

## Albanian-speaking migration, mid-19th century to present

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In the past two decades Albania and the former Yugoslavia have become associated with some of Europe's most dramatic emigration movements. During the four decades of the communist regime, the Republic of Albania was a blind spot in the imagination of Europe and the world. It was brought back into the collective consciousness in 1991 when media all over the world showed dramatic pictures of impoverished and desperate men arriving in overcrowded ships in southern Italy: Albania had its "boat people." In addition, Albanian populations living in the former Yugoslavia, particularly Kosovo-Albanians, gained a world audience in 1998 when tens of thousands of refugees arrived not only in Europe, but also in Albania and other neighboring countries, after the outbreak of open war in Kosovo. However, migration in this world region cannot be reduced simply to such key moments; a historical perspective reveals that migration has been a constitutional aspect of the Balkans for a long time.

### Historical perspective

Writing the history of Albanian migration requires a narrative from the perspective of the 21st century – after history has been interpreted by a diverse range of actors and *after* political nationalism took hold. What today is understood as "being Albanian" has changed throughout the centuries, and research tells us that the idea of "Albanians" with their own culture and tradition is not something already existing a priori, but is the result of social processes linked to ethnonational boundary-making. It was only in the second half of the 19th century, in the context of the disintegrating Ottoman empire and in parallel with other

Balkan states, that political and cultural moves peaked in consolidating an Albanian national consciousness among people highly divided by class, strong language dialects, and religion (Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Muslim) later demanding their own independent state (Vickers 2011). However, historical sources depict early migration movements of people considering themselves to be Albanians from as early as the 15th century. An important mass departure that still plays a prominent role in the collective memory of Albanians took place after the death of Gjergj Kastrioti – the late Albanian national hero known as Skanderbeg – who fought for 25 years against the Ottoman occupation.

After his death in 1468, Albanian lands fell to the Ottomans, resulting in significant departures of the inhabitants, reaching a climax in 1480 (Barjaba et al. 1992). Most of these emigrants headed to regions that were not occupied by the Ottomans, particularly to Dalmatia and Greece; however, the greater part of the refugees settled in southern Italy, in Calabria and Sicily, where they became known as *Arbëreshs*. While in other places Albanians assimilated, the *Arbëresh* in southern Italy maintained their group boundaries over a long time, even to the present day, to some extent (Hall 1994). Many of them immigrated later to the United States as part of the large-scale transatlantic emigration from Italy during the years 1880–1914 (Pollo et al. 1974).

During the five centuries of Ottoman rule other types of migration took place, often within the empire: farmers migrated seasonally in order to cope with economic shortages; insurgent Albanians were deported, often to Istanbul, while others rose to occupy key positions in the Ottoman empire's military and

administrative ranks (Barjaba et al. 1992). One of the direct outcomes of these movements was a steady increase of the Albanian population in Kosovo and Macedonia up to the end of the Ottoman empire (Bartl 1995). From the second half of the 19th century onward, emigration movements started to diversify in terms of destination. While Greece remained a preferred destination, other places also appealed, particularly Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Siberia, Egypt, but also Australia, Latin America, and the United States. For the latter, it was mainly Orthodox young men, often from the southern town of Korçë, who settled in Boston and New York, beginning in the late 18th and early 19th century (Nagi 1989).

These Albanian settlements developed a profound transnational character with far-reaching consequences. Patriotic and cultural associations and societies were created wherever people settled – in Brussels, Sofia, Istanbul, Egypt, Athens, Bucharest, to name just a few – which contributed to the development of their home villages and cities investing in education, building schools, bridges, roads, and so on. Moreover, the *émigrés* played a decisive role in the awakening and creation of an Albanian national consciousness by developing a wide range of cultural activities and journalistic publications, thereby propagating the idea of an independent Albanian state (Vickers 2011). Most important in this regard were the activities of the *Arbëresh* in Italy, but the Albanians in Boston also voiced a strong national sentiment.

It was in Boston – and not in Albania – that the first Albanian Orthodox Church was founded in 1908 (Nagi 1989). After the establishment of the Republic of Albania in 1912, many of those American-Albanians returned to Albania. However, they were quickly disillusioned and returned to the United States, bringing their wives, children, and family with them, resulting in a second large-scale immigration to the USA (Nagi 1989).

In the ruins of the Ottoman empire, the 1923 Treaty of London, while recognizing for the first time an independent Albanian state, also ceded Turkish territory to other countries.

Montenegro and Serbia incorporated the regions of Kosovo and Macedonia, where important populations of Albanians lived. After the Italian invasion of Albania in 1939 (which lasted until 1943), the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini occupied Kosovo and Macedonia, creating for the first and only time a “greater Albania.” However, this did not hold, and after World War II the Republic of Albania and Yugoslavia went different paths with their Albanian-speaking populations.

Beginning in 1944, after the communists seized power and Enver Hoxha was installed as the country’s new leader, Albania’s borders were sealed. During the early years of the regime, members and adherents of the major anti-communist parties fled in their thousands toward Yugoslavia or Italy; some also went to the UK, others to the USA (Vickers 2011). Just a small number of Albania’s citizens were able to leave during the next 45 years, and it was only at the beginning of 1990 that Albania experienced significant new emigration.

### **Migration of Albanian speakers from Yugoslavia after World War II**

Albanian populations living in Yugoslavia – mainly in Kosovo, but also in Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia – have been involved in emigration movements since 1945. During 1945 and 1966, many Albanians left Kosovo and fled to Turkey as a result of the repressive politics of the Serbian security chief Aleksandar Ranković, who signed an agreement with Turkey in 1956 that established the deportation of “Turks,” among them many Albanians (Petrisch et al. 1999). From the 1960s, because of the low level of industrial development and high unemployment rate, an important labor migration took place. Albanians were directed toward other, more developed republics within Yugoslavia as well as to Western countries, mainly to Switzerland and Germany.

After World War II, European countries needed foreign labor and Yugoslavia became, after Italy and Spain, as of the 1960s, a central recruitment region for Germany and Switzer-

land. Until the 1980s, Albanian working migrants were mostly young men without families. They arrived from rural and poor regions and worked mainly in unqualified jobs. Their first objective was to earn enough money to overcome economic hardship at home and to return after a few years (Dahinden 2005a).

A new phase of emigration started in 1980 and was prompted by a political crackdown after the Albanian demonstrations of 1981 in Kosovo. In the aftermath of Tito's death in 1981, and the abolition of Kosovo's autonomous status in 1989, there was political unrest and emigration pressure increased. Members of the nationalist elite among Albanian students were increasingly persecuted and forced to leave Kosovo, meaning that at this time urban, better-educated, and skilled migrants left Kosovo – again moving mainly toward Switzerland and Germany, but also to the UK, France, Belgium, Austria, the USA, and Scandinavian countries. In addition, as the economic and political situation in Kosovo deteriorated, many of the former guest workers, who were entitled to bring their wives and children to Switzerland or Germany, slowly abandoned their plans to return and decided instead to take their families to new countries. As a result, there was a steady increase in the Albanian population from former Yugoslavia in European countries through chain migration, mainly women and children – a movement which continued through the 1990s (Dahinden 2005b).

The political developments culminated in 1998 in open war between the army of the Milosevic regime and the Kosovo Liberation Army, leading to mass departures of civilians. Albanians fled to neighboring countries such as Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro, or to Germany and Switzerland with their already established migrant populations. After June 1999 and after the NATO intervention, Kosovo experienced a rapid return of the displaced population. In most EU countries the Kosovo-Albanian asylum-seekers were only given provisional status and after the end of Serbian control in 1999 most of them chose to return or were repatriated (Mustafa et al. 2007). Since 2000, a new form of emigration has taken

shape: a temporary migration of highly skilled Kosovo-Albanians going abroad to accomplish their studies in a European or American university, often returning afterward.

In other words, Albanian communities from former Yugoslavia living nowadays in Western Europe are internally very heterogeneous in terms of migration history, education, origin, sex, and so on. Nevertheless, we can show some common factors: First, they turned into long-term and settled migrants with children growing up in the host countries. Second, in Europe they have (since the mid-1990s) been increasingly confronted with stigmatization, ethnic discrimination, and socioeconomic marginalization, resulting in the building of strong exclusionary boundaries against them. Third, in parallel, the political developments in Kosovo in the 1990s resulted in a bounded ethnic solidarity of destiny which culminated in transnational activities and in mass mobilization of Albanian migrants in home town associations, collective or individual remittances, and humanitarian projects. Furthermore, the elites among the Albanian refugees played a crucial role not only in supporting the Kosovo Liberation Army, but also later when it came to lobbying for independence of Kosovo in national, international, and humanitarian organizations (Dahinden 2010).

It is impossible to obtain accurate information about the number of Albanians from former Yugoslavia living abroad. There are no reliable data on migration available in Kosovo (nor in Macedonia or Montenegro). In EU countries, Albanians were until recently classified as Yugoslavs, later as belonging to Serbia-Montenegro or Macedonia, and the statistics differ in regard to who is counted as "Albanian" (ancestry, citizenship, self-declaration, external categorization, etc.) A common, yet disputed estimate is that 800,000 people from Kosovo – which has, according to the statistical office in Kosovo, 2.2 million inhabitants – live abroad. Germany, with 300,000 and Switzerland, with 155,000, host the largest established communities (Haxhikadrija 2009). Other large communities are in Italy, Austria, Scandinavia, the UK, the USA, France, and Canada (Mustafa et al. 2007).

## Migration out of the Albanian Republic since 1990

Migration out of Albania took a very different path when compared to the migration of Albanians from former Yugoslavia, both with regard to destination countries, but also with regard to the type of migration. After 40 years of sealed borders, international migration unfolded dramatically with the fall of the Albanian communist regime. The transition toward democracy and a market economy was – and still is – a rocky road producing serious economic hardship and political instability. International migration began in the summer of 1990 with the so-called “embassy migrants,” when around 5,000 Albanians sought refuge in Western embassies in Tirana. Eventually they were allowed to leave for the West and Italy was the main destination country (Vullnetari 2007). The impact of these “embassy occupations” was considerable: in the following weeks thousands from all over the country rushed to Tirana in the hope of entering one of the embassies. In the south, thousands trekked by foot over the mountains to Greece. Disorder leading up to Albania’s first democratic elections led to the first “boat people” exodus to southern Italy in March 1991. A second boat exodus took place in August; most were repatriated, but illegal migration continued to Italy (Vickers & Pettifer 1997).

In 1997 the collapse of a pyramid scheme for the investment of private savings – including many of the emigrants’ remittances – led to a period of political and economic turmoil, riots, and to civil war in some parts of the country. These events produced another peak in emigration to Italy and Greece. Others followed with their established networks in France, Germany, or Belgium, or went to the UK. Some Albanians immigrated to the United States through the Green Card lottery program run by the American government (Vullnetari 2007). At the same time, Albania experienced, as mentioned above, an important in-migration in 1999: around 500,000 Albanian refugees from Kosovo entered the country, where they were often given shelter by impoverished Alba-

nian families. Finally, a topic that has been highly publicized is the migration of Albanian women for the purpose of working in the sex industry, mainly in Italy, but also in other countries (Davis 2009).

Since 1990, these emigration movements have some common specificities. First, they had a highly illegal character, particularly when it came to Italy and Greece, and, second, they were for a long time circular in nature, involving many to-and-fro transits. In fact, given the geographic proximity to richer neighboring countries, migrants often circulated between Italy and Greece: sometimes they went there to earn enough money in order to be able to pay for a longer (and more expensive) journey to other EU countries or overseas, a journey which demanded entering illegally since the European borders have become much tighter for Albanians since 1990 (Efionayi-Mäder et al. 2001).

In 1991 Albanians had some chance of being recognized as refugees in Western European countries. However, from 1992 onward, their demands for asylum were rejected in most countries and the borders closed to them as the restrictive immigration policies of Western countries did not allow them working permits. Finally, these Albanian migrations played a fundamental role in the economic survival of Albanian society, not least through the significant amounts of remittances migrants sent back – similarly as in Kosovo (Mai & Schwander-Sievers 2003).

The main migrant destinations, Italy and Greece, reacted in similar ways to this massive immigration. An initial welcome was followed by a repressive reception, culminating in negative stereotypes of Albanians as “dangerous,” “criminal,” and living in the socioeconomic margins. However, these opinions have become more moderate during recent years (Barjaba & Perrone 1996). In addition, different regularization programs in both countries contributed recently to a more legalized character to this migration flow (Barjaba & King 2005).

Again, various attempts have been made to estimate emigration since 1989, a task that is difficult because of the irregular and circular

character of this migration. However, most studies converge in estimating that a fifth of the population have left the country between 1989 and 2001. The 2001 census data (INSTAT 2002: 19) estimated net loss due to emigration of around 600,000 persons between 1989 and 2001 – the total population in 2001 being 3 million – not including short-term migration of less than one year's duration. Newer data based on the 2005 Albanian Living Standard Measurement Survey revealed that since 1999 there has been a downward trend in emigration following the peak in 1997, but also that more people are now migrating to other European destinations such as the UK and Germany, as well the USA (Azzarri & Calogero 2009).

It can also be observed that the demographic and socioeconomic composition of current emigrants has changed. While during the first years of the 1990s migration was mainly dominated by young men and of temporary or circular character, currently older individuals and women are migrating, a fact that points to the effects of networks and settlement (Azzarri & Calogero 2009).

SEE ALSO: Balkans, migration, mid-19th century to present; Greece, migration 1830s to present; Italy: migration 1815 to present; War and migration; Wars and population displacement, 20th century

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