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From the village to the city

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MIGRATION IN POST-1990 ALBANIA **A Facilitator of Socio Demographic Change Triggered by** **Post-Communist Transformations**

“Albania is a laboratory to study international migration”

(Russell King, 2005)

ABSTRACT

The 17 years of transition which led Albania from a planned economy towards a free-market economy have changed the face of the country. Developments following the democratization process have resulted in dynamic socioeconomic and political transformations. These transformations have played a considerable role in changing Albanian demography and socioeconomic situation. Migration, internal and international, is the main reason for these social and demographic changes, with the end of political and economic isolation imposed by the communist regime contributing most to the great spatial mobility of the population. This is an explorative and descriptive paper on internal and international migration in Albania. This paper provides a greater insight into the central and developmental role of migration for Albania. Moreover it explores the chronology of migration triggered by the major economic and political developments in the historical, social and economic background in way to build up and to make sense of the contemporary migration in Albania, focusing primarily on the migratory flounder during almost an half century of the communist regime.

3.1 Introduction

Migration – the phenomenon that is at the heart of economic, social, and cultural change in Albania over the last decades. (King, 2005: 133)

No other country in Eastern and Central Europe like Albania has been affected to such an extent over such a short period of time from migration. (ETF, 2008)

Migration in Albania has been a dominating process of everyday life, shaping the social and economic situation of the country and of the population. (UNDP, 2000)

Migration is perhaps the most important political, social, and economic phenomenon in post-communist Albania. (Carletto et al. 2004: 4)

Such statements lead us to the question of why this phenomenon is of such importance in Albania.

‘The last piece of domino’, as communist Albania was called by the Western media, fell in December 1990 (Lami, 1999:1). In relation to other former communist countries in Eastern Europe, it took more time and effort for Albania to overcome what is generally accepted as one of the most repressive and centralized communist regimes in the world (Tachella, 2005). Over the last 17 years, Albania has experienced remarkable political, social and economic development in the transition from a closed, centralized economy to an open-market economy.

The transformation process occurred during a period of economic and political unrest and led to social and demographic changes accompanied by large flows of people within and out of the country. The process of migration, both internal and international, has increasingly been seen as involving economic, political and demographic changes as well as processes of urbanization and modernization. According to Mullan (2001), migration has dramatic social, cultural and economic consequences for individuals, families, communities, society, regions and the country as a whole. As such, migration (internal and international) has been one of the most dynamic features of the Albanian transition. The role of migration is reflected in a total population decrease, the massive urbanization of some areas and depopulation of others, increased levels of conflict in urban areas because of difficulties related to the integration of migrants, social and cultural transformation of the regions, changes in gender and age of the population and other dynamic changes (Doka, 2005).

Different sources suggest that around one million Albanians have moved temporarily or permanently across its borders since the beginning of the transition period (INSTAT, 2004; Barjaba, 2003; Labour Market Review of Albania, 2006). Moreover, the last census (2001) revealed that the urban population has markedly increased due to internal migration, from

33.5 percent in 1979 and 35.7 percent in 1989 to 42.1 percent in 2001 (INSTAT, 2002). According to LSMS (2005), the urban population has continued to grow in recent years. The internal migration flows are largely directed from the rural northern and southern regions towards the urban areas in the central region and the lowlands. The population of the capital (Tirana) alone is estimated to have risen from 200,000 in the early 1990s to approximately 800,000 in 2005 (IMF, 2005).

The aim of the present article is to analyse the migration process as, on the one hand, driven by post-communist transformations and, on the other, as the facilitator of socioeconomic and demographic developments in Albania during and after the 1990s. The main goal is to provide greater insight into the central role of migration in the transformation process. Firstly, we will try to understand the effect of the economic and political transformation on migration levels, patterns and directions. Secondly, we attempt to analyse the effect of migration on the further social and demographic transformation. In this regard, we raise two main questions: How has the transformation process in Albania post-1990s affected the levels and patterns of migration over time? What is the effect of migration on the social and demographic changes that followed the transformation process?

The article starts with a brief discussion of the main political and economic changes in the country following the demise of the communist regime. It continues with a presentation of the dynamics of internal and international migration in Albania, focusing on the importance of this phenomenon as a promoter of sociodemographic change. This is followed by a chronology of migration, which was triggered by the major economic and political developments during the transition period. Finally, the article closes with some insights with respect to the need for effective migration policies and further research on issues concerning migration, especially in the Albanian transformation context.

3.2 The context of the transformation

Lami (1999) has noted that following the demise of the communist regime: ‘Albanians have thrown down the walls, but have not built the bridges, and as it is known in the Balkans it is more difficult to construct than to demolish’ (p.1). As this statement suggests, it has not been an easy road for Albania during this difficult transformation period. The transition from a socialist society towards a democratic one is a process that implies different kinds of transformations and cannot be seen as a single process (Kok, 1999). Chains of transformations take place: a political transformation from communism to democracy, an economic transformation from a centralized economy to an open market, and many other social and cultural changes. Following the demise of communism, the political system and the economy were likely to experience major dynamic transformations, which would be expected to have a strong impact on the social and demographic reality.

- *Political transformation*

The end of the 1980s signaled the end of the communist regime in the Eastern bloc. However, Eastern Europe was not a homogeneous region and in the early 1990s, as the transformation took hold, the countries were affected differently (Kok, 1999). Because of the late demise of its communist regime, Albania started the transition process long after other centrally planned economies (Sadiraj, 1999). Albania also underwent a more problematic and difficult transition period compared with other former communist countries, as a consequence of its policy of isolation and self-reliance. The political, economic and social reforms implemented by the communist regime pushed the country towards total isolation, not only from Western developed countries but also from the communist bloc.¹⁵ For nearly five decades, Albania experienced total centralization, with no liberalizing reforms, a unique case among the former communist countries. By the end of the 1980s, economic and political conditions had further deteriorated, until a total collapse in 1990 produced an urgent need for radical political and economic change, which inevitably arrived. Following 1990, the period of democratic transformation occurring across Eastern Europe also began in Albania, simultaneously introducing a pluralist democracy and a market economy.

- *Economic transformation*

The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed one of the largest economic experiments undertaken thus far, with former communist countries attempting to transform their countries from centrally planned to market-based economies (Castaldo et al. 2005). Since 1990, Albania, together with other Eastern European countries, has undergone significant political and economic transformation towards a democratic society with an open market, private ownership and free competition. Important reforms have been implemented, such as price and trade liberalization, the privatization of state-owned enterprises in strategic sectors, and private sector development. However, these economic reforms were not gradual, with the transformations mainly starting at the 'zero' level,¹⁶ which made it very difficult for Albania to adopt the new rules of the open-market (Doka, 2005).¹⁷

Nevertheless, following the first chaotic years, the economy of the country began to stabilize and show a trend towards growth. According to the IMF (2006), after undertaking many structural reforms, Albania was one of the fastest growing transition economies. For the period 1998–2004, the average annual real GDP grew by 7.5 percent (IMF, 2006). Moreover, the World Bank report (2006)¹⁸ showed that poverty rates in Albania dropped more dramatically than in any other country in the Western Balkans in the previous years. On the

¹⁵ Albania first broke away from Yugoslavia in 1948, then from the Soviet Union in 1961 and finally from China in 1977, becoming a unique case of self-isolation.

¹⁶ According to Doka (2005), after the changes of the 1990s, economic development tended to start from a 'zero' level, meaning that all the previous communist structures were dismantled.

¹⁷ The main economic developments are presented in more detail in following sections.

¹⁸ Western Balkans Programmatic Poverty Assessment Progressive Review 2001–2005, cited by the Albania Urban Sector Policy Analyses.

basis of these economic trends there was hope that Albania had started on the difficult road towards Europe.

The progress achieved in relation to politics and economics during the transition did not spread homogeneously across the country, with significant regional disparities appearing. For instance, the disaggregated result of the HDI (2002) (Human Development Index) in Albania shows substantial differences in socioeconomic development between the various regions of the country and between various districts within the same region. Poverty is at a higher level in the rural areas and disproportionately concentrated in the remote northeastern part of Albania (INSTAT and World Bank, 2003).¹⁹ After 1990, this disproportionate development influenced most of the social and demographic changes in the country.

- *Socio-demographic transformation*

For demographers it is a well-known phenomenon that political and economic changes affect the social and demographic behaviour of the population (Kupiszewski et al. 1994). At the beginning of the 1990s, when Albania started the parallel economic and political transformation towards democracy it was expected that the combination of these transformations would also bring dynamic social and demographic changes, shaping the behaviour of individuals.

According to Sjöberg and Tammaru (1999), one of the many areas where the demise of central planning and the one-party rule of the former communist regimes was expected to make a difference was migration (p. 821). The demise of the communist regime was anticipated to be accompanied by mass migration given that migration has been for so long banned (Layard et al. 1992).

3.2.1 Mass migration as a facilitator of demographic transformation in Albanian society after the 1990s

Cole and Filatotchev (1992) argue that with the demise of central planning, migration patterns of a different character and extent are likely to result as these economies move towards the open market. Furthermore, Sjöberg and Tammaru (1999) have noted that economic restructuring, transformations in the housing market and the elimination of the administrative control during the communist regime are expected to create different set of opportunities and constrains for the potential migrant (p. 821).

The mass migration anticipated in some early studies on the transition process did not follow the same trends and levels throughout all post-communist countries. According to Castaldo (2005), most of the countries in Eastern Europe generally experienced modest population mobility in comparison to the original expectations. From the data available, Albania proved to be an exception within the former communist bloc, experiencing one of the

¹⁹ According to INSTAT and the World Bank (2003), 21 percent of the poorest group of the population was concentrated in the northeast of Albania, while only 12 percent of the total population lived in the region.

greatest migration flows of the last two decades in Europe (Carletto et al. 2004). The freedom of movement for Albanians was granted in the summer of 1990 (UNDP, 2002; Aliaj et al. 2003). According to UNDP (2002), 'this act symbolically may be compared to opening the dike of a huge lake without having made plans or taken any measures to channel the deluge of water accumulated in the lake in the right direction to avoid mass flooding'(p. 84).

The most relevant context in which to consider the mass migration of Albanians is the difficult economic conditions and unstable political situation accompanying the transformation from a socialist society to a democratic one. The astonishing levels of migration can also be seen as a response of the population to the strict isolationist policy and strong administrative control over migration during the communist period. Since the 1990s, mass migration has constituted one of the most important factors affecting and facilitating social and demographic developments in the country.

- *The theoretical background: migration decision process, macro and micro influences*

The theoretical discussion below provides a basis for understanding the astonishing migration levels triggered by the transformation and the central role of migration as a facilitator of demographic and social change.

1. Neoclassical migration theory – push and pull factors

According to the neoclassical approach, migration is self-correcting because it alters the supply and demand of labour at both the origin and the destination. The key driving variables of the neoclassical approach are wage and unemployment levels. As such, the decision to migrate and the process of migration are triggered by a set of push and pull factors. According to Lee (1966), the push and pull factors are associated with the area of origin, the area of destination, intervening obstacles and personal factors (Chapter 6 and 7). According to his/her demographic characteristics and economic conditions, the potential migrant perceives the set of push and pull factors at both origin and destination differently. Furthermore, between origin and destination there are a set of intervening obstacles, which may facilitate or retard the decision to migrate (Chapter 9).

Firstly, the dynamic transformations during the transition period, a difficult economic and political situation in the country in general and in some regions in particular, together with the social and demographic characteristics of the population (young age groups, high unemployment rates) constituted the push factors for the prospective migrants. According to INSTAT (1998, 2001, 2002), unemployment rates in Albania decreased in recent years compared with the first years of transition, from over 25 percent in 1993 to 14.4 percent in 2004. Nevertheless, these rates are much higher than levels in EU countries. The situation is even worse in some regions, such as Has, Kurbin and Pukë, where the unemployment rate is more than 40 percent (HDPC, 2002). In fact, these regions have lost a large proportion of

their population due to migration. As such, high unemployment rates constitute one of the main push factors in internal and international migration in Albania.

Secondly, better economic development in some regions, along with greater employment opportunities and higher wages constitute the pull factors (Chapter 6 and 7). In this respect, within the country, Tirana offers a greater range of opportunities in terms of labour market and higher wages, making it the most attractive region for internal migrants (Chapter 5). International migration is triggered by better wages, better living conditions and greater opportunities available in Western countries. These push and pull factors have shaped the migration patterns we have observed since the 1990s. Furthermore, migration patterns and directions have affected the demographic and social evolution of the regions in particular and the country in general.

2. A structural individualistic approach and a behavioural model

The structural individualistic approach proposed by Coleman (1990) explains the migration processes at the macro, societal level by analysing individual actions. This theory thus uses a micro-macro model to explain the migration decision and the destinations chosen. Depending on the evaluation of the new opportunities that accompany the transformation process, people decide whether to migrate or not.

Gardner (1981) has introduced an alternative behavioural model which presents the macro-level influences on the migration decision process. This model of the migration process includes the concept of stress on the one hand, which is seen as the source of the needs and expectations of the household, and the role of the environment on the other (Boyle et al. 1998). This model, along with the structural individualistic approach, provides a more complete theoretical explanation of the migration decision process and its patterns (Chapter 6). In Albania after the 1990s, the changes in the labour and housing markets, the changes in the structure of the economy and other social developments were expected to affect the individual's decision to migrate, shaping migration patterns and directions. Moreover, the demographic and social characteristics of the individuals played an important role in the decision to migrate and the destination choice. As such, international migration mainly involved those of working age and the male population, while those who migrated within the country are mainly female and from younger age groups (INSTAT, 2001) (Chapter 7 and 9).

3. New economics of migration

In the social network literature, the nuclear family perspective is confronted with the collective extended family perspective (Chapter 7). The former treats migration as a selective process. Those who migrate are considered non-conformist and critical of the status quo in their area of origin (INSTAT, 2001). According to the collective approach, migration involves the construction of dispersed livelihood systems that reduce vulnerability. In either case, migration

creates new forms of social capital, both in the destination area and across space (Van der Geest, 2003).

In the Albanian context, family and kinship networks and connections are very important factors that determine the decision to migrate and the destination choice (Vullnetari, 2007). Moreover, these connections create what is known in the literature as chain migration and social networks in the destination choice (Chapter 5, 6 and 7). In the Albanian context, we find a strong relationship between internal and international migration. As a result of the strong family ties in Albania, the money earned through international migration and sent back as remittances, finances the secondary process of internal migration by other family members (Chapter 9). The family may also be reunited in cases of return emigration or as a result of further international migration. In short, family and social networks create chain migration, within the country or abroad, while shaping migration directions and patterns (Chapter 9).

- *Effects of migration on sociodemographic changes*

From a demographic point of view, internal and international migration, firstly, in absolute terms, accounts for the numerical increase or decrease of the total population and, secondly, shows the degree of change in the territorial distribution of the population during a certain period (INSTAT, 2001). Given the magnitude of migration flows in Albania, we can see this process as necessary for the socioeconomic evolution of the regions and of the country in general, as well as a facilitator of sociodemographic change related to urbanization, sociocultural transformation, changes in the age and gender structure of the population and educational levels, amongst other developments.

Following the 1990s, in addition to the economic and political reforms, many other social and demographic reforms were introduced, finally abolishing the stringent control and restrictive policies that limited urbanization and people's freedom of movement for several decades. Based on new opportunities and desires, people could freely choose their place of residence within the country or move abroad. During this period, migration was a spontaneous phenomenon. There were no migration policies to orient and control the migration level and direction. Under these circumstances, migration played a central role in shaping the social and demographic development of the regions and of the country as a whole. Below, we will discuss the effects of the migration process.

- *Effects of international migration*

The mass emigration of Albanians since the 1990s has had positive and negative consequences with respect to socioeconomic and demographic developments in the country.

a) Positive consequences

1. One of the most positive effects of emigration is the income generated through remittances, in the form of financial and material goods that the emigrants send back home. The

remittances of emigrants have an impressive effect on economic performance as well as improving the quality of life for much of the population. The annual inflow of remittances in Albania is estimated to be more than 14 percent of the countries' GDP (World Bank, 2006), ranking Albania among the top 20 remittance recipient countries in the world (World Bank, 2007.a)

2. In addition to the financial benefits, many emigrants have gained professional and intellectual skills through the work they undertake abroad and the additional education they may have received (Levitt, 1998). According to Doka (2005), these new skills and further education are used and applied within different sectors of the economy in the case of returning migrants.

3. Emigration also has a positive effect on the labour market. A high percentage of the emigrants are of working age (Bërxfholi et al. 2005). The emigration of this age group had an important effect in relation to lowering unemployment rates in Albania. Moreover, the remittances have created new labour-market opportunities for the population. The revenue from emigration is often used to establish small and medium-sized enterprises and businesses, employing more people and further lowering unemployment rates. Emigrants as such constitute a major potential source of labour for a growing Albanian economy.²⁰

b) Negative Consequences

1. According to INSTAT (2004), in the period 1989 to 2001, the total population of Albania decreased by 6.5 percent. According to different estimations, around one million people emigrated during this period, the main reason for the total population decrease. Population censuses since 1945 have charted the evolution of demographic change over time. During the communist regime, pronatalist attitudes, the prohibition of emigration and other population-related policies, led to the continuous growth of the population – from 1.1 million in the 1945 census to 1.4 million in 1959, to 2 million in 1969, 2.6 million in 1979 and 3.2 million in 1989 (see chapter 2).²¹ Following the democratization processes of the 1990s, the last census (2001) shows a general decrease in the total population, from 3.2 million (1989) to 3 million (2001), a drop of 6.3 percent (Bërxfholi et al. 2003).

2. In addition to the absolute decrease in the population, the last census shows a marked drop in population in the rural northeast of the country and in some areas in the remote south (INSTAT, 2001). The loss of the population from these regions can be attributed to international and internal migration to more attractive and developed regions. The population decrease in the southern parts of Albania is attributed mainly to international migration to Greece, while the population decrease in the northeast is attributed mainly to

²⁰ To quote the Labour Market review for Albania: 'There is some evidence that returning migrants are already making a valuable contribution: around a third of the owner-operators of small businesses in Tirana interviewed in a recent study had work experience from abroad, and some 68 percent of these considered their foreign experience to be very useful for their business'.

²¹ Data collected from various statistical yearbooks: 1950, 1958, 1966, 1970, 1989, 1999 and 2001, as well as census found in the general state archives.

internal migration towards the central region (INSTAT, 2001; Çaro, 2005). However, in recent years there has been an increase in the number of internal migrants from the southern regions, as well as an increase in the number of international migrants from the north (King, 2005).

3. One of the main negative effects of emigration is what is known as ‘brain and skill drain’. Many intellectuals have left the country because of the difficult economic and political conditions and the better opportunities in Western Europe or the US and Canada. A report on the ‘brain drain’ from Central and Eastern Europe suggests that 38.5 percent of Albanian intellectuals have emigrated, while the average for other Eastern European countries is 8.6 percent. According to Gëdeshi et al. (1999), more than 45 percent of researchers and intellectuals from universities and research institutes in the country have emigrated.

4. Moreover, emigration is an age and gender-related process, involving the most active age groups of the population. Misja (1998) points out that emigrants are very young; more than 50 percent being in the 20–29 year-old age group, while Doka (2005) estimates that 70 percent of emigrants are male.

5. Emigration has an individual character. The first to move is usually the head of the family (perhaps later followed other family members) (King and Vullnetari, 2003). This form of emigration generates many other social problems within the family, household, community and society. As such, there is a noticeable increase in divorce rates, while the rate of marriage has decreased (Doka, 2005).

- *Effects of internal migration*

During the communist period, migration directions and levels were very much controlled and directed by the state (see chapter 2). As mentioned above, the removal of barriers to the free movement of people in Albania in the early 1990s was accompanied by a huge wave of migration. Following the 1990s, migration has been characterized by the absence of migration policy. Consequently, the redistribution of the population reflects spontaneous trends and directions. The main direction of internal migration in Albania since 1989 has been from rural to urban areas and from northern to central regions. The main consequences of internal migration are presented below.

1. One of the main effects of internal migration is the depopulation of some areas and the over-populating of others. According to several sources and data sets (INSTAT, 2002, 2003, 2004; LSMS, 2002, 2003, 2005), the most serious population loss is observed in the rural north, as well as in the rural south, particularly from villages high in the mountains. The regions that have gained most in terms of total population are the internal lowlands such as Tirana, Durrës and Elbasan. Between 1998 and 2002, the rural population fell by 15 percent (INSTAT, 2004), while urban areas, especially Tirana, grew disproportionately. This figure is in contrast to the previous census in 1989, when the rural population actually increased by 20 percent (INSTAT, 2004). These levels of urbanization are the result of rural-urban migration, given the fact that the fertility rates are much higher in the rural areas than the urban areas

(Bërxfholi, 2005). The massive migration towards urban areas has promoted chaotic and disproportionate development in these areas (UNDP, 2000), with the urban population continuing to rise in recent years. According to various estimates, more people now live in urban areas than in rural regions (INSTAT, 2004; UNDP, 2002).

2. As an inevitable consequence of internal migration, a sociocultural transformation has begun in Albania. Different cultural traditions that were rooted locally are now being brought to different areas of the country, where they are placed in dynamic confrontation (UNDP, 2000). The original identity of urban areas has often changed considerably due to the different sociocultural norms and values introduced by the migrants (Dervishi, 2001). Fuga et al. (1998) points out that the urban areas continue to face a massive turnover of the population. According to UNDP (2000), it seems difficult for urban residents to accept the newcomers, while the migrants themselves may feel estranged and excluded. This situation often provokes discrimination and aggression between residents and migrants.

3. Internal migration involves the most educated and skilled part of the population from the uplands of the north and south of the country. Those leaving are of active age and better educated. The 2001 census found that in the towns and cities 46 percent of individuals had an upper-secondary or higher education qualification, compared with only 16 percent in rural areas. In 1989, this category accounted for 22 percent in rural areas and 50 percent in urban areas (INSTAT, 2001). Between these two censuses, the rural areas lost 41 percent of their highly qualified individuals, while in urban areas their numbers increased by 9 percent (INSTAT, 2001). The more highly educated and better skilled migrants move towards developed urban areas with a greater range of opportunities. As such, migration facilitates a better distribution of human capital with respect to economic opportunities and conditions.

4. Another important impact of internal migration is the abandonment of arable land and rural communities, with its associated economic and ecological problems, such as the collapse of agriculture and the degradation of land (Bërxfholi et al. 2005). The abandonment of these regions also has social effects. Given the Albanian family ties and cultural context, King (2005) and Vullnetari and King (2008) argue that the abandonment of rural land is very difficult for the older generation (see chapter 6) and remittances from abroad only to some extent compensate for what he calls “cross-generational family break-up”.

3.3 Migration chronology as shaped by post-communist developments

Albania embarked on a path towards a democratic and open society, leaving behind a period of repressive isolation applied during the communist regime before the 1990s. Admittedly, some limited economic and political reforms aimed at liberalization had been introduced by the end of 1980s.²² However, these reforms were partial and not radical or coherent, resulting in the breakdown of the communist regime and an economic crisis by the beginning of the

²² According to Banja (1990), between 1985–1990 some attempts to decentralize decision-making occurred. These macroeconomic reforms aimed to decentralize and liberalize the market.

1990s. A tense political situation emerged, with growing discontent in the population leading to revolt.

The vicissitudes of the years of transition that followed were difficult and challenging. The transition was hindered by demonstrations against the communist regime in 1990–1991, liberalization reforms in 1993–1996, the crisis of the pyramid schemes in 1997, the Kosovo crisis in 1999 and the frequent conflicts between the various political factions. Due to these very specific conditions, the transition period in Albania had distinct effects on the social, economic, demographic and urban development of the country. As suggested above, the dimensions, intensity, direction and motives behind the migration process were determined by the transformation occurring in Albania during this time (INSTAT, 2004).

In this section, we will present a detailed migration chronology as shaped by the economic and political transformation occurring during the period. This migration chronology draws widely on the literature concerning Albanian migration and is strongly supported by the existing data (e.g. Pastore, 1999; King, 2005; King and Vullnetari, 2003; Vullnetari 2007; INSTAT, 2001; UNDP, 2000; Barjaba, 2003; Doka, 2005) In addition, we want to provide more insight into the role of the economic and political transformation in shaping the migration chronology. Figure 3.1 shows the main destinations of Albanian international migrants, from 1990 to 2001 (Bërxfholi at al. 2003).

- *1990: Demise of the communist regime – open borders after 45 years of extreme isolation*

At the beginning of the 1990s, Albania was experiencing a transition from a communist regime to the difficult beginnings of an open-market economy. While economic indicators and political events were changing dramatically, for the first time in almost five decades Albanians were free to move. The collapse of communism was the result, amongst other events, of the people's great dissatisfaction with the regime. For 45 years, the population was obliged to live under a policy of total isolation, suffering political oppression and coping with extremely difficult economic conditions. In the tense period following the liberalization of passports in June 1990, the first political exodus, known as the 'embassy phenomenon', took place (Doka, 2005). In a political exodus which was the first real shock to communism, more than 5,000 people sought asylum behind the walls of Western embassies, wishing to find better living conditions and reacting against the communist regime (Doka, 2005). Without a doubt, the event marked the beginning of the end of communism and was generally seen as the people's response to the harsh conditions. The asylum seekers were later allowed to enter their countries of choice, mainly Germany, France and Italy, and according to Vullnetari (2007), this was the first wave of emigration, which created the basis for chain migration to Western Europe. The result was a continuous flow of people, mainly towards the closest countries, Italy and Greece. The data for this period is not accurate because of the difficulties of keeping records; however, on the basis of estimates of international migration we can say that approximately 20,000 Albanians left the country in 1990 (Barjaba, 2003).

- *1991: First democratic election – mass migration to Italy and Greece*

At the beginning of 1991, the general political and economic situation was approaching a genuine crisis (Pashko, 1993). Finally, in March 1991, the first democratic and pluralist election was held. Muço (1997) points out the importance of this moment as the first phase of economic reform. Moreover, he argues that these reforms were accompanied by controversies, political instability and confusion. The victory of the former Party of Labour in the first democratic elections was followed by massive opposition, which spread throughout the country and resulted in widespread strikes, especially in Tirana. Under these conditions, the economy began to collapse and the political situation became very tense. The general macroeconomic achievements to that point were being reversed. According to the IMF economic review for Albania (1994), output decreased by 50 percent in 1992 compared with the end of 1990, while external debt reached 30 percent of GDP. Inflation was increasing sharply at 15 percent a month by the beginning of 1992 (IMF, 1994). Moreover, the unemployment rate was continuously growing; the level of criminality was increasing, as was the feeling of insecurity.

The emerging situation created the push factors for a second extraordinary wave of emigration. In March 1991, more than 25,000 people migrated towards southern Italy (Barjaba, 2003). Emigrants attempted to reach Italy and Greece by any means, risking their lives in long sea voyages in inappropriate, overcrowded boats or walking long distances over dangerous trails (King, 2003). In four weeks between May and June 1991, more than 100,000 people crossed the Albanian border, with 76 percent heading to Greece and 24 percent to Italy (Bërxfholi and Doka, 1996).

While the first waves of emigration were generally accepted by the foreign destination countries, with the migrants being granted refugee status, after the democratic election and the general economic political changes, a process of repatriation began (Vullnetari, 2007). Albanian migrants were no longer accepted as refugees, which exacerbated illegal migration, especially to Greece and Italy. Nonetheless, it is estimated that 300,000 people emigrated from Albania between 1991 and 1992 (Bërxfholi and Doka, 1996; Carletto et al. 2006). According to different sources,²³ during 1991–1992 around 20,000 people emigrated every month, resulting in a 9 percent decrease in the population by the end of 1992 compared with 1989.

Moreover, there is further evidence of massive levels of emigration from the parliamentary electoral rolls from 1991 and 1992 (Doka, 2005). These show that many districts, and the country as a whole, lost a considerable proportion of their population during this period. The loss of population in many districts of the country was the result of mass emigration, as internal migration was not a great concern at the time (Heller et al. 2005). The southeastern region experienced the greatest loss of population due to its close proximity to Greece, while the north shows a moderate decrease in the population as a result of internal migration, mainly towards such centres as Tirana, Durrës and Lezhë (Doka, 2005).

²³ See for example, INSTAT (2001), Doka (2005) and Misja (1998).

During this period, to a certain extent internal migration compensated for the population loss in some regions (Bërxfholi and Doka, 1996; Heller et al. 2005). However, internal movement was characterized by a lack of organization and appropriate policy. As such, internal migration was accompanied by a massive, chaotic and disproportionate development of the urban zones and the abandonment of rural areas. This tendency would be reinforced in the future (Heller et al. 2005).

- *1993–1996: Economic growth and political stability – steady emigration rates and rising internal migration*

Following the chaos and difficulties of the first years, by the end of 1992, the government implemented serious economic reforms. The former Party of Labour resigned under pressure from widespread strikes and popular opposition. However, the coalition government which then came to power could not succeed with its macroeconomic reforms and after the Democratic Party withdrew from the coalition, new elections were held on 22 March 1992.

The Democratic Party won the elections and immediately launched very ambitious economic and social reforms. The programme implemented by the new government was supported financially by the World Bank, the IMF and the European Community (IMF, 1994). In addition, Albania received additional financial aid from countries such as Italy, Greece, Germany and the United States. The result was a period of high, steady economic growth. Inflation decreased from 237 percent in 1992 to 31 percent by the end of 1993, 16 percent in 1994 and only 5 percent in 1995 (e.g. IMF, 1994; 1996; INSTAT, 1998; Muço, 1997).

Without a doubt the remittances sent by emigrants played an important role in the economic stabilization of Albania during this period. According to different sources, remittances were the main source of financial aid to the Albanian economy at this time. Korovilas (1999) argues that by the mid-1990s an estimated 700 million dollars per month was being sent back home, one quarter of the country's GDP.

With the economy of the country more stable, internal migration rates started to increase. The main movements were towards the capital and the coastal and central regions from the northeast. This increase in internal migration was also influenced by the remittances from emigrants, as international migration began to finance internal migration, providing remaining family members with the financial means to move towards regions in the country offering better economic and geographical conditions and opportunities. As mentioned above, King (2003) argues that in the Albanian context international migration was usually a first step within a family and was followed by the internal migration of other family members and a possible later reunion of the family in Albania.

- *1997: The collapse of pyramid schemes²⁴ – new waves of exodus*

The lack of a developed banking system ‘forced’ many people, especially emigrants, to invest their money in so-called pyramid investment schemes (Korovilas, 1999). The maximum value of the investment in the pyramid schemes reached to almost half of the countries’ GDP (Jarvis, 2000). Around two-thirds of the Albanians put in their money in these financial schemes (Jarvis, 2000). The pyramid schemas were characterized by very high rates of interest becoming quickly an attractive source of “easy” money. Are countless the instances when people invested everything they possessed (house, land, savings, remittances) in these schemas. Remittances were the main source of investment in the pyramid schemes, with the emigrants sending increasing amounts to invest (Jarvis, 2000).

The pyramid schemes collapsed in early 1997. The fell of the pyramid schemas was accompanied by anarchy and chaos, which lead the country toward turmoil and almost a civil war (the consequences of which are still present nowadays). The economic and political development achieved to that point was severely undermined and Albania descended into total anarchy.²⁵ The dramatic situation during this period triggered a massive new wave of emigration, again mainly to Italy and Greece. Once more thousands of Albanians were on the move, either by boat towards Italy or by land towards Greece (King, 2003).

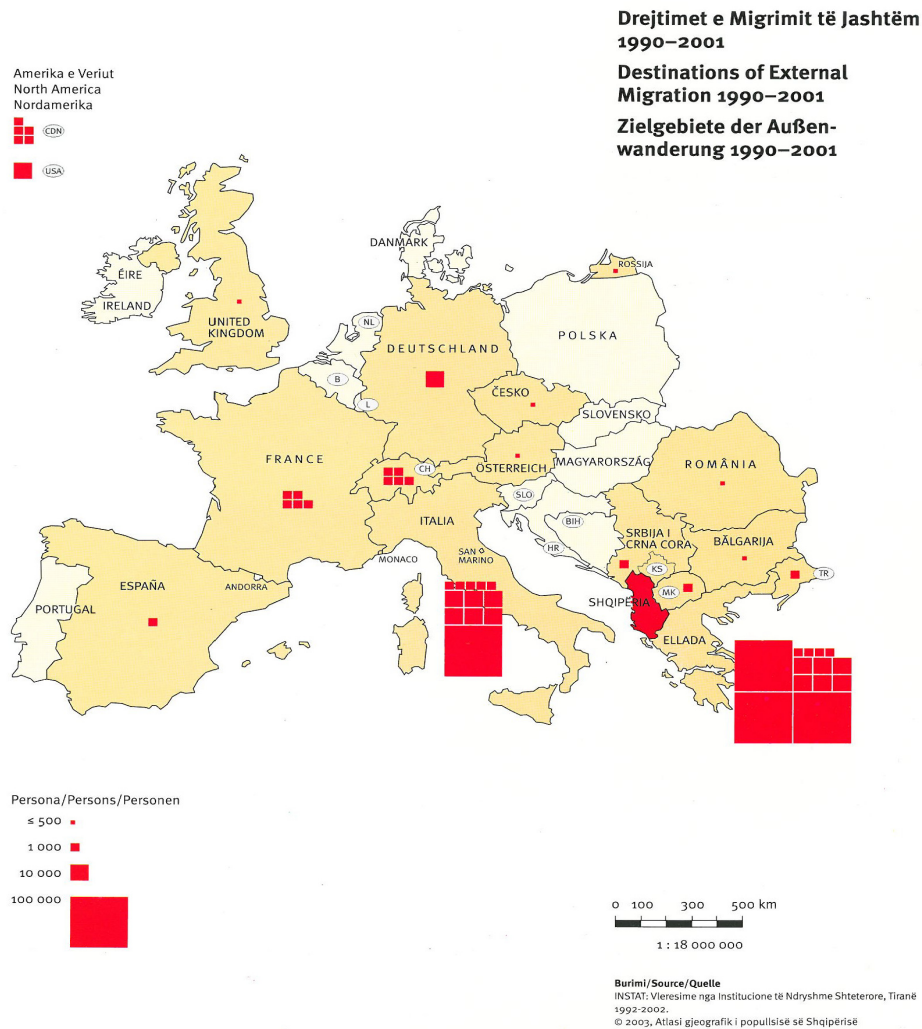
- *1999: Kosovo crisis – from a country of emigration to a country of immigration*

Following the collapse of the pyramid schemes, despite the dramatic consequences for the country and its population, the economy recovered rapidly and the GDP was growing remarkably, 12 percent in 1998 (Jarvis, 2000). Though still a fragile society trying to come to terms with its difficult past, Albania suddenly found itself converted into a destination country for immigration. In 1999, the Kosovo crisis produced more than 500,000 Kosovo refugees who moved towards Albania and while there are close cultural and ethnic ties between both countries, including sharing the same language, in reality this exodus placed enormous pressure on the economy of the country (Vullnetari, 2007). With many Kosovo refugees using Albania as a transit point for migration to other Western countries, many Albanians from the north joined the refugees and also sought asylum (King, 2005).

²⁴ The pyramid schemes involved informal financial institutions in which people invested their money and received very high rates in return. Albania’s formal financial system was rudimentary. After the transition there were few private banks and with the banks unable to satisfy private sector demand for credit, an informal credit market based on family ties and financed by remittances grew up (Jarvis, 2002).

²⁵ By March 1997, large parts of the country, especially the south, were no longer under government control. Weapon depots were seized from the authorities and more than 1 million weapons came into the hands of the people. During this period, a new wave of uncontrolled emigration began.

Figure 3.1 Destinations of international migration 1990-2001



Source: Bërxholi et al. 2003

- 2000–2007: Towards a stable economic and political situation - controlled emigration and continued urbanization

Following 2000, with the Kosovo crisis over, the economic conditions and political situation started to stabilize. The data suggests that international migration since 2000, and especially since 2002, has been steady, with no observable peaks of mass migration (Doka, 2005). Nevertheless, Albanian politics and the economy continue to be generally dominated by corruption, the mismanagement of public funds and poor economic planning (Vullnetari, 2007). These conditions have produced ongoing regional disparities and polarization of the country, leading to better economic development in some regions and profound poverty in others.

During this period, the central region, mainly Tirana being the most developed region/city in the country, has continuously attracted more people. The urban population in this region has increased by 45 percent since 1990 (Heller et al. 2005; Doka, 2005). The rapid growth of Tirana continued at the same pace and in 2008 it was estimated to be the residence of more than one-third of Albania's population. According to further estimates, internal migration is expected to continue to follow existing trends, which means a massive urbanization of some areas and the depopulation of others. Albania remains a predominantly rural country, although there are now some who assert the opposite. It is a fact that internal migration patterns are dominated and will continue to be dominated by large rural-urban flows. This continuing trend will soon lead to an urban population that is larger in size than the rural population.

3.4 Conclusions

The 17 years of transition which led Albania from a planned economy towards a free-market economy have changed the face of the country. Developments following the democratization process have resulted in dynamic socioeconomic and political transformations. These transformations have played a considerable role in changing Albanian demography as, following the demise of the communist regime, Albania experienced one of the most spectacular migration waves in European history, with the economic and political situation changing rapidly. The demographic changes are expressed in a decrease in the total population, a slowing down of natural increase, a chaotic and massive increase in the population in cities, an increased concentration of the population in the central and western parts of the country and the abandonment of the remote northeast. Migration, internal and international, is the main reason for these social and demographic changes, with the end of political and economic isolation imposed by the communist regime contributing most to the great spatial mobility of the population.

The primary aim of this article was to develop an understanding of the migration levels and trends as embedded in period of transition and triggered by the political and economic transformation. Furthermore, the effect of migration, internal and international, on social and demographic changes was examined. The data and literature confirm that the mass migration following the transition period was determined by the political and economic developments, and became a facilitator of social and demographic changes.

Firstly, the chronology of migration revealed that alternate massive and more stabilized migration trends followed the path of economic and political transformation and development. As such, periods of political and economic unrest were accompanied by large flows of people from the country. During a period of economic growth and political tranquility, the migration trend tends to be relatively stable. While emigration is affected mainly by economic crises, high levels of poverty and unstable political situations; internal migration is related more to economic development and growth that drives migrants towards regions which are better off.

Secondly, the migration chronology suggests that internal migration occurred as a second step, following a wave of emigration. It was revealed that international migration is seen as a way to fund internal movements through remittances sent home, creating the financial opportunity for families to undertake internal migration. Furthermore, political stability and economic growth, especially in certain regions, shape internal migration patterns and directions.

Thirdly, we have also seen the significant impact of migration on social and demographic change in Albania. Migration, in its trends, intensity and selective character plays a central role in the demographic transformation of the society. This impact has both positive and negative aspects. The decrease in the total population and its regional redistribution are the main changes directly attributable to mass emigration and internal movements. Furthermore, the effects of the remittances, the selectivity of migration in terms of age, gender and educational level, the abandonment of peripheral rural regions, the massive urbanization of other areas, the sociocultural transformation of society and regions, such as the abandonment of older generations, the increase in divorce rates, as well as the continued cultural confrontation, are some of the sociodemographic elements and consequences of mass migration.

Further research is needed to explore the significance of the relationship between socioeconomic development and political transformation with respect to the migration phenomenon. However, we believe that the current article provides some insights into and enhances our understanding of the complex relationship between migration and the transformation processes that are still going on in Albania. In particular, this article suggests that to control mass migration there is first a need for a stable political environment and more homogeneous economic development across the country. Moreover, given the intensity and magnitude of migration flows, it is important to control its negative impact on socioeconomic and demographic variables.

Migration during this period (internal as well as international) was chaotic and not regulated by migration policy. Albania needs to adopt and implement effective migration policies. As King and Vullnetari (2003) suggest it is important to understand how to benefit from the positive effects of migration and minimize the costs and the risks. To reap the benefits, there is a need to improve actual migration policy, to implement new initiatives and to develop collaboration between national and international policies.

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