

“Feeling as a migrant even in my homeland”: Living experiences of Albanian return migrants from Greece.

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Abstract

The fall of communism in Albania was followed by a massive movement of citizens towards western countries, where they settled for a better life. But after living abroad for many years, many Albanians have decided to return home. Although in many cases return was voluntary, some of the returnees want to migrate again, maybe permanently this time. Others move back and forth, spending only short periods of time abroad, when they are unemployed at home.

The main aim of our research is to explore the experiences of Albanian returnees at their home country, their feelings about the decision to return, the difficulties of their re-integration in Albania, and how they perceive themselves in the Albanian society. We call it a ‘re-integration’ because Albania is not the country that they left behind when they first migrated. It has changed the same way as other closed societies have, after they opened their borders. We also explore their first impressions and reactions when they settled in Albania, the way they perceive the Albanians who have never migrated, and whether migrating again is a possibility for the future.

Key words: Albanian migration, return migration, re-integration, double identity.

Introduction

Until 1990 Albania was a closed communist country with centrally planned economy. Internal population movement or external migration was not allowed. But the fall of communism was followed by massive movements towards the major cities of Albania, as well as, to a larger extent, toward foreign countries. Hundreds of thousands of Albanians left the country in search for a better life in the West. Their main destination was the close by country of Greece. Greek economy had shown signs of improvement in the early 1980s, and a decade later it needed the cheap migrant workforce, composed mainly by Albanians, to perform even better.

To Iosifides and King (1998) the massive movement of Albanians towards Greece in 1990 is linked to the geopolitical changes in the socialist countries of the Eastern Europe after 1989. The fall of the communist regime made possible the free movement of Albanians. Fakiolas (2000) notes that despite the political and social push factors, it was for economic reasons that Albanians left their country and immigrated to Greece. He goes on by noting that “the wages earned in Greece are about four-to-six times higher than those that might be earned at home in Albania.” This explains the large number of Albanians, relative to other migrants living and working in Greece. According to the Labour Force Survey on December 2009, the total number of Albanians is about 501,000, which corresponds to 60% of the total migrant population (Triandafyllidou and Marouf, 2011). Many social scientists have suggested that migration is a ‘one-way trip’, that there is no ‘home’ to go back to (Hall, 1987). But if we look at recent history of international migration movements, we will see that this suggestion is far from the truth. Migration is not a no-return process. According to King (1977), the problems of return migration have been to some extent neglected by geographers and social scientists in general. He argues that this happens because of the temporal character of international migration within the European labour market. King

(2000) thinks that return migration 'is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration'. Klinthäll (1998) also argues that there is a surprising lack of empirical work on this issue, and Cassarino (2004) observes that although return migration has been a topic of various interpretations, its content remains hazy.

A brief review on Albanian return migration

Return migration in Albania is a recent phenomenon, and it deserves more attention from the point of view of the receiving countries, as well as the sending country. It includes voluntary, i.e., organized voluntary return, and forced return. According to International Organization of Migration (August 2006) there is a significant flow of Albanian migrants returning to Albania. However, the official data are practically non-existent and the empirical research is very limited. The research focuses mainly on the characteristics of the return migrants, the reasons of return, and on employment in general.

During the last decade, a considerable number of migrants have returned for different reasons in Albania. But many of them want to leave again, maybe permanently this time. Others move back and forth, spending only short periods of time abroad, when they are unemployed at home. Apart from the economic benefits, this way their stay in Albania is made easier (Labrianidis and Lyberaki 2004; Nicholson 2004; Labrianidis and Kazazi 2006).

According to several studies (Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou 2005; Carletto *et al.* 2004; King, 2004) migration is seen by the Albanians as a strategy to overcome poverty, and hence to improve their living conditions in Albania. With their earnings abroad, according to Nicholson (2004), Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou (2005), Germenji and Milo (2009), the returnees have financed small businesses, and have purchased equipment in existing activities. Their attitude towards investing seems to depend on the country they migrated, because in the study of Kilic *et al.* (2007) the returnees from Greece showed less involvement in investing in small family businesses, compared to returnees from other western countries. In all cases, however, the return migrants have put in use their working experience and the skills they have acquired abroad.

Although return migration is associated with positive economic results, it continues to be considered as a failure among Albanians (Labrianidis and Kazazi 2006). Barjaba (2000) thinks that the returnees belong to the category of migrants who couldn't integrate in the country of their destination, or were deported by the authorities. He supports his position by arguing that there is no evidence which can prove that important investments of the returnees go to serious productive activities.

Nevertheless, migration, return migration and circular migration will continue to play an important role in the lives of Albanians, as long as the country is not politically and economically stable.

Political tension has been present in Albanian reality since the establishment of a parliamentary republic based on multi-party system. High rates of corruption at every level and all branches of the government, the parliament and every other institution, as well as the inability or the lack of determination on behalf of the different governments to tackle decisively the problem, hinder any progress towards European integration. According to the World Bank's Control of Corruption measurement, in 2008 Albania was placed in the 25-50 percentile, while Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) for the same year placed Albania in the 85th place, out of 180 countries ranked. The situation has worsened in the coming years (IDRA, 2010). In 2014, according to CPI Albania occupied the 110th place out of 175 countries (the data is available at Transparency International website). Under these conditions, a decline in economic activity of the country was to be expected.

After the fall of communism the Albanian economy started to adjust to a market economy. The adjustment was made easier by the remittances of Albanian migrants, and the economy showed signs of improvement. In 1997, however, a chaotic period

occurred when a backed by the government system of pyramid schemes collapsed. It was followed by social unrest, massive migration, and a fall in production. In 1998 the economy started to improve, very slowly in the beginning, but a decade later, just at the brink of the global financial crisis, the growth rate was as high as 6%. The financial crisis slowed the rate of growth significantly. The Albanian financial sector is not developed enough to be hit by the crisis. Yet the Albanian economy suffered its impact indirectly. The remittances were reduced significantly, since the vast majority of Albanian migrants live in the two countries hit most by the crisis, i.e., Greece and Italy. Further, return migrants, especially from Greece, are increasing in number, hence putting pressure on the labour market.

A significant feature of unemployment is that, although almost one third of Albanians live abroad, its rate has been persistently very high throughout the years following the change in regime (World Bank, 2008, Albanian Ministry of Labour, 2015). Since 2007 for example, unemployment rate for ages under 30 years old has been persistently over 19%, reaching as high as 32.5% in 2014. While for ages over 30, the unemployment rate has been between 10 to 13% (INSTAT, 2015).

Methodology

This article presents the results of 28 in-depth semi structured interviews with Albanian migrants who have returned from Greece. The interviewees belong to the first generation of Albanian migrants, who have lived in Greece from 3 to 22 years, but now have returned and are living in Tirana for over a year. The year of their return varies from 2003 to 2011. In absence of official statistical data, we used the technique of snowball to select the sample, which consists of 14 males and 14 females, aged between 26 to 65 years of age, most of whom at a very productive working age.

The interviews were taken at café-bars, at their work or their home, during the period November 2011 – July 2012. The returnees are currently living and working in the city of Tirana. Only one of the returnees is working in Durres. We chose Tirana because it is the capital and the most developed area of Albania. There are more chances for the returnees to be employed or self-employed. Further, due to its economic development, Tirana is transformed into a modern city, offering to the returnees similar way of living to that in Greece.

Return migrants' first impressions and problems of reintegration in Albania

For many migrants, returning to Albania was a dream. They felt nostalgia for home, their friends and relatives. However, it turned out that they missed the country they left behind, but not the one they returned to. It is a very different country the one they found.

Some of the returnees admitted that returning to Albania was a bad decision, and they were very disappointed about it. Upon their arrival in Tirana they were surprised by the plurality of colors the buildings were painted. Almost all of them agree that there is no beauty in this, and that the environment, not only in Tirana but everywhere in Albania, is certainly not beautiful. By using the word *beauty* the returnees have in their mind a place with order, cleanliness, simplicity and with people pure at heart. Lack of beauty they see also in the prevailed dress code, especially of women and young girls, who put makeup from the morning. This was fact stressed by women returnees, rather than men. The migrants who returned between 2003 and 2007 faced some additional problems due to the poor infrastructure, such as frequent power outages, shortages in the supply of running water, unpaved and unclean streets and squares. They acknowledge that now things have improved, but again some problems, such as the lack of continuous water supply, continue to create difficulties.

Apart from these technicalities, they noticed that people were impolite, rude, and in particular they lacked patience. Especially when people were lined up in queues in

supermarkets, banks, etc., or even waiting for the bus, they didn't show any sign of respect towards the others who were there first.

"When we were near 'Zogu i Zi' neighborhood, many buildings were painted with different colors, like in the circus. We saw each other with surprise because we were used in Greece to see buildings painted in grey or white." (Niko, 43)

"It was funny when I went to have a bath and there was no water. My cousin told me that I had to wait until 19:00 for the water to run"; "... a lot of noise, pollution, garbage along the streets and squares. You can't breathe." (Pjerin, 44)

"In Athens I was used to wear sports shoes, because I felt more comfortable, and I dressed in a very simple way. When I came back I saw that women, especially young girls, were being dressed in a very exaggerated way, wearing high heels and makeup in the middle of the day. I felt a bit uncomfortable when I heard my neighbors gossiping about my style... Now they dress normally, wearing like me sports or flat shoes." (Klodi, 35)

Back home wasn't as they expected. The process of reintegration seemed to them to be more difficult than that of integration in Greece, especially for the returnees with children. This category of returnees expressed their anxiety for the future of their children. They think that their children are better educated than the rest, and even more honest. For example, some of their children have observed that their friends at school don't express openly their opinion. According to the parents, this is hypocrisy. They went so far as to say that in Albania hypocrisy is seen as a value. One of the parents, Pjerin, said *"My child here seems to be like a sheep amongst wolfs"*.

At work, those who are working in offices, or teaching at schools, had in the beginning problems with the official Albanian language. There are a lot of changes in terminology, as well as the use of new words.

All of the returnees, however, were surprised by the way the "other Albanians" worked. They put the least effort, try to skip working hard, and provide silly excuses for their performance. Further, the relations between co-workers are based on interest. This was hardly unexpected, because the presence of self-interest in the relations they felt also in the wider circle of family and friends. They expected their friends and relatives to be more welcoming, more supportive and helpful. But this didn't occur. Albanians have become more individualistic. The returnees understand that life in Albania has changed which means that the rhythm of life is faster and nobody can dedicate more time to friends and family. They also are aware of this fact, but nonetheless it is disappointing.

"I know that my friends and cousins have their problems and their errands to run to, but again I expected them to support me, at least psychologically" (Emilio, 38)

"People have changed. They are closed to themselves and don't help. I remember during the communist regime that we supported very much each other. In my village after a storm almost everyone would run to help the families who suffered the most damages. Now everything has changed." (Pjerin, 44)

"I am a teacher in a high school and when I opened the books I use for teaching materials, I couldn't understand anything. The language seemed not to be the same we used before I left Albania. Many new words borrowed from English or Italian language". (Enkelejda, 45)

The Albanian society cannot be regarded any more as a traditional society, but rather as a modern one. The fall of communism was followed by a partial and asymmetric modernization, which doesn't involve only structural change, but also a change in the relationship between the social structures and social agents. As Beck (1992) underlines, individuals in modernity have lost their traditional networks of support. They have to rely on themselves and their personal fate. As a consequence, the individuals are compelled to put themselves in the center of their own life plans, and are free to make their own choices without being provided any traditional guidelines (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Another problem the returnees faced was and continues to be corruption. The returnees who are entrepreneurs had to deal with serious bureaucratic problems when they were trying to start up their business. The answer to all these problems is corruption. Almost all the entrepreneurs wanted to act according to the law, to pay the taxes, the bills, etc. But in Albania nobody paid taxes, at least not all the taxes. Instead, Albanian businessmen paid the government officials, responsible for tax collection or license approval, different amounts of money every time, according to the level of taxes they had to pay the state. By itself, this was not a problem. But the government officials demanded from everyone to bribe them, even by deliberately creating problems. This was the main difficulty that the new businessmen, who didn't know how to react to such demands, had to overcome.

By adding the problem of corruption to the above mentioned difficulties, such as the lack of running water, frequent power cuts, etc, it is understandable that to serve their clients the costs for the entrepreneurs were much higher (they had to buy big water deposits, water pumps, generators, etc).

“When I opened my beauty salon, I was very determined to act according to the law, and I was paying everything on time. But I learned that the owner of a shop nearby didn't pay anything. He was just bribing the government employees who came to audit him. As if it wasn't enough, these guys came to my saloon and fined me, although I had done everything according to the law. Sometimes this makes me furious, and at the same time disappointed, because this isn't nice. We were used to obey to law in Greece”. (Linda, 37)

Almost all the returnees share the same opinion about corruption. Corruption is present in every institution in Albania. Responsible for this are the politicians and the government.

“I don't know where I belong!” The emergence of double identity

According to Simmel (1972) a stranger is a person who lives in a society with characteristics uncommon to him or her. He or she feels like a foreigner because of the different nationality, religion, and language.

In the beginning of their life in Greece, the Albanian migrants shared this feeling. They were in a strange environment, surrounded by foreign people, very different from them, speaking a different and a very difficult language. But with the passage of time, they integrated in the Greek society. This strange and foreign environment gradually became familiar and intimate. Yet, a full integration was not achieved because of their relatively low status jobs and Greek xenophobia. These factors had significant implications on their psychology. Most of the migrants hid their national identity because of the bad reputation of Albanians in Greece.

“I was a teacher in Albania. In Greece I was a cleaning lady. In the beginning the lady where I worked treated me as a clueless idiot. I felt bad, but after I learned to speak Greek, she began to know me better and learned to respect me. After some years Greece became a part of me but again I missed my country.” (Teuta, 45)

The Albanian return migrants carry in themselves characteristics of two cultures. Berry's theory of acculturation (2003, 2006) seems to give a relatively good explanation about the strategy chosen by the migrants to integrate. They have maintained their ethnic identity, with some of its cultural characteristics, to which they attached some values of the Greek society. Upon their return in Albania, the returnees felt both native and foreigner. They couldn't fit easily within the Albanian society, because some of the old values of the Albanian traditional culture, such as honor, respect, loyalty, love, are not considered any more as such in modern Albania. The changes that they saw and experienced in this society made them realize that they don't belong here. But returning to Greece will not facilitate their effort to have a clear identity, because there they felt more Albanians, while in Albania they feel more Greeks.

“I felt like a foreigner. The environment and the people have changed a lot. Firstly I didn’t recognize Tirana. Not only Tirana, but even the people. I thought that here I would find a little psychological support from my relatives and friends but they have changed a lot. I don’t feel the same. Maybe I have changed, not them.” (Alfons, 40)

“I see Tirana and it has changed a lot. I don’t know the streets, in the beginning I couldn’t find my parents address. I know better the streets of Athens than of Tirana. I feel like a migrant here, because other new people live now in our block of flats, the people see me strange when I speak Albanian language or when I say thank you or when I ask them politely to not put the shoes at the public corridor because we can’t walk along.” (Giannis, 42)

The return migrants perceive themselves as “foreigners”, and some of them use even the word “migrant” to describe themselves in Albania. Feeling like foreigners in their homeland is due to the influences they had while living in Greece, on one hand, and the political, economic and social changes that happened in Albania during their absence, on the other.

“Do I have to migrate again?” Return migrants’ intentions

Albanians consider migration as a solution to their poverty. It has influenced the improvement of the living conditions of most Albanian households. In 2002 unemployment fell from 25% to 12.4%, and it continued to fall until 2008 (UN 2010). Despite the general improvement of its economy, Albania remains a poor country with growing inequalities between its citizens. Poverty seems to push people towards migration. With regards to return migrants, studies confirm their intention to re-emigrate, especially those that were deported, or are unemployed (Kilic *et al.* 2007; Germeji and Milo 2009).

Our research shows the same conclusions. The returnees are not satisfied with their staying in Albania, not only because of the general economic problems, but also because of personal issues, such as self-fulfillment within the Albanian society. They wish to live in a society characterized by the order, honesty, meritocracy, and safety. A society with such characteristics is neither the Albanian, nor the Greek one, but a more developed one, like the German, Swiss, American, Canadian and Australian societies. Hence, re-emigration seems like a possibility to escape again from the Albanian reality. One of the interviewees expressed her anxiety about the future of her children in Albania, where there is little opportunity for them to become successful. To her, this is a serious reason to re-emigrate to another more developed country in Western Europe.

“When I went to Greece my goal was to make some money and return to Albania so I could open my own business. We returned in 2002. After one year we went back to Athens. Then we returned again in 2006, because after the Olympic Games things started to be difficult. We settled in Tirana, where I start up my business. But again I think of going to another country, such as Germany, America. There is no future for my children here, as the things are”.

“Very often I think to migrate to another country Switzerland, Danmark, or England, Albania is not the place I wish to be. Or sometimes I say to my children to study hard so they can continue their studies elsewhere, and then to remain there, not to return back.” (Majlinda, 37)

A survey carried out in 2007 by the European Training Foundation (ETF) showed that, in the short term, migration will continue to play a significant role in Albania, since 44.2% of 18 to 40 year-olds interviewed were thinking of migrating, although only 17.8 % had the necessary social and economic capital to actually be able to live abroad.

The lack of work culture

Almost all the return migrants that we interviewed believe that people working in Albania do not have a work ethos. They clarified this by giving some examples from

their work experience in Greece. They were at work on time, worked hard, were honest, and didn't make conjectures about the earnings of their employees.

Further, working as a cleaning lady in Albania, or serving at restaurants, taking care of older people, etc, is associated with shame and humility. These types of professions are not preferred or appreciated by the Albanians, as they seem to have no importance, dignity and value. But this was not the case in Greece.

“When we first came here and opened the bar I told my husband not to hire a waitress. I have worked in Athens as a barwoman and as a waitress, so I could do that job. He agreed and everything was okay. But this was not okay for the public opinion here in Tirana. People began to wonder, and even asked my husband how he could accept his wife working as a waitress, serving other people. They can't understand that working with dignity is a value and not a shame”. (Mari, 39)

The returnees also think that the managers or administrators do not treat the workers properly. They often offend and threaten the workers of firing them, if they don't do a good job. But they don't give enough time to the workers to learn the work process.

“When I first went to Greece, people there helped us, and I found a job. I didn't know anything about that job but the afentiko [the owner] came near me and showed me patiently what to do and how to do it. He was very patient and never shouted at me. Here, the behavior of the manager is too harsh and he seems to go crazy when I make a mistake. Very often he fires women. Sometimes I don't have the desire to go to work. It's not only because of the behavior of the manager, but even the bad working conditions and the low salary”.

The return migrants who own small business are not satisfied with the performance of their employees. They are afraid to give the employees more responsibilities, because no one would work as they should. The employees don't show any interest at work, and sometimes they are more curious of learning about the earnings of the owners, rather than how to improve their work.

The Albanians share the belief that the “boss” shouldn't work, but rather sit and give orders, smoke or drink his coffee and supervise the employees. Giannis a 42 years old coffee shop owner explained his concern about this way of thinking.

“When we open the coffee shop, I decided to work alone and not hire anyone. We believe that no one can do the job better than us. So one day, I was cleaning the shop and a girl entered and asked me where is the boss of the shop. I answered that he was not there for the moment. Then she asked me again if I knew when he would return. Just as I was ready to reply, she answered herself and said: ‘what can you know? You are just a worker!’ and left. She returned after a while, and asked my wife, who had just entered, if she knew anything about the owner's schedule. My wife answered: ‘There he is’, by pointing at me. The girl said that I couldn't be the boss. I was just a cleaner. The boss doesn't work like this. There are many other similar cases. Sometimes I feel furious about their way of thinking here. It is so primitive.”

This mentality makes the returnees disappointed and pessimistic about the future of the country. Albania is already a country politically and economically unstable. Albanians are aware of this, but they do nothing to change it. The research of Mai and Paladini (2013), which focused on circular migration in Albania, showed the same results with regards to the work culture in the Albanian society, and its devaluation of certain professions.

Conclusions

Return migration in Albania is a recent phenomenon, which deserves more attention from the receiving and sending countries. The current study shows that the return migrants seem to have stuck between the Greek and the Albanian society. They have mixed feelings about their decision to return. Some of them think that, given the Greek financial crisis, they made the right choice, while others would have preferred to migrate from Greece to other countries.

Their return in Albania seems to be associated with positive consequences, such as better economic condition or higher labour status, as well as negative consequences on their psychology and identity. After spending some time in Albania they realized that they don't belong there, without however having an answer to the question. It is not by accident that they constantly make comparisons between the Greek and the Albanian society. The social networks in Greece, i.e., their friends and relatives, seemed to work when they were seeking for a job or any other kind of help. But not back home. The individualistic character of modern Albanian society is a big and unpleasant surprise. During their stay in Greece, they had a very romantic idea for their country, romantic in the sense of upholding values such as honesty, respect, solidarity, love, sincerity, and in general humanism. Now they have realized that these values have been replaced by hypocrisy, self-interest and corruption. In modern Albania people build relationships only on the basis of interest. The returnees understand the individualistic character of a modern society, but, due to the comparison with the Greek society, they do not justify the extent to which people are pursuing their own interest. The Greeks were in general more cooperative, respectful and eager to provide help to one another, even to the migrants, although the majority of the society was xenophobic.

The Albanians lack work ethos. They are not well organized, and although they act quickly and even creatively to solve immediate problems, the solutions do not take into consideration possible future consequences. The motto "live for the present" best describes their inability to provision adequately, or even their indifference towards, the consequences of their actions. According to the returnees, the lack of provision and long term planning is a characteristic of the Albanian government itself.

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