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### *Overview on migration in Albania*

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#### **1. Migration as a global phenomenon**

Migration is a phenomenon as old as the history of mankind, without which perhaps humanity itself would not have existed. People, individually or in groups, have constantly or voluntarily changed their place of residence. If migration has not known experienced disruption, the intensity, motives and geography of relocations have changed constantly over time. The motives that have forced individuals, or large groups of people to migrate within countries of the same continent or between different continents, are based on economic, social, political, but also climatic reasons.<sup>1</sup>

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Our continent, Europe, has its own history of migration. This continent has welcomed millions and millions of migrants from other countries, just as millions more have left Europe to move to other continents. This story continues to our days. The United Europe remains a favorite destination of refugees coming for economic reasons, to escape local conflicts, lack of freedoms and democratic standards in countries of origin, etc.

According to Eurostat, if the population of the EU-27 on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019 was 446 million inhabitants, 21.2 million or 4.9% of them were foreign nationals. Only in year 2018, 2.4 million people migrated to the EU-27, to whom, only 672,000 gained citizenship. This phenomenon can be considered as one of the most obvious processes of the globalizing trend of the world <sup>2</sup>.

Migration in the Western Balkans, in which are included Albania, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the last ten years are distinguished for high migration aged 15-39 years old. This phenomenon is more distinguished for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania and lower for Serbia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia <sup>8</sup>.

## **2. Background of migration in Albania**

It is difficult to describe statistically the migration of Albanians before and after the declaration of independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912.

During the Ottoman occupation, a part of the Christian population migrated toward Greece (Arvanites) and Italy (Arbëresh).

This mass migration took place in the XIV-XV centuries. Part of it are also over 260,000 Arbëresh (albanesi d'italia) who settled in the south of Italy and who managed to preserve their language and customs up to our days <sup>4</sup> According to academician Eqerem Çabej, there were three migratory flows to Italy: the first to Ancona in 1473, the second to Calabria in 1448 and the third one to Brindisi di Montagna in 1774<sup>3</sup>.

The economic and political circumstances in which Albania was in a period after the declaration of independence and during the First World War and the Balkan War, forced many Albanians to migrate to other countries. The fragmentation of Albania in 1913 by the Conference of Ambassadors in London left outside the country important parts of the territory as well as a good part of its population. Following this division, Serbia and Greece forcibly expelled hundreds of thousands of Albanians toward Turkey.

The population of Albania after 1913 was estimated at about one million inhabitants. The depopulation of the country and the decline of the labor force led the governments of that time to impose rigor measures to limit migration. One of them was the act of 1920-1930 for the abolition of Albanian citizenship for all those who left the country without the permission of the authorities<sup>10</sup>.

From 1923 until the end of World War II, about 150,000 Albanians or 13% of the population in 1945 migrated. Their destination was the Balkan

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countries, such as Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece, but also other countries, such as Romania, France, Italy, Egypt, USA and Argentina.

The picture of migration changed radically after World War II, when the communist regime was installed in the country. The country went into almost total isolation. According to communist doctrine, migration was considered a social scourge of capitalist countries and a cause of international inequality. The regime of that time strongly propagated that there was no reason for migration to other countries as long as the communist countries were building a higher standard of living than the capitalist countries. Control over the population was strict. The regime did everything possible to ensure that its citizens had as little contact as possible with the rapid development of democratic countries.

If other communist countries were strict about controlling migration, Albania took even more repressive measures to prevent this phenomenon. Any attempt to leave the country illegally was considered a serious betrayal and was punished by border shootings or long prison terms. The families of those who attempted to do so, were interned and meanwhile did quite heavy work. The measures were so strict that you can enter the border areas only with the necessary permission.

The economic situation of the country came deteriorating. Poverty, especially in rural areas was very severe. Only after the 1990s took places profound changes which paved the way for mass relocations of citizens from rural to urban areas, as well as migration to other countries. Starting from 1990 until now days, it seems that 1.3 million Albanians, who make up almost 32% of the country's population, have left the country.

### **3. Democratic change after the 1990s**

The Berlin Wall divided for 50 years democratic West Germany with communist East Germany. This wall became a symbol of the division of the two worlds, the democratic and the totalitarian one. During this period about 5,000 people managed to cross the wall from the east to the west, while another 300 people were shot during this attempt. The fall of the Berlin Wall on October 3, 1989 served as the first signal of the collapse of the communist system in the east. The first countries to overthrow the communist system in 1989 and meanwhile to pave the way for democratic developments were Poland and Hungary. This process became unstoppable for the collapse of the communist system in other countries of the east bloc. Albania would not be an exception to this process. The student protests of the 1990s became a reason to attract the rest of the population to overthrow the communist regime in Albania as well.

During this regime there were about 14,563 political prisoners, 5,548 shot with and without trial, 987 dead in prisons and 21,401 other people interned. In 1990, the Albanian Parliament declared a general amnesty for all these categories, declaring their innocence.<sup>5</sup>

Political survivors in prisons and families in exile were amnestied in 1990. The rest of the population also suffered the consequences of lack of freedom, social services, free movement, deep poverty, lack of housing, infrastructure, education and health standards. lack of religious faith, expropriation, depoliticized justice, etc.

On December 11, 1990, the first opposition party in Albania, the Democratic Party, was formed, while on June 12, 1991, was formed the Socialist Party. Later, other smaller parties were formed, completing the spectrum of the beginning of pluralism in Albania. On March 22, 1992, the Democratic Party came to power after 50 years of the communist regime in Albania.

#### **4. "The phenomenon of embassies in Albania" on July 2, 1990**

The difficult economic situation and lack of democratic freedoms in the country are the main drivers of the mass emigration of the 1990s. The West, especially for young people, was a dream to be touched. Italian television and radio served as a window through which Albanians saw the profound democratic contrast between their country and Western democracies. It was time for mass relocation inside and outside the country.

Albania, although a small country with approximately 3 million inhabitants, experienced a massive influx of migration in the 1990s. On 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1990 occurred the "Phenomenon of embassies in Albania". 4975 people, from all areas of the country were forcibly admitted to the embassies of western countries. 3554 people entered the German embassy, 816 in the Italian embassy and 549 in the French embassy and other diplomatic headquarters. This movement was a strong blow to overthrow the communist dictatorship in Albania. Fear was killed and the

state did not have the strength to stop this mass exodus that had not been seen since the beginning of World War II.

The only thing the communist regime of the time did was labeling it with the most insulting words for those who entered the embassies, at a time when these Albanians showed courage to touch the missing freedom. To condemn this action of "hooligans", "vagabonds" and "ordinary prisoners" as well as to give a message to the international community that in Albania the system was not shaken, on July 13 a revolt rally was organized in the main square of the capital, where the keynote speech was given by Xhelil Gjoni, secretary of the Labor Party for the city of Tirana. No other leader of the Political Bureau, and no minister had the courage to come to this rally to condemn the "embassy phenomenon" of July 2<sup>nd</sup>. In the newspaper "Zëri i Popullit" of July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1990, the speech of Xhelil Gjoni was published, who, among other things, said that "We say to our enemies unanimously: "Albania and the Popular Power are no longer shaken by some people. perverted who left in pirate way the homeland, and meanwhile by whoever else. They are not Albania, they are not the people'"

Up until today no one has explained exactly how the embassy event was organized on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1990. Some think that this event was actually organized by the secret services to accelerate the fall of the communist regime. However, this event, marks the beginning of the mass exodus of 5,000 Albanian citizens to European countries.

## **5. The flow of mass migration to Greece and Italy**

Albania is bordered with Greece mainly by land and less by sea, while with Italy is separated by the Ionian and Adriatic seas. The closest distance with Italy (71km) is in the Strait of Otranto, which divides the Karaburun Peninsula in Albania with the coast of Lecce in Italy.

In December 1990 and in progress tens of thousands of Albanians migrated to Greece. According to the data of the National Statistics Office of Greece, in the 1991 census were registered 20.556 Albanian emigrants, while in 2001 this number reached 443,500<sup>7</sup>. The mass migration to Greece took place with great difficulty crossing the land borders in a very difficult mountainous terrain.

Mass migrations to Italy in 1991 utilized all types of vessels navigating the Ionian and Adriatic Seas. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, a ship with 130 emigrants set sail from Orikumi, Vlora, to Italy. Six other smaller ships were hijacked in the port of Vlora to set sail for the same destination. This news spread quickly and on March 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> tens of thousands of Albanians gathered in Albanian ports to hijack ships and set off toward Italy. Albanian police had lost control to prevent a mass exodus. In Bari and Brindisi was declared a state of emergency. Dozens of ships set sail toward Italy. In three days 25,000 people left. In the following days and months, the departures from Albania to Italy continued but to a smaller extent.

In August, the second and most massive wave of migration toward Italy began, marking one of the most dramatic pages of migration in the history of the Albanian state. Thousands of Albanian citizens gathered in the port



of Durres and occupied all the ships that were there. On August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1991, the cargo ship "Vlora" arrived at the port of Bari with 20,000 Albanians, including men, women and children. Italy found itself unprepared to expect such a large influx.

The newcomers were locked in the old stadium of the city "Della Vittoria". They stayed there for days in the scorching heat of August, with no water and little food being thrown from above. Only 300 out of 20,000 managed to force their way out of the stadium and remain in Italy, while others were repatriated using ferries and air transport.

Italy tolerated the first wave of March with about 25,000 migrants due to the difficult political and economic situation in the country, while the second wave of August that occurred after the first democratic elections in March 1991, no longer justified the status of the refugee<sup>6</sup>.

Migration toward Italy continued in the following years, but on a much smaller scale. The Albanian governments that followed after 1990 took a series of measures to prevent migration to Italy by sea.

At the end of December 2015 in Italy there were 467,000 Albanians with residence permits and 94,000 Italian-Albanians with Italian citizenship. The number of Albanians living in Italy must be more than 561,000.

## **6. Taken measures to manage migration**

According to INSTAT, there are four main factors influencing the emigration of Albanians to the EU: the opportunity to work abroad (84%),

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family reunification (4.6%), unemployment (4.2%) and the opportunity to study abroad (3.5%). In 2017, more than one million Albanian citizens were outside the country. The contribution of Albanian migration in the development of the country from 1990 until today has been significant. The highest remittances increased in 2007 by 951.7 million Euros, while in 2017 they fell to 637.3 million Euros<sup>9</sup>.

The legal framework for migration control and management has been improving. Today there are several strategies and action plans, a complete package of laws and bylaws and some employment agreements with other countries.

All this framework aims to control migration flows, stop illegal migration and trafficking in human beings, care for immigrants and their families, promote seasonal employment, facilitate the licensing of private employment agencies, improve border control, creation of a database for entry and exit from the country, signing agreements with other countries for the recognition of years of work for retirement, etc.

Despite the progress made, surveys show that the phenomenon of migration still continues. If the migration of Albanians to neighboring countries, Greece and Italy, has steadily decreased, to other countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, it still remains high.

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