁷ Calogero, "A Country on the Move. p. 773.

family reunification in 2001, which marked a transition from temporary labor migration to community formation. Unlike other immigrant groups, Albanians in Italy are geographically more dispersed, which may facilitate better assimilation over time. This shift aligns with classic migration patterns seen in Southern Europe, in which labor migration is followed by family reunification, permanent settlement, and community integration.²³⁸

3.2 Diaspora

One of the most prominent Albanian newspapers, *Gazeta Shqiptare* (engl. *Albanian Newspaper*) published an article about the massive migration of Albanians, even 20 to 30 years after the fall of the communist regime. Due to this large-scale migration, various sectors of the Albanian economy have suffered significant losses in terms of human capital—people who are able and willing to work. Following the regime’s collapse, Albania had a predominantly young population, which contributed to the scale of migration. This, in turn, benefited other countries—Italy, in particular—by providing them with a young labor force across different sectors. This category of recent migrants, along with earlier waves such as the Arbereshe and others, collectively form the Albanian diaspora.²³⁹

Over the years, the movement of the Albanian diaspora has played a crucial role in the advocacy for individual and collective rights, the preservation of the Albanian language and cultural identity, the protection of national interests, and the contribution to the economic and social development of Albania. Despite the importance a diaspora has, there is little consensus in academic and policy discussions regarding to the explicit definition of the Albanian diaspora. One can differentiate between an old diaspora and the new diaspora. The old diaspora consists of Albanian migrants who migrated before 1990s, primarily to regions in Italy (the Arbëresh community), Turkey and United States.²⁴⁰ In contrast, the new diaspora refers to the massive waves of migration that began in the 1990s and continued into the 2000s, largely driven by

²³⁸ Calogero, “A Country on the Move. p. 774.

²³⁹ Gazeta Shqiptare (2022), “*Alarmi i Emigracionit! Lufta e Heshtur e Shqipërisë.*” *Gazeta Shqiptare*. <https://gazetashqiptare.al/2022/10/28/alarmi-emigracionit-lufta-e-heshtur-e-shqiperise/>. (24.04.25)

²⁴⁰ Barjaba Jonida (2019), *Albanian diaspora across the world*. In: Athens Journal of Mediteean Studies. Vol. 5. No. 3. p. 173.

political instability, economic hardship, and conflict, in particular the Kosovo War. This group has predominantly settled in European countries such as Greece, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, forming extensive networks that continue to influence both their host countries and Albania.²⁴¹

The Arbëresh, the first Albanian émigré community in Italy, are considered the pioneers of later Albanian migration waves that shaped one of the largest Albanian diasporas in the country. Today, approximately 200,000 Albanians reside in Italy, forming a significant diaspora in addition to alongside the historic Arbëresh community. Concurrent to the diaspora in Italy, approximately 1.2 million Albanians were living outside Albania's borders in 2015, according to the United Nations.²⁴²

The Arbëresh represent the old diaspora, with their migration dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries, when Albanians fled political turmoil, military conflicts, and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. They settled across the country of Italy, primarily in the north and south, but their emigrational experiences diverged over time. While those in Northern Italy assimilated for the most part, the communities in Southern Italy, notably in Calabria, Sicily, Basilicata, Molise, and Apulia, chose to preserve their distinct identity through their language, customs, and traditions. Recognized today as one of Italy's largest ethno-linguistic minorities, the Arbëresh have continued to uphold a strong cultural presence. Their unique language, an archaic Albanian dialect with Italian influences, was officially recognized in 1999 as the language of an 'ethnic and linguistic minority', which ensured institutional support for its preservation. Despite modernization and integration pressures, the Arbëresh continue to uphold their heritage today by means of cultural festivals, religious traditions, and linguistic initiatives, serving as a lasting testament to the resilience of Albanian identity beyond national borders.²⁴³

Diasporas are in most cases contested spaces, and this holds especially true of the Albanian diaspora, which was shaped by a complex web of internal divisions. These disunities among

²⁴¹ Barjaba, "*Albanian diaspora across the world*." p. 173. ²⁴²

Barjaba, "*Albanian diaspora across the world*." p. 173. ²⁴³

Barjaba, "*Albanian diaspora across the world*." pp. 175f.

the migrants stem from factors such as geographic origins, political affiliations, economic status, gender dynamics, and levels of professional qualification. The post-1990 wave of emigration has further amplified these distinctions, as newly arrived Albanian migrants attempted to integrate into pre-existing Albanian communities abroad, which in some cases led to tensions and shifts in identity dynamics. What makes this wave of migration particularly unique is that, for the first time since the Ottoman era, large-scale emigration from Albania coincided timewise with the mass migration of Albanians from Kosovo. Both countries, though connected by history and ethnicity, experienced their own separate upheavals that triggered the act of migration: Kosovo faced the Kosovo War, while Albania endured civil unrest and economic instability following the collapse of communism, as previously mentioned. While this shared experience of displacement might suggest a unifying force, encounters between Albanians from Albania and those from Kosovo in their new host countries have often reinforced national and cultural differences rather than bridging them. These distinctions run so deep that only moments of profound national crisis have the power to momentarily override them, revealing the enduring complexities of Albanian identity in diaspora.²⁴⁴

This situation closely aligns with B.Z.'s interview, in which he recounts his experience upon arriving in England. He states:

'When I first reached my destination country, I was interviewed about the reasons I left Albania, and the authorities were already aware of the situation there. Many people took advantage of this, as well as the war in Kosovo. That was the reason why Albanians were generally well received. I personally knew people who were originally from Albania but claimed to be from Kosovo to gain an advantage in the asylum process. Once you undergo the interview, you have to wait until your case is reviewed and a decision is made on whether you can stay or not.'²⁴⁵

B.Z.'s account highlights how the different political and humanitarian crises in Albania and Kosovo opened new opportunities for migration, which sometime led individuals to fabricate in regard to their national distinctions in order to navigate asylum procedures more effectively. This underlines how migration policies and international perceptions of crises can directly influence the strategies migrants use to secure legal status in host countries.

²⁴⁴ Kostovicova Denisa (2008). "*Albanian Diasporas and Their Political Roles.*" pp. 75.

²⁴⁵ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

While the Kosovo War served as a pivotal moment of unity for the Albanian diaspora, the sense of all-encompassing national solidarity that followed has been more inconsistent. Although Kosovo's path to independence has continued to inspire Albanian patriots abroad, the diaspora's focus has gradually shifted toward other pressing issues, particularly those of corruption and governance challenges in Albania. Given the persistent struggles of governments across Albanian-inhabited regions in the Balkans to provide essential public goods—most notably employment opportunities and economic development—diaspora engagement has taken on increasing significance. In response, policymakers in the homeland have prioritized strategies to attract remittances and enhance their long-term impact, which makes evident the crucial role of financial contributions of the diaspora in stabilizing and advancing local economies.²⁴⁶

In recent years, the new diaspora is more connected with its homeland due to different factors. One main factor includes various forms of return, mostly permanently, in which individuals or whole families decide to return to Albania. Reasons for this can occur sometimes through different investments or seasonal work, or also virtually, leveraging the influence of digital technology to engage with their homeland in real-time from everywhere. This results in various contributions like business development, political discourse or knowledge transfer.

The Albanian community in Italy has proven to be highly resilient over the years and has played a crucial role in the social and economic growth of the country. Over the years, a strong Albanian presence has established itself, not only in the labor market but also in cultural aspects, such as the arts, music, and sports. Some notable individuals of Albanian origin have achieved recognition in Italy's sports teams and entertainment industry and have significantly contributed the country's cultural landscape. Moreover, the economic relationship between Italy and Albania has grown stronger due to the large number of Albanian workers sending remittances back home. These financial transfers have played a pivotal role in supporting Albania's economy, contributing to household incomes, business ventures, and local

²⁴⁶ Kostovicova, "Albanian Diasporas and Their Political Roles." pp. 81f.

development projects. Many Albanian migrants have used their earnings to invest in businesses or real estate in both Italy and Albania, further cementing their common economic footprint.²⁴⁷

By the mid-2010s, Italy had become home to one of the largest Albanian communities abroad. Approximately 450,000 Albanian migrants were living in Greece and Italy alone, forming a vital part of the Italian and Greek workforce and society. In addition to fortifying their economic impact, these migrants have succeeded in maintaining deep cultural ties to their homeland. The preservation of Albanian language and traditions remains important for many living abroad, with various cultural associations and local communities being established and with the function of keeping these practices alive.

In recent years, younger generations of Albanians in Italy have found numerous methods to reconcile their homeland heritage with their new Italian identity, making their mark on the social fabric of their local communities. While some of this age group have opted for careers in Italy's professional sectors, others have returned to Albania and have thus contributed to the cross-border exchanges that continue to shape Albania's development. The cultural reciprocity between the two countries, facilitated by the Albanian diaspora, is continuously helping to bridge the gap between Italy and Albania in political, social, and economic spheres.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Barjaba, "*Albanian diaspora across the world*." p. 178.

²⁴⁸ Barjaba, "*Albanian diaspora across the world*." p. 178.

3.3 Return of emigrants



Fig. 5:²⁴⁹ “Never again in emigration”

"*Never Again in Emigration*"—the title of a podcast episode aired on December 6, 2024—features Etleva Sulovari and her son Aldo as they share the journey of their family who returned to Albania after 20 years of living in Italy. Their story calls into question the dominant narrative of Albanian migration, which, at the turn of the new millennium, was defined by the aforementioned mass departures driven by economic hardship and the pursuit of a better future abroad. Two decades later, the discourse around migration has noticeably shifted. While emigration remains a defining aspect of Albanian history, there is now a growing emphasis on the possibility of return—an idea that was once unthinkable for many. The podcast serves as both a testament to the complexities of migration and a counter-narrative to the once-unidirectional flow of Albanians leaving their homeland. It also raises critical questions, such

²⁴⁹ Rama, Edi. (2024), "*Kurrë më në emigracion*." *Edi Rama Podcast*. (14.03.25).

as the following: What does it mean to return? Is repatriation a viable alternative for those who left? And how does this story influence younger generations contemplating emigration today?²⁵⁰

Beyond the personal experience, Sulovari's story highlights the broader socio-political messaging whose goal is to encourage the Albanian diaspora to reintegrate. No matter if driven by nostalgia, economic reinvestment, or state-led incentives, these cases serve as "food for thought" for those considering migration in their younger years suggesting that the choice is not necessarily irreversible. Beyond that, the central role of the household in this thesis is also evident in the decision to return: the entire household chose to emigrate together back, without leaving any family members behind in emigration. By putting a twist on the conversation surrounding migration, this podcast challenges the prevailing assumption that leaving is always the only or the best option. Instead, it presents a nuanced perspective, one in which return is not a failure but a conscious decision, shaped by personal growth, changing circumstances, and evolving national dynamics.²⁵¹

Remittances from the diaspora have played a major role during the financial crisis in transitional period and beyond, having a long-term impact on Albania's economy by helping households maintain a secure base of income. In 2004, financial transfers from Albanian emigrants added up to \$1 billion, contributing to 13.5% of the country's total GDP. These funds significantly surpassed those of foreign direct investment and development aid and covered nearly half of Albania's trade deficit. Their summed economic impact was comparable to that of a major industry. There were many families whose income would mainly rely on remittances. These funds served as vital source of financial support, often defining the financial situation of a household, which could be either impoverished or financially stable. However, even though the income was important, the financial input did not contribute much to the stabilization of the local production. To elaborate, a lot of the money that came from the migrants' remittances was spent on goods, rather than being invested directly in the country's

²⁵⁰ Rama, "*Kurr më në emigracion.*"

²⁵¹ Rama, "*Kurr më në emigracion.*"

infrastructure or facilities. This reliance on external financial support has reinforced a pattern in which domestic consumption outweighs the country's productive potential. To put it directly, investment in the youth of the country is one key to a well-functioning state. In this case, investments in job creation were failing, which led to the majority of many young people to seek these lost opportunities somewhere else, perpetuating a cycle of emigration. A decrease in remittances has been seen in recent years, as the migration flows are stabilizing and a more emigrants are settling permanently in their host countries with their families. This shift could pose new economic difficulties for Albania, as the country has long depended on these external financial contributions to sustain its economy.²⁵²

The issue of returning emigrants and their significance to the country remains a key topic of discussion. Studies suggest that more than half of Albanian emigrants, particularly those who initially migrated to Italy and Greece, are theoretically willing to return to their homeland. After spending an average of 14 to 17 years abroad, such a return would hold great importance for Albania. Many returnees bring not only financial resources and investments but also innovative ideas that contribute to economic growth. Their involvement also motivates the local youth to invest in their own country, which helps to foster a sense of opportunity and stability that can help reduce further emigration. This trend of returning emigrants may contribute to a decline in remittances.²⁵³

Understanding the framework and the challenges faced by returnees, as well as the difficulties of their reintegration in their homeland, can also be examined from the perspective of the Albanian government. A key player in the National Strategy on Migration, the National Action Plan on Migration (NAPM) outlines the policies and measures that the Albanian government has implemented so far to regulate emigration flows and in the bigger picture to develop an extensive migration management framework. This plan addresses both voluntary and forced returns. The latter case could occur particularly through readmission agreements, which are legal frameworks that administer the repatriation of individuals residing illegitimately in

²⁵² UCL Europe Blog. (2023) "Albania's Brain Drain: Why So Many Young People Are Leaving and How to Get Them to Stay," *UCL Europe Blog*. <https://ucluropeblog.com/2023/07/09/albanias-brain-drain-why-so-many-young-people-are-leaving-and-how-to-get-them-to-stay/> p. 3.

²⁵³ UCL Europe Blog, "Albania's Brain Drain". p. 4.

foreign countries. Given the considerable number of Albanian nationals who have returned under these agreements, a deeper analysis of readmission policies is essential.²⁵⁴

Readmission agreements and their respective protocols of implementation play an essential role in regulating return procedures while at the same time ensuring that the fundamental rights and freedoms of returnees are respected. Albania took a significant step in this direction by signing a *Readmission Agreement with the European Community* on April 14, 2005, making it the first country in the Western Balkans to do so. This agreement officially entered into force on May 1, 2006, for Albanian citizens and then again later, on May 1, 2008, for third-country nationals who had passed through Albania in order to reach EU member states. The primary goal of this agreement is to strengthen cooperation in tackling illegitimate migration and establishing transparent and standardized procedures for the identification and safe return of individuals who do not meet legal residency criteria in either Albania or the EU. This provides a clear and structured explanation of how Albania has addressed emigration flows and the reintegration of returnees, emphasizing legal frameworks and cooperation with the European Community.²⁵⁵

The decision to return after facing numerous challenges as an emigrant is certainly not an easy one. It is natural that the homeland seeks to benefit from the skills and achievements emigrants have gained abroad, using those benefits to contribute positively to national development. The Albanian government, in accordance with its obligations under the National Action Plan on Migration (NAPM), has implemented various measures to support the reintegration of returnees. In collaboration with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and with financial assistance from the European Union and the Italian government, an evaluation study was conducted in 2008 to assess the capacity of institutions providing vocational training for

²⁵⁴ Government of Albania, *Strategy on Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens 2010-2015*, European Stability Initiative. p. 7.

https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/schengen_whitelist_project_Strategy%20on%20Reintegration%20of%20Returned%20Albanian%20Citizens%202010-2015.pdf (25.02.25)

²⁵⁵ Government of Albania, “*Strategy on Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens*” pp. 7f.

returnees. Identifying the reintegration needs of returnees is crucial for the government to ensure a positive outcome for both the state and those returning.²⁵⁶

On the other hand, there are many migrants who cannot imagine returning to Albania in their future. One such example is B.Z., who, when asked about the possibility of returning, firmly rejected this idea. He admitted that while the thought had crossed his mind and the desire was there, “*returning was not something he envisioned happening anytime soon.*” Reflecting on his journey, he acknowledged that “*Albania gave him his identity, but it was England that shaped his character.*” It was there that he built his life - becoming a husband, a father, and a professional. “*England provided him with opportunities, stability, and a sense of belonging that he was uncertain he could find again in Albania.*” His biggest concern regarding a return, however, was his family. Married to a non-Albanian, he questioned whether they would be able to adapt to life in Albania and whether he himself would still fit into the country that he once called home. While his pride in being Albanian remained strong, it did not change the reality that his family, his achievements, and the life he had built were deeply rooted in emigration to England.²⁵⁷

Thirty years ago, leaving Albania was seen as a form of liberation and rescue. Nowadays, government-driven narratives are searching for a transformation and reconstruction of this perception. Keeping the population inside the borders of the state appears urgent, and the country is using all the self-advocacy they have in order to motivate the younger generation, the key group tasked with shaping Albania’s future, on the possibility of return. For many of those young people, who migrated for a better student life, the thought of returning is still pragmatic, due to different reasons. Some of them see the change in the youth in Albania, yet the government needs to make more progress in the security, infrastructure, medicine and educational system. There are still gaps that need to be filled, according to the Albanian youth, who studied or are studying abroad.²⁵⁸ The engagement and contribution of this social group are crucial for the nation's long-term growth. To address the challenges of emigration, the

²⁵⁶ Government of Albania, *Strategy on Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens*” p. 12.

²⁵⁷ Daklea Zenuni, Interview with B. Z/ B. K., via Zoom, September 2024.

²⁵⁸ Shqiptarja.com, (2024). “*Shqipëri, vazhdon të jetë shqetësues emigrimi i të rinjve.*”
<https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/shqiperi-vazhdon-te-jete-shqetesues-emigrimi-i-te-rinjve> (16.04.25).

Albanian government has launched various initiatives with the goal of encouraging the return of emigrants by offering financial incentives and support for their investment ideas. These programs not only assist with the benefit of returning citizens from business opportunities but also contribute to the country's economic growth. By fostering entrepreneurship, these initiatives stimulate job creation, enhance the tourism industry, and strengthen local economies, ultimately reinforcing Albania's development and sustainability.²⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the decision to return is not always one that an emigrant can make alone. It is influenced by numerous factors, including their family, the life they have built abroad, and the sense of belonging they have developed in a new home. Returning does not simply mean relocating physically: it involves reconnecting with society that may feel both familiar and foreign at the same time. Despite the reintegration measures implemented by the government, these initiatives neither fully consider the diverse and complex needs of returnees, nor do they in all cases provide sufficient assistance or benefits for those who are still in the stage of considering the possibility of a return. In the end, the decision remains deeply personal and varies from one emigrant to another. However, the gaps in reintegration services highlight the need for a more comprehensive and targeted approach, one that takes into account not only economic reintegration but also the social and psychological challenges faced by those who return after years, or even decades, abroad.²⁶⁰

Lastly, as the migration routes change, so do the differences between migrants involved, as well as migration patterns during the period of 1995–1999 and the more recent wave from 2015–2019. As mentioned in the beginning of the thesis, migrants of the first wave mainly resided in the neighboring European countries, primarily in Italy and Greece (this case), which were seen as place of economical salvation and the destinations with stability. However, as the countries of destination do change, the same phenomenon occurs with the migrants themselves. The countries that were once top destinations for migration have since become less attractive due to economic turbulences and the adaption of immigration policies. To elaborate, the rate

²⁵⁹ Eurofast. (2024). “*The Mountain Package: A New Opportunity for Albanian Diaspora Investment.*” November. <https://eurofast.eu/the-mountain-package-a-new-opportunity-for-albanian-diaspora-investment> (20.03.25).

²⁶⁰ Government of Albania, *Strategy on Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens*” pp. 12f.

of Albanian migrants to both Italy and the United States has undergone changes, as the number of the emigrants here has declined, while in Greece this trend has reversed entirely, making it the country where more Albanians are leaving than coming in. Once perceived as a “promised lands” and a symbol of economic and political salvation, these countries no longer hold the same appeal for migration. Instead, Albanian migrants are now exploring alternative destinations, such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and Nordic countries, where current economic prospects, social benefits, and job opportunities are perceived to be more favorable. This shift reflects broader global economic trends and the evolving aspirations of Albanian emigrants.²⁶¹

²⁶¹ Gazeta Shqip. (2020), “Zbulohen Shifrat: Ja Sa Shqiptarë Janë Njëpër Botë Që Nga 1945 e Deri Në 2019.” <https://gazeta-shqip.com/me-rendesi/zbulohen-shifrat-ja-sa-shqiptare-jane-neper-bote-qe-nga-1945-e-deri-ne-2019/> (25.03.25).

Conclusion

The composition of this thesis presented both challenges and rewards. One of the most difficult aspects was to address a topic that has thus far received limited academic attention. This required me to rely on original sources including interviews I conducted myself, which provided valuable firsthand accounts. The incorporation of mediated representations, such as a documentary and a feature film, offered alternative and insightful portrayals of the themes I delved into.

The subject of migration, particularly emigration and the development of migration regimes, is profoundly intertwined with the broader transformation within a society. In the case of Albania, the roots of migration lay back in time. Migration, whether internal or international, is a natural and often a necessary phase in a society's development. Its impact extends beyond that group of people who move, in other words, it is not only felt in the local community, but it also influences the economic structures, political discourse, and community dynamics, as migrants bring change, new ideas, new perspectives and practices with them, wherever they go.

From the outset, my aim in this master's thesis was to focus on the evolution of Albanian evolving society after the fall of communism and to trace the origins and development of its migration movements. Rather than deciding to solely concentrate on political transitions or institutional reforms, my choice was to explore how these societal changes were experienced on a personal level. In order to provide context, I aimed to incorporate more perspectives from every-day people, who experienced every part of the journey by themselves, including interactions with their families. To understand a transformation in a society, it is essential to lay focus on all different types of migrants and also those indirectly affected in one way or another. Migrants are not a homogenous group; they vary in all aspects, psychologically, emotionally as well as culturally.

Had the thesis focused solely on politics, the trajectory of the thesis would have shifted in another direction, perhaps only analysing diplomatic relations or legislative reforms. While

these aspects play a major role as well, my decision to foreground the social experiences that gave me space to explore more topics like separation, adaptation and reunification and all of these with the focus of women and the household.

Furthermore, since the emphasis remained on society and lived experiences, I was able to explore the human dimension of this topic, like the experiences of those who migrated and those who stayed behind. This included stories of separation, adaptation, resilience, and eventual reunification, viewpoints which are often overlooked in more policy-oriented studies.

Interestingly, during the writing and researching process, one is exposed with different literature that provides new perspectives as well, such as the case of the reunification process and return of migrants after years of emigration. These perspectives were not seen in the earlier years, as in the example of Arbëresh, which built a community in Italy with Albanian traditions and language that remains even today. Thus, as we speak, the focus remains on that percentage of emigrants who moved after the turbulent times, like after the fall of communism, which represents the Albanian modern transition era. It was this time, that marked the transition of the society, while on the move.

This was a time marked by uncertainty, not only in Albania, but across the entire Eastern Block, as countries confronted the collapse of communism. Mobility and reinvention became defining features of the post-communist period, triggering a wave of migration that followed the turbulence of political and societal upheaval.

With this thesis I aimed to address a gap I observed in much of the literature and scholarship I encountered during my research. The theme of isolation, though often mentioned, was treated in a rather superficial manner. This lack of depth posed a significant challenge for historical inquiry; when available sources are limited or incomplete, it becomes difficult for historians to uncover deeper insights. This challenge led me to peruse other aspects such as oral history.

Oral history, which refers to when participants are willing to share their stories, offers a powerful means of accessing perspectives that are often absent from official archives. In most of history, oral history has been underestimated, simply for the fact that ordinary people were not the main subject of happenings or were mostly seen as peripheral to major historical events. Politics and people in the government have always driven the attention of the scholars with all their decisions and rulemaking. However, laying focus only on the political elite overlooks the value of the narration of those who experienced the consequences of these rulers.

In the case of communist Albania, it was very difficult to uncover and find reasons behind state actions, as they have proven to be particularly complex. At first, the resemblance with other communist countries (like Soviet Union and China) offered some explanatory frameworks. Nevertheless, when Albania's communist leader later cut ties with all the relations he had had with other communist parties in the Eastern Block, the topic started to become more difficult and traditional comparative models began to lose their explanatory power. The rigid and unique context of the isolation in Albania was not that easy to understand just by political analysis alone, which led me to go deeper into the methods of propaganda, in the work force and in the areas of leadership.

In conclusion to the topic of Albanian migration, what once started with the *Vlora* cargo ship experience, changed the course of the history of Albania drastically. What initially emerged as a response to the insecurity and was driven by the uncertainty of the turbulent post-communist period has since evolved into a pivotal moment of an ongoing process of mobility, adaptation and transformation. Today, migration is no longer seen solely as a loss, but more like a strategy. Its impact continues to shape Albanian society, not only through those who leave, but also through return migration, remittances, transnational ties, and the redefinition of identity across borders.

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