



## **METOIKOS Project**

**RELUCTANT CIRCULARITIES: the  
interplay between integration,  
return and circular migration within  
the Albanian migration to Italy**

Nick Mai  
London Metropolitan University





**EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE**  
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**circular migration within the Albanian**  
**migration to Italy**

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**The METOIKOS Research Project**  
**Circular migration patterns in Southern and Central Eastern Europe: Challenges and opportunities for migrants and policy makers**

The METOIKOS project looks at circular migration patterns in three European regions: southeastern Europe and the Balkans (Greece, Italy and Albania); southwestern Europe and the Maghreb (Spain, Italy and Morocco); and Central Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine). More specifically, METOIKOS studies the links between different types of circular migration and processes of integration (in the country of destination) and reintegration (in the source country). It identifies the main challenges and opportunities involved in circular migration for source countries, destination countries and migrants (and their families) and develops new conceptual instruments for the analysis of circular migration and integration. The project will develop policy recommendations (a Guide for Policy Makers, available in 10 European languages) for local, regional and national policy makers as to how to frame circular migration with appropriate (re-)integration policies. It will also organise three Regional Workshops (on Spain, Italy and Morocco; on Greece, Italy and Albania; and on Poland, Hungary and Ukraine). The project will foster online discussion on circular migration with a view to raising awareness about the challenges and advantages of circular mobility in the wider EU Neighbourhood and the Euro-Mediterranean region more generally.

The METOIKOS project is hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and co-ordinated by Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou ([anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu](mailto:anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu)). The project is co-funded by the European Fund for Integration of Third Country Nationals, Community Actions, 2008.

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**ISET – Institute for the Study of European Transformation, London Metropolitan University**

The Institute for the Study of European Transformations (ISET) was established by London Metropolitan University in 2002 as a multi-disciplinary group addressing research questions arising from the transformations in Europe and in its relations with the wider world. The focus is on contemporary transformations in the socio-economic, cultural, linguistic and political social spheres both in Europe and globally. Our research investigates agency, responses and contestations implicated by these transformations at the individual, local, national and international levels. ISET aims to deepen understandings of formations and intersections of a variety of social relations - gender, language, sexuality, 'race', ethnicity, religion and class - in European societies; and to critically engage with European institutions and politics. Within this broad framework, we have particular research interests in migration and cohesion, media and culture, linguistics, and gendered citizenship and EU social policies.

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## **Abstract**

The findings of the METOIKOS research project do not corroborate a politicised celebration of the circularisation of migration as a win-win situation for both countries of origin and destination. The majority of migrants interviewed in this research were reluctantly and ambivalently oscillating between Albania and Italy. For most, circulating is a way to achieve the migratory flexibility they need to negotiate their livelihoods between societies and labour markets characterised by the different opportunities, predicaments and degrees of socio-economic and political instability. Most Albanian migrants do not choose to circulate, but accept to do so in order to secure the sustainability of projects of settlement abroad and/or return home which are still not completed or which became unsustainable in the context of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. For younger people and women, particularly if they are studying, oscillating between Albania and Italy is both a way to reconcile the contradictory moral worlds brought together by their diasporic trajectories and a way to gain the socio-cultural capital to bypass widespread dynamics of corruption and preferential access to the labour market in Albania.

**Keywords:** Migration, Albania, Italy, Circularity, Inequalities, Geopolitics







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## 1. Introduction: the main dimensions of the Albanian migration to Italy

### 1.1 History and main reasons of the Albanian migration to Italy

The post-communist Albanian migratory crises of the 1990s inaugurated a new phase in the history of relations between Italy and Albania, which both built upon and transformed their imaginary, socio-economic and cultural liaisons. Between the 7th and 10th of March 1991, as the Albanian communist state collapsed and the country was precipitated into a situation of violent political confrontation and extreme economic deprivation, some 25,700 Albanians crossed the Otranto Channel between Albania and Italy in boats and rafts of every type. A new crisis arose in August 1991 with the arrival of another 20,000 Albanian refugees on several overloaded ships. Whereas most of the Albanians who arrived in March 1991 were considered refugees and given legal immigration status, most of those who followed in August 2001 were repatriated as 'irregular migrants'. The two migratory waves of 1991 were just the beginning of a dramatic and controversial migratory flow, which has its roots in the prolonged economic and political instability of Albania throughout the 1990s. After March 1997, as Albania teetered on the verge of civil war as a consequence of the collapse of 'pyramid selling' schemes, there was another mass migratory crisis.

Although there have been no further mass emigration episodes from Albania since 1997, since 1991, because of the restrictive visa policies implemented by the Italian State, many Albanians resorted to illegal entry into the country, mostly through dangerous rides on speedboats across the Adriatic Sea to the Apulian shores, from Vlorë to Otranto. Throughout the 1990s Italy promoted a number of migration amnesties, through which many irregular migrants were able to obtain legal status. After 1998, Albanians have been brought into the newly-established quota arrangements implemented by the Italian government in an attempt to control immigration according to labour market needs. One of the key guidelines behind this new Italian policy<sup>1</sup> is the yearly allowance of a definite number of legal entries for non-EU (*extracomunitari*) citizens. According to statistical data elaborated by the Albanian government, more than 1 million Albanians have migrated abroad since 1991 – 600,000 in Greece, 250,000 in Italy, the remainder in other European countries and in North America. This equates to one in four of the Albanian population, enumerated at around 3 m. in the 2001 census. In 2001, the Albanians were the second largest community in Italy after Moroccans (159,599), and ahead of Romanians (68,929) and Filipinos (65,353). In 2007, Albanians are the third largest migrant group in Italy (381,000), after Moroccans (387,000) and Romanians (556,000) – these estimates from Caritas (2007) are based on permits to stay plus a notional quota for 'irregular' immigrants. According to a recent research, Albanians are the most significant group of migrants in Italy, in relation to the overall size of the population of the sending country, as 14 per cent of Albanian people actually live in Italy (ISMU 2011).

The relationship between Albanian migration and existing social and spatial inequalities is a complex one, involving the interconnection of international and internal migration, the increasing polarisation and territorial re-distribution of resources and the rise of new economic and political elites. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge the existence of three main regional socio-economic environments, that influence greatly the extent and the way people recur to migration as the main coping strategy with the opportunities and predicaments offered by the post-communist

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<sup>1</sup> L. 40 of 6 March 1998 on *Disciplina dell'Immigrazione e Norme sulla Condizione dello Straniero*, published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n.59 of 12 March 1998, Supplemento ordinario n. 40.

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transformation. The North, especially the mountainous region, is still the poorest part of Albania and is a region of internal migration, mainly to the central Tirana–Durrës and to the regional capital Shkodër areas, as well as of international out-migration, particularly to Italy and the UK. Because of the enduring poverty of the area, there is very little evidence of return migration. This is not the case for the second socio-economic region, the South, where the relatively better economic performance and the proximity to Greece (the main migration destination) allow people to engage in to-and-fro migration and (less frequently) to return and invest their remittances, mainly in the coastal tourist industry (hotels and restaurants), in small shops and mechanical workshops. The Centre is the most affluent (or less deprived) area of the country and receives internal migration, as well as being the area with the highest number of returnees and a zone of emigration, particularly to Italy. Tirana and Durrës are Albania's urban-economic core, as these two districts alone received 60% of all inter-district migration during 1989–2001, which produced a massive population increase (De Soto *et al.* 2002: 3). These dynamics are crucial for the analysis of the usefulness of the concept of circularity in capturing the transformation of the Albanian migration, which needs to be mapped across the complexity of the socio-economic and cultural transaction underpinning an intra- as well as trans-national social field (Vullnetari 2009).

The main explanations for the extent to which Albanians resorted to migration in the last two decades emphasises the role of poverty, demographic factors and political instability. On an economic level, it is important to underline that Albania has been characterised until recently by the most widespread poverty of any country in Europe, the least diversified and most backward economic base, the enduring and pervasive threat of disappearing financial and human capital, inadequate fiscal resources, and the reluctance of foreigners to invest in the country (De Soto *et al.* 2002: 1). As a consequence, internal as well as international migration became a fundamental livelihood strategy for many households all around the country and remittances determined the economic viability of many Albanian families (King and Mai 2008).

A crucial demographic dimension of the Albanian migration phenomenon is its youthfulness. In 1998, 42% of the total population was under 19 years of age and the average age was about 24 years (UNICEF 1998: 14-15). Both in 1990 and in 2000, nearly one third of the population was under 15, which means that there is still an abundance of potential young emigrants for the next 10–20 years. These demographic considerations are significant if one thinks that it is mainly people between the ages of 15 and 45 that have been, and continue to be, involved in migratory dynamics, as these age groups accounted for 94.6 per cent of the total number of migrants until the early 2000s (Gjonça 2002: 31).

The prevalence of a very confrontational and polarised political culture and the widespread presence of corruption undermined the progress of economic reforms and the delivery of vital infrastructures and utilities (electricity, paved roads and water in particular), which are unable to meet the needs of the population. To this scenario of structural fragility, one should add the rise of criminal phenomena in Albania, as the process of post-communist transformation was characterised by the emergence of local alliances between political groups/public functionaries and local power brokers. The consequence is that the Albanian state is still unable to guarantee the exercise of the rule of law as well as safety for a large sector of the population. The continuing appeal of emigration for many people in Albania needs to be read against the scenario of poverty, unemployment, low wages, minimal pensions/social welfare and insecurity outlined above. At the same time, according to the IOM (2006), recent years witnessed a decline in emigration numbers as a consequence of 'more realistic perceptions by prospective Albanian migrants of opportunities in Europe', as well as because of restrictive admission policies and border controls and the often unfriendly attitudes in host countries (IOM 2006).

Although since 2005 the population in absolute poverty in Albania declined from 25 per cent in 2002 to 12.4 in 2008, while there was a decline in unemployment since 2002 to the current level of 13.1 per

cent, these positive dynamics coincided with a more stark economic polarisation amongst the population and refer to the central and more urbanised and prosperous area of the country (UN 2010). According to a recent survey (EFT 2007) migration will continue to play a role in Albania in the short term, with 44.2% of 18–40-year-olds interviewed saying they were thinking of migrating and 17.8% actually being able to do so because of their access to necessary social and economic capital. According to the survey, males were slightly more prone (46.9%) to migrate than females (40.9%). The survey also confirms that there is a link between educational level, employment status and the desire to migrate as almost 50% of people with primary education wanted to migrate, compared with 40.1% of those with a university degree and the intention to migrate was higher among unemployed respondents. Finally, the survey highlights that the choice of the destination country and the foreseen duration of the migration period was strongly affected by educational level. Migrants with primary education preferred Greece, while those with secondary general and vocational education preferred the UK and Italy. Almost two-thirds of potential migrants with primary education wished to stay in the destination country for three to ten years. A third of those with secondary education wished to stay from three to five years.

The results of our research, which we will present in the next section of the report, both confirm the demographic and socio-economic trends presented above and add new and more nuanced information about how these dynamics impact on the nexus between migration, return and circularisation.

### ***1.2 Albanians in Italy: hierarchies of differential integration***

In Italy, a recent country of immigration, there is as yet no overarching model of immigrant incorporation. Policy measures have been *ad hoc* and frequently contradictory. There seems to be an acceptance of the economic rationale of harnessing migrant labour and of the inevitability of immigration in a scenario of enhanced global mobility; and yet the trend in legislation – from the Legge Martelli (1990) through the Turco-Napolitano (1998) to the Bossi-Fini law (2002) – has been to pay lip-service to integration and instead to keep immigrants as a marginalised, temporarily-resident fraction of Italian society (Zincone 2006). Italian press and other media have reinforced this stance by continuously representing immigrants as outsiders and a threat to the nation. Throughout the 1990s and since, Albanians have been the lightning-rod for this negative discursive framing of immigration. Until 2008, more than any other group in recent years, Albanians were subject to a brutal campaign of stigmatisation and criminalisation by the Italian media (Mai 2002). As in Greece (cf. Lazaridis 1996), *albanophobia*, an all-encompassing and irrational fear of all things Albanian, became entrenched within the perceptions of the Italian population as a whole. This stigmatisation crashed dramatically against Albanians' expectations.

In Albania, by illegally watching Italian television in communist times, many young people internalised lifestyle models which were very different from those assigned to them by communism. In this way the idea of migrating abroad (above all to Italy) could be seen as the logical outcome of a wider process of disembedding of Albanian young people's identities from the homogenous, moralised, collectivist-nationalist landscape that prevailed before 1991 (Mai 2001). Albanians, especially teenagers and young adults, had already undergone a process of *anticipatory assimilation* to Italy and its way of life even before their 'migratory projects' became realisable. Moreover, years of watching Italian television had given most young Albanians a reasonable command of the Italian language – an invaluable headstart should they end up by migrating there. Yet, the contrast between this aspirational belonging and the actual rejection and stigmatisation was stark indeed for most Albanians, once they reached Italy.

The paradoxical coexistence (King and Mai 2009) between aspirational integration into and selective exclusion from Italian society underpinned Albanian migrants' partially-successful assimilation into

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Italian society. Their fast progress along the assimilation-integration trajectory has been achieved in a short space of time compared to longer-established immigrants in Italy. Quantitative data on Albanians in Italy reinforce the impression that Albanians are becoming increasingly integrated within the host society. The first index is geographical distribution. Albanians are the most 'dispersed' of all immigrant nationalities in Italy; that is to say, they are the group whose spatial distribution is most similar to that of the Italian population as a whole (Bonifazi 2007). The evolving demographic structure of Albanians in Italy is another indicator of rapid stabilisation and integration, as by 2001 40 per cent of Albanian migrants were women, a gender trend which shows dynamic change towards demographic 'normalisation' (Bonifazi and Sabatino 2003: 970). Data on pupil enrolments in the Italian school system also confirm these 'normalising' trends, as Albanians are now the largest foreign-origin group in Italian schools, accounting for 17.7 per cent of all foreign pupils, well above their share of the overall immigrant population (11.3 per cent). During the academic year 2004-05 there were 9,522 Albanian students studying at Italian universities, a quarter of all foreign students. At university level most students are not second-generation young people living with their immigrant parents, but 'primary' migrants. But the existence of so many third-level students is another facet of Albanians' close relationship to Italy across different age and social strata. The figures quoted exclude Erasmus and other short-term exchange students (Caritas/Migrantes 2006: 181). Another 'classical' numerical indicator of assimilation is intermarriage with Italians. Mixed marriages between Italians and foreigners have increased sharply in the past decade, reaching one in ten of all marriages in 2005 (ISTAT 2007, pp. 340-3). The data indicate that, although Albanians are one of the fastest-growing groups to intermarry with Italians, marriage rates remain low compared to other migrant nationalities. These trends could be an indicator of continuing stigmatisation, but also of the prevalence of endogamy within the Albanian population because of their own strong family and kinship bonds and relatively balanced sex-ratio.

These positive quantitative indicators of the outcome of migrant integration strategies need to be measured against the qualitative experience of the process of integration by migrants themselves. In this respect, the relentless stereotyping of Albanians as criminals and more generally as rough, uncivilised people has two main important ramifications. The first is the behaviour of Italians towards Albanians in various spheres of life such as employment and housing. Although Albanians have little difficulty obtaining low-status jobs in Italy, many instances of discrimination in the workplace were recorded, including receiving lower wages than Italians doing the same work. This becomes less common as time passes and Albanians get legalised and progress to more stable jobs – this holds for all immigrants who start as undocumented workers in the informal labour market. More specifically anti-Albanian discrimination arises when Albanians try to access qualified jobs: there appears to be a glass ceiling. The second ramification involves Albanians' internalisation of the stigmatising discourse, so that it affects their own self-presentation and their behaviour towards both Italians and other Albanians. Sometimes parents want to ensure that their children are not identified as Albanian and picked on as a result, so they encourage them to speak Italian all the time at school and in public spaces such as the street (see also Zinn 2005).

Albanian associations that do exist in Italy were not established in the early years of arrival, in order to reinforce Albanians' ethnic identity and help each other settle down, but were formed in the late 1990s in order to respond to negative media images by recovering positive elements of identification. This delayed ethnic mobilisation is described in the American sociological literature as 'reactive ethnicity' and arises out of the 'confrontation with concerted attitudes of prejudice on the part of the surrounding population' (Portes and Rumbaut 1996: 133; 222). The fact that Albanians' projective identification with Italians was not reciprocated and was in fact replaced by narratives of stigmatisation, led some Albanians to adopt another, more extreme assimilation strategy: mimesis (Romania 2004). This

may be accompanied by an acceptance and internalisation of the rationales for stigmatisation. Others, instead, may be led to a reappraisal of their Albanian heritage, either through an embryonic and delayed growth of ethnic associations, and/or a return gaze to the homeland. But this is a confused gaze, for the homeland itself is full of contradictions – between its rejected communist past and an uncertain neoliberal future – and tensions – rural-urban, rich-poor, traditional-modern etc. (Fuga 2000). These observations are very relevant for the scope of this research as the idea of return, which often translates into circularity, was often embedded within people's desire not to be singled out or stigmatised as 'Albanians'. This desire, as we shall explain in the next section, sometimes overrode the evaluation of the actual sustainability of return, which then translates in people's reluctant circularisation between Albania and Italy.

## 2. Findings of the Project

The research was undertaken by two teams of local researchers in both Albania and Italy. We gathered 80 interviews with circular migrants and 20 interviews with key informants in the two countries. In both Albania and Italy, the project co-operated with the Italian NGO IPSIA, which has offices in both Shkoder and Tirana and was undertaking a parallel study on the dynamics of return of Albanian migrants from Italy. 45 interviews were gathered by Cristiana Paladini, a sociologist working for IPSIA, between Albania and Italy. In Albania, the project was also supported by the doctoral student Erin Smith, who undertook 5 interviews in the Fier region. In Albania, the project involved several doctoral researchers: Kalje Kerpaci, Denata Hoxha, Daniela Mece and Enkeleida Cenaj. In Italy, the research also involved the post-doctoral researchers Sabrina Marchetti and Giulio Giangaspero.

The composition and expertise available amongst the researchers involved in the research allowed the project to address diverse experiences of circularity as well as different socio-economic and geographical areas in both Albania and Italy. In Albania, the research focused on the coastal area, the one more structurally and historically involved in the migration to Italy, and covered the cities and areas of Shkoder, Tirana, Durrës, Fier and Vlore. In Italy, the majority of interviews were gathered in Rome, with some interviews undertaken in Milan and in Calabria.

### 2.1 *Political and Policy Context, the hiatus between rhetoric and reality*

Since the 1990s, Albanian migration policies responded to the geo-political pressures exerted by Italy (Chaloff 2008) and Greece, in exchange of vital economic support, the support for Albania's long-term aim to join the EU, and under the threat of restrictive measures against Albanian migrants, including mass deportation in the case of Greece (Konidaris 2005). This means that, de facto, international co-operation and the policies and initiatives regulating the Albanian migration ended up by serving external rather than Albanian priorities (Chaloff 2008). In 2004, the potentially beneficial economic impact of external migration has been seized on by the government, which set out a blueprint for capitalising on migration as a development stimulus in its *National Strategy on Migration* (Government of Albania 2004). Covering the five-year period 2005–10, the National Strategy on Migration (NSM) aims to provide Albania with a more comprehensive and integrated policy on migration – moving from a series of ad hoc measures designed mainly to combat irregular migration to a more holistic policy based on migration and remittance management.

Critical analyses of the deployment of the Albanian NSM (Totozani et al. 2007; Chaloff 2008) highlighted its ambitious 'manifesto' character, because of the absence of the funds, co-ordination and infrastructures to implement many of the foreseen measures (Chaloff 2008). The evaluation of the implementation of the NSM undertaken by Totozani et al. (2007) also underlines its dependency on the (lack of) interest from the Italian (and Greek) governments. Italian migration policies, according to

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Chaloff (2008), concentrate on meeting the short-term needs of Italian employers through seasonal and dependent work quotas and only contemplate circular migration 'to the degree in which unemployed foreign workers are required to leave the country if they fail to find a new job'. In process, the potentially negative and/or positive impact of migration for Albania is neglected. As a result of these dynamics, at the moment circular forms of migration happen in the interstices between policy framework addressing migration according to different and overlapping definitions, which are embedded in contrasting geopolitical priorities. Whereas Albanian migration law defines short-term emigration as lasting less than a year, Italy has a migration policy allowing seasonal work for up to 9 months. Although Albanians are accorded priority in seasonal work visas, the Albanian policy aims at extending the terms of seasonal migration, which it does not see as circular (Chaloff 2008).

The findings of the METOIKOS research show that the interlinked phenomena of return and of circularity are relatively limited in comparison to the rhetoric of circularity promoted by the Italian and the Albanian governments, both of which highlight the extent of return for different but interrelated (geo)political interests and priorities. The imminent liberalisation of tourist visas for the EU Schengen area hegemonised official discourses about circularity during fieldwork, which tended to be equated with return in official discourses both in Italy and in Albania. On the Albanian side of the migration process, the emphasis on circularity as return is a consequence of the conditions posed by the visa liberalisation process, which emphasised Albanian government's responsibility of providing returning migrants with guidance and assistance as a precondition for the liberalization of visa. This means that conversations with public officials in Albania focused on the promotion of the Albanian government's compliance with assisted return policies, rather than on the reality of return and circularity per se.

On the Italian side, conceptualizing and advertising migration as return is a strategy to promote an idea of migration as benefiting the Italian economy, while containing strategically manufactured moral panics about the presence of problematised migrant groups. After having been the most stigmatized migrant group throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Albanians are portrayed in public culture (TV shows, etc.) and debates as positive examples of integration. In the process, new groups of migrants, Romanian Roma migrants in particular, have simply stolen the moral panic scene, whose political relevance in obfuscating the complex intricacies of integration and marginalization remains unchanged (Mai 2010). At the same time, the governance of migration, whether in a circular or linear form, does not seem to be a priority within the Albanian and Italian political systems, both of which have recently been characterised by violent confrontations between the main political parties and forces around the supposed corruption and immorality of their leaders Sali Berisha and Silvio Berlusconi.

## **2.2 Types of circularity**

From the analysis of the socio-economic and cultural space encompassing the Italo-Albanian migratory flow and of the gathered interview and ethnographic material the following 5 main typologies of circular migration emerge as significant:

1. **Seasonal workers** (agriculture, tourism, herding), both of a legal and technical type, the latter associated with residence and work permits that do not correspond to the seasonal character of the work undertaken.
2. **Students** returning to Albania in order to work in universities, in the public administration, the third sector and, less, the private sector, keeping an active relationship

with Italy. This category also includes students who study and live in Italy and who visit Albania regularly.

3. **Migrant entrepreneurs** residing in Italy and setting up a parallel firm in Albania in order to start building a future between Italy and Albania and to employ their relatives, notably in the construction industry. This category includes returned or successful entrepreneurs whose base is in Albania and who need to be in Italy very often as part of their work (import-export, etc.).
4. **Documented returnees:** i.e. migrants with Italian citizenship or a permanent/long term (5+ years) permit to stay, who returned in Albania as they felt their migratory experience was completed, but who are still retaining structural links with Italy regarding employment, family, health services and study.
5. **Economic returnees:** i.e. migrants who, having returned to Albania as a consequence of the economic crisis in Italy and because of the temporary and informal nature of their employment in Italy, are planning to return to Italy to work in the future and to keep documented and/or obtain citizenship and undetermined leave to remain. This category includes migrants who were deported and/or decided to go back to Italy repeatedly and irregularly to earn a living for themselves and their families.

In the next subsections, we will elaborate on each of these six typologies, by providing an analysis of the main dynamics and factors of circularisation involved in each and by drawing on examples from the ethnographic material we gathered.

### ***2.3 Factors of circularisation***

#### **2.3.1 The Impact of the Economic Crisis**

According to a recent UN report (UN Albania 2010), although the Albanian economy was not as adversely affected by the 2008-9 global financial crises as were other economies in south eastern Europe, there was an important indirect impact of the crisis on neighbouring countries, which had a negative influence on ‘remittances, commodities, the export-sensitive footwear and apparel industry and migration (UN Albania 2010: iii). As far as migration is more directly concerned, the same research underlines that the deepening of the crisis and planned austerity measures in Greece could translate in the return of low skilled migrants working in construction and agriculture (UN Albania 2010: 4). While this might be true for Greece, the results of our research indicates a different trend regarding the return of Albanian migrants from Italy.

According to key informants who did not belong to institutional settings –who therefore were free to talk outside of official rhetoric- and to most migrant interviewees, the looming of the economic recession in both Italy and Albania encourages people to stay put, rather than to engage in circularity. In Albania, key economic sectors such as the construction industry are grinding to a stop, particularly in the Tirana-Durres conurbation, while in Italy it has become increasingly difficult to find, or even retain, jobs, particularly for the least documented. As a consequence, staying put in Italy and in Albania is an increasing reality when people have a job to hold on to, while people who have a job abroad might have to be circular in order to maintain their families in Albania and Italy.

People who did not make it come back...or people who lost the permit to stay. From what I have seen, people who are documented tend to stay here (Italy) because even if the crisis is bad here, and I have

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seen its impact on my work, there are still many more perspectives in Italy than in Albania, it is a more secure and safe environment anyway. Those who are returning now it's because they are documented, maybe they open a small business, while they are unemployed here. Then there are those who became citizens, who go back home as Italians abroad... (key informant, Rome)

The impact of the economic downturn which followed the global financial crisis of 2008 was often mentioned by migrants as one of the main reasons for their decision to return. However, as the previous quote shows, the crisis impacted differently on different groups of migrants, with the legal status being the second, after employment opportunities, most important variable in people's decision to stay put, migrate, return and circulate. Migrants who still had not obtained a satisfactory migration documentation tended to either stay put in Italy or to 'go circular', in case they had to return to Albania, in order not to lose the benefits and advantages they had accumulated in relation to their legal status. Migrants with Italian citizenship or a 'carta di soggiorno' (a 5-year valid permit to stay) tended to either stay put in Italy or in Albania, depending on their economic and family circumstances. In other words, those who are documented and employed, stay put; those who are not satisfactorily documented or employed...circulate!

### 2.3.2 Escaping Albanophobia and ‘being over the migration experience’

As was mentioned above, Albanians are no longer the main scapegoat for long-standing problems within Italian society, which they had been until recently. Nowadays, while new moral panics are erected regarding the presence of (Roma) Romanian migrants, Albanians are increasingly and equally arbitrarily defined as a virtuous example of integration. While this has always been true, it has only been publicly recognized very recently, with the vast majority of Albanians being regularly resident in Italy. During this process of strategic rehabilitation of Albanians within the Italian public consciousness, important experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, against which Albanians were able to develop their life trajectories, are sometimes both obfuscated in interview narratives and reproduced on other marginalized groups, as some Albanian migrants did seem to reproduce Romanophobic discourses and leitmotifs.

I see many Albanians who are angry with Romanians, they do not understand that the situation is very similar. They tell you things like ‘but they are different, they are meaner’. There is this opinion amongst Albanians that Romanians are mean. What I say is that if you consider how the situation was four years ago, it was clear that we were really the same thing. Maybe it is a kind of self-defence...because some time passed and they feel more integrated...by blaming someone else (circular migrant, male, 28, Italy).

Dynamics of othering and marginalization are key in (particularly older) interviewees’ decision to return to Albania and are often summarized (and glossed over) in terms of ‘the migration experience being over’. Experiences of stigmatization were more marked in the past and for people working in non-skilled jobs, while they have been relatively less relevant for students and people in skilled jobs and more institutional settings. Escaping stigmatization is one of the main reasons behind the decision to return and can obfuscate, together with nostalgia, the limited opportunities offered by the Albanian socio-economic context. This nostalgic obfuscation, combined with the superficial knowledge of the actual opportunities available in Albania, which is usually gained while on holiday, are a major factor behind the unfeasibility of most of the return projects of migrant individuals and families.

I don’t think I will go back and live in Italy for good. I thought about returning to Albania for a long time because it really gets at you all of this ‘Albanese’ talking. Even when they do not actually say it, you feel that they think it, that you are constantly prejudiced against and that gets difficult to bear in the long term. (circular migrant, female, 23, Albanian)

Compared with the dynamics of projective identification of prospective Albanian migrants of the 1990s, which tended to highlight ‘positive’ continuities and similarities between Albanian and Italian cultures, contemporary returnees and circular migrants seem to be much more aware of cultural differences and specificities. The existence of a more conservative mentality in Albania regarding established gender and family roles was recognised by most migrants. People above 40, particularly men, were ambivalent about the predicaments and opportunities posed by these values. Younger people and women, particularly if students, were most critical of these aspects and particularly of what they saw as a lack of entitlement to individual self-expression in the name of the sacrifice for the family, a neglect of professionalism and the conservatism of Albanian culture. Younger interviewees were the most sceptical about the possibility of an improvement of the socio-economic and cultural co-ordinates of Albania, while wishing to build a future in between Italy and Albania in order to reconcile their contradictory expectations, values and commitments.

I really don’t like one thing about Albanian culture, taboos. Like, ‘don’t talk to that one, don’t say this, don’t do that’. And what I hate most is people talking, talking, talking! I mind your business, you mind my business, together we mind everyone else’s, sadly that seems to be the motto over here... (circular migrant, man, 28, Albania)

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I came back because we returned as a family, but as soon as I can I will return to Milan, I am used to that mentality, here it is completely different. I like this country but, to give you an example, I am friendly with everybody and they misunderstand it. I was with a guy for three months last summer and I could not show to be happy, he told me I had to show a sad face otherwise people would talk behind his back and look down on him for being with me! I mean, help! (circular migrant, woman, 27, Albania)

A particularly recurrent criticism, and a parallel appreciation of the experience of emigration to Italy, highlighted the perceived 'lack of work culture' within Albanian society, which many saw in the unavailability of people to take up manual labour for the fear of being stigmatised socially.

When we first opened the bar and the cinema once back here... It was very difficult. I should have been a tough boss from the very start, people wanted to get paid to sit down and knit. While I was doing everything, I cleaned, I managed... People had no respect for work, they were stealing money from the cash, they felt ashamed to be seen cleaning the floor by other people... And they were very poor too!!! I mean, I regret having invested all of that money in that experience, we should have bought a home instead... I mean, there is no respect for work in many people, there is no understanding of working, producing, which is why I am not thinking of going back there. (circular migrant, woman, 35, Italy)

At the same time, many interviewee thought that the translation of the Italian 'culture of work' into Albanian society potentially brought about by returning migrants was a very important contribution to the improvement of the socio-economic situation at home.

I only know people who came back because they had to... But I think people returning will determine a change in society, because they will have experienced the mentality and culture of work that is active in Italy and they will have brought it with them. They will reproduce it there and in the process produce something for themselves and others... (...) Because in Albania...capitalism was misunderstood, it was translated in the worst possible form, as making money at all cost and in any possible way, without any plan or moral and that has damaged society and the economy a lot. (key informant, Italy)

Besides being the expression of the limitation of the Albanian labour market, young people's enduring oscillation between Albania and Italy also corresponds to their fundamental ambivalence towards the traditional values of Albanian culture, which are partially reproduced and challenged through the migration process.

I left when I was 16, with the speed boat, I just wanted to leave, to go somewhere. I lived in many places in Italy and worked very hard... I got papers as a minor and worked all the time ever since. I mean, I work from 2am until 7pm... And sometimes I dream of escaping home. But when I come home I like it...but I could not live here anymore. I don't know what I want to do, I have a void inside, I just go on and on. I know I could live back at the village, with nothing, doing little, but here in Italy we are more forward and even if I work too much...it's better. I think what I would like is to have an Italian lifestyle and Albanian rhythms...but that does not exist, does it? (circular migrant, male, 24, Italy)

At the moment I feel in between the earth and the sky, suspended. I am 27 and I don't know where to build a life for me, where to get married and set up a family. Here not for sure, but not even in Albania! Here in Italy it is not possible, because I am Albanian. I don't want to frame it in terms of racism but I went through quite a few episodes, even here at the university... And then there is the economic issue, it is difficult for Italians to find a job, can you imagine for an Albanian, and a woman on top of all, because there is a lot of machismo in Italian society. (...) In Albania I can't find myself anymore... I feel foreign now and 'Italianised'! I can't stand the prejudices people have against

women, the mentality here... So I guess at the moment I feel like...mobile...in between Albania and Italy, but a bit confused. (circular migrant, female, 27, Italy)

In this respect, forms of circular migration can be seen as corresponding to an ambivalent passage to a more syncretic, i.e. less oscillating and contradictory, assimilation of Albanian and Italian values, practices and opportunities, in the context of enduring economic instability and socio-cultural ambivalence and stagnation, both in Albania and in Italy.

### 2.3.3 Striving for migratory flexibility: the cycle of return, documentation, employment and circularity

The World Bank estimated the number of migrants returning to Albania in 2005 at around 83,000 (2008). IOM (2007) research shows that the majority of returning migrants are from Greece, that there is a positive attitude in Albania towards return within families with a history of migration and that return is conditional to the availability of secure employment. However, the same research shows that 60 per cent of respondents felt that reintegration upon their return was difficult, and only eight per cent reported receiving any assistance upon return (IOM 2007). These observations corroborate the findings of existing research, which highlights the way in which the lack of security and adequate financial and logistical infrastructure hampers the process of return and reinvestment into Albanian society (King *et al.* 2003). Although the idea and the intention to return is still mentioned by at least half of Albanian migrants and there is some return to Albania 'after all' (Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou 2005), other existing studies (Barjaba 2000; King and Mai 2008) confirm a weak propensity for Albanian migrants in Italy and elsewhere to return. Above all, this is because the current state of the Albanian economy offers little encouragement to do so.

Infrastructure is certainly a major obstacle to return, not just in terms of personal inconvenience, but also because it hampers attempts to set up functioning businesses, which need guaranteed supplies of power and water, as well as decent road connections (De Soto *et al.* 2002: 8). Existing studies (King and Mai 2008; Giorgio and Luisi 2001) indicate a business orientation on the part of many Albanian migrants who want to return, but there are many objective difficulties to an economically successful return. Moreover, these opportunities are distributed according to the new Tirana-centric map of socio-economic development and internal migration in Albania. The area around and between Durrës and Tirana is the economic heart of Albania and the only region where the population is growing, above all by internal migration. Elsewhere, opportunities for returnees are not so good. In areas away from the main towns, business prospects of returnee enterprises are limited by a shrinking market due to seasonal and permanent migration and depopulation. Missing infrastructure, poor market demand and depopulation are not the only obstacles to returnee enterprise. Business plans may also be frustrated by the lack of personal security, shortage of credit and general political instability. In these circumstances, success in the migration–development nexus in Albania can often depend on the pooling of family resources and expertise, rather than on the individual behaviour of the returnee acting on his (or her) own (King and Mai 2008).

As far as the specific issue of circular migration is concerned, King and Vullnetari (2003) highlight how the Albanian migration system can be seen as constantly evolving, and therefore how return migration can be seen as interlinked with the emergence of circular patterns. In this respect it is important to underline how existing research has highlighted that the length of stay abroad reduces the propensity to return. For example, Markova and Black (2005) established that Albanian migrants who have lived in London for several years sell their property in Albania and purchase houses in London. These findings are in line with research conducted by Bonifazi, Conti and Mamolo (2006), which indicates that Albanian migrants integrated relatively well into Italian society, and that the number of those who do not intend to return increases with the length of their stay in the country. The steady

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increase in the share of female emigrants who leave to join their husbands abroad (King and Vullnetari, 2003) reinforces the above findings. Complementary findings emerge from recent survey research by Lois Labrianidis and his colleagues, which shows that Albanian migrants in Italy, as well as being from less-poor backgrounds than those in Greece, also earn and remit more, but are less likely to be able to reintegrate back to Albania in the event of return migration (Labrianidis and Lyberaki 2004; Labrianidis and Hatziprokopiou 2005; see also de Zwager et al. 2005). Once again, this confirms the contrast between the back-and-forth nature of much Albanian migration to Greece, and its more permanent character in Italy. The different resources and patterns available to Albanians migrating to Greece and Italy are implicitly confirmed by Vadean and Piracha's analysis of the specific determinants of return and circular migration in Albania. Vadean and Piracha highlight the relationship between lack of education, seasonal work and circularity, as 'being a male, having a lower education level, originating from a rural area and having a positive temporary migration experience in the past are factors affecting circular migration'. At the same time, the amount of time spent abroad, legal residence, and accompanying family are positively related to permanent migration, while age, secondary education, failed migration or fulfilment of a savings target determine permanent return after the first trip.

Finally, a recent survey on 'The Contribution of Human Resources Development to Migration Policy in Albania' (ETF 2007) further corroborates the observations and analyses reviewed above. The survey highlights how a large majority of returnees were young (54.0% of them belonged to the 18–34 age group), males (89%) and had medium levels of education (35.7% secondary general and 20.4% secondary vocational). As it emerges from other literature reviewed in the report, the levels of education of returning migrants from Italy, the UK and Germany were higher than those from Greece. Returning women tended to be more educated than men. The most important reasons for migration were economic and the survey shows that most returning migrants worked for the longest period of time in the migration country in de-skilling sectors such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality and catering (these last two, plus domestic help, were particularly relevant for female migrants). Only 10.2% of the returning migrants increased their skill level. The answers about the reasons for return varied according to level of education and employment status. Those with a low level of education came back mostly because they were forced, or for family reasons. People with university education, besides family reasons, were more likely to come back because they wanted to start a business (11.3%). Very few returning migrants (1.6%) were aware of any government support programmes intended to facilitate return. On their return to Albania, 74.3% of respondents found a job after an average search period of 3.4 months. Furthermore, the survey results highlight the existence of a positive relationship between returned migration and self-employment, as they show that 51.5% of returning migrants became self-employed or an employer. The remaining migrants found salaried employment. However, at the same time, the survey indicates that 42.9% of returning migrants wished to re-emigrate from Albania, the main reasons being: 'have no job/cannot find job', 'to improve standard of living' and 'nature of work unsatisfactory'. Finally, the survey highlights an inversely proportional relation between the desire to re-emigrate and the level of education. This trend can be seen as highlighting three main aspects: the higher rate of success of educated returnees, the relevance of socio-economic and cultural factors other than employment in the decision to re-emigrate; and, following Kilic et al. (2007) the possibility that many returning migrants had not yet attained an appropriate target level of savings and skills to successfully re-integrate in Albania by engaging in self-employment activities on return.

The findings of the METOIKOS research project confirm these broad trends and analyses and offer more nuances regarding the intricate relationship between return, socio-economic integration (whether at home or abroad) and the circularisation of migration. The majority of migrants interviewed in this research were reluctantly and ambivalently oscillating between Albania and Italy. For most, circulating is a way to achieve the migratory flexibility they need to negotiate their livelihoods between societies and labour markets characterised by different opportunities, predicaments and

degrees of socio-economic and political instability. In other words, for most interviewees circularity is a necessity, rather than a choice. In many cases circularity is the outcome of an unfeasible/unsustainable return, in both economic and legal documentation terms. While some interviewees, usually students (and particularly women), underlined the positive aspects associated with living in between the Albanian and Italian social settings, most people involved in circular patterns emphasise the toll going back and forward takes on their lives in economic and emotional terms. Many interviewees first decided to return and live in Albania and then felt that they had to keep working/studying in Italy as a way to support their return in the short-medium term, as economic and professional opportunities in Albania could not meet all of their needs and aspirations.

For a few years we had two activities, one in Italy and one in Albania and we kept going back and forward all the time... It was good in a way as we could keep both of our social lives here and there, but then it started also being stressful, living in two places means double worry and double work. Then with my child I could not move as freely because of school and everything else, so we decided to return (circular migrant, female 27, Albania)

It is a difficult question, whether I am thinking of returning or not. In a moment like this, in which Italy is not doing very well and I am having problem with my papers, I am considering returning to Albania. But then as soon as I fix the papers I will give myself some more time here. I am at the third year of my doctorate. I don't know what to say as I want to try both here and there. I mean I want to follow a double track and get the best option available between the two countries... (circular migrant, female, 30, Italy)

In many cases, interviewees were in the process of negotiating a return home or settlement abroad through circularity, rather than aiming at building a circular future for themselves. Only a minority of interviewees decided to build a professional and emotional life stretching across Albania and Italy. The majority have oscillated between Albania and Italy, returned or are considering return for an inextricable mix of reasons, including: wanting to escape stigmatization or even 'being abroad', nostalgia of homeland, being closer to the family at home or abroad, building one's family at home or abroad, having access to key services in Italy (notably the NHS), keeping legally resident in Italy, maintaining one's family at home or abroad, exploring new situations and social settings, and studying in order to improve one's employability in Albania and/or in Italy. The combination of these factors sometimes obliterates an objective evaluation of the sustainability of the project of return, which then makes circularity necessary to sustain life at home and/or abroad.

There is a direct connection between legal status, social capital and the possibility to resort to different forms of settlement and circularization. People who have been longer in Italy have the greater chances of being regular and to build the socio-economic capital and skills, as well as the greatest nostalgia for the homeland, underpinning a project of return. In many cases, this involves opening, or the intention of opening, an economic activity, as a way to:

- maintain the work ethos, working conditions and income level they could enjoy in Italy;
- provide themselves and their relatives at home with employment opportunities; and
- reconcile their family responsibilities and attachments with their professional achievements and individual ambitions.

In general, people try to reproduce in Albania the economic activities they were involved in while in Italy and tend to remain in touch and co-operate with their employers in Italy, through the exchange of machineries, products and know how. The individual (or nuclear family) scale of investments combined to the fact that most migrant tended to work for small and medium enterprises while in Italy means that most 'diasporic' enterprises remain rather limited in scale and fragile in terms of financial sustainability and knowledge transfer. However, there are some more structured and larger scale forms of co-operation, like call centres and transportation firms, usually in co-operation with Italian investors.

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I mean, it's a dream for each Albanian to bring the work experience they had in Italy back here, because they are proud of it! Like my idea, after having worked in the best bars, restaurants and clubs in Florence, after having worked as a DJ in Italy, I decided to open a lounge bar here. I mean, it will be a rustic lounge bar, because this is not Tirana, but it is important to try and bring back something, to change things. Here in Albania, lots of people complain about the lack of many things and then say it's not important. But it is very important! Everything is important, if you do something, you have to do it well, even the little leaf of basil is important. This is why I am trying to open a quality venue here, because we need to start from somewhere, for things to change. (circular migrant, male, 32, Albania).

I have papers in Italy because I first went there as a minor. I learnt a lot there, by working in vineyards, wine bars, nice 'alternative' restaurants... That is where I got the idea of opening an agricultural tourism place, but I don't want to live there for the moment. I want to go there to keep updated, I would like to promote the slowfood concept in Albania, but I don't feel ready yet. This place is more ready than what it seems, it is less of a cultural desert than what it seems. I think there are possibilities here, but it is difficult to have changes fast because the place was devastated by a very violent consumerist and capitalist development. When communism went, everything went with it, respects, morals... It's a bit like water, they say water is life, but when the dam breaks down it's another matter altogether. (circular migrant, male, 24, Albania)

Often, the analysis of the feasibility of the project of return is based on personal priorities rather than on the actual evaluation of the economic and social context one returns to. For instance, most returning migrants want to set out as self-employed in order to avoid the poor working conditions and the authoritarian relations which often characterize employed work in Albania. In the absence of specific skills or of the economic and social capital to invest in the sector they worked in while in Italy, migrants have opened a proliferation of bars and restaurants which are not sustainable in a relatively poor country like Albania.

I live in Albania, but I go and come back from Italy every two months as have people offering me work there as a painter, decorator, etc. Here in Albania, in Durres, we opened a restaurant, which is working mainly in the summer. We thought we had enough money when we returned, but then we had to get some credit and the restaurant alone is not enough to pay it back. (circular migrant, male, 45, Albania)

In some cases, returning migrants invested a considerable amount of hard-earned savings into the setting up of venues offering recreational opportunities which do not match the conservative mentality of the socio-economic possibilities of the contexts they return to. Again, the desire to reconcile 'being home' with the possibility of enjoying and offering more hedonistic lifestyles and diverse forms of consumption can fuel a potentially unfeasible project of return, as the context being invested upon might not be able to afford or interested in the challenge. In fact, the lack of infrastructure, credit, gender inequality and discrimination, unemployment, deskilling, the unaccountability, instability and corruption of political culture and the lack of a work ethics enabling people's self-fulfillment through work are the most mentioned problems encountered by returning migrants, as well as the main reasons for their return to Italy, which often translates into reluctant circularity.

I mean I tried to invest in Albania, and so did my brother. They opened restaurants, but they will never get the licence and... I invested in transport, with mini-buses, fast delivery services, I was the first person to open a go-cart place here in Albania. But it never worked. The issue of the police, of corruption, documents...is very important. In the last two-three years I think Albania has been alienating all Albanians. Like me and my brothers we invested all our money and even went into debt, but then the first person who goes to the police can destroy you... Or like when you want to buy a house... I wanted to buy a flat in Tirana but in the end you will never be sure it is yours with the laws

and the corruption we have... I'd rather buy it here in Milan, rent it out and live with the money, or not? (circular migrant, male, 37, Italy)

Because of the enduring economic and political instability in Albania, obtaining and keeping legal status in Italy (and abroad in general) is still an absolute priority for individuals and their families. Having documents abroad has always been considered as a safety valve by most Albanian individuals and households and was one of the main motives for migrating abroad. Most interviewees waited to achieve legal status before considering returning to or investing in an economic activity in Albania. For many circularity is the only way to keep legal, in a situation of enduring instability, by renewing their seasonal or two-yearly work permit until they can obtain more durable forms of documentation. This is one of the main reasons why assisted repatriation, which implies renouncing to the residence permit, is only an option for people who face deportation and expulsion as an alternative, while they are not considered by anyone else.

There are many who keep a relation with Italy in order to remain documented, long after they stopped working in Italy and returned to Albania. Here they don't spend much money, they try and get the odd job, many in construction... And they hope for the Italian economy to pick up again, because life there is less stressful, even if you work more, you feel safer in terms of work and everything else. (circular migrant, male, 55, Albania)

The timing was not good, but I had no choice. My son was born in November 2000 and I left for Italy in July 2001. I chose to go that early after he was born because it was the only moment in which the three of us could go together. The general situation here in Albania was not great, but most importantly I understood that the visa was going to expire soon and that the only way not to waste the possibility to go away from Albania and to keep the right to be in Italy was to use it. So we did. (circular migrant, female, 40, Albania)

The rural-urban divide influences the development of specific forms of re-settlement on return. People from and returning to villages tend to be reabsorbed within family structures and to have looser contacts with Italy, mainly in the form of staying periodically in touch telephonically with their former employers and friends in order to keep the door open in case of future necessity and also just out of social respect, affection and loyalty. However, most people move from rural to urban contexts on return, even if only in peri-urban new settlements outside the city centres. In this respect, the process of urbanisation and of international migration are parallel strategies adopted by families and their individual members and need to be analysed as parallel aspects of contemporary social transformations in Albania. In the North, only people who were deported, or became undocumented or faced emergencies returned to rural or mountainous areas. In these cases the family network protects 'failed' migrants from the economic consequences of their return, while the social and psychological impact of a failed migration project can be very hard. In the South of Albania, the relationship between the success of the migratory project and the return to a rural environment is more complex, as some 'successful returnees' managed to build a house in the city for their families and chose to live in, or to commute from, the village of origin in order to run their business in agriculture and to enjoy a higher quality of life which they associate with living in the countryside.

Students occupy the other extreme of the socio-economic spectrum. They enter Italy documented; they avoid, relatively, stigmatisation and marginalisation; and they gain skills and qualifications which enable them to have better chances to find a good job back in Albania. However, their experiences of return are often marked by the frustration of their desire to find a job according to their qualification, while they tend to feel most disconnected with the conservative mentality and the family-centred and patriarchal values of their country of origin. As a consequence, many try to maintain a contact with Italy and aim to go back to Italy to work regularly and to achieve more skills and specialisation in order to meet their professional ambitions at home. By achieving more cultural capital abroad, Albanian students attempt to overtake the impediments to social mobility they meet back home,

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notably the allocation of work opportunities according to personal liaisons and not merit, which they describe in terms of 'corruption'. At the same time, they negotiate an in-between socio-economic and cultural space which enables them to enjoy selective aspects of the homes between which they circulate.

#### 2.3.4 The intricacy of family and economic circularity

In the Albanian case, family dynamics cannot be meaningfully separated from the labour-economic dimension when trying to understand the main forces behind the migration/circularization nexus. Family networks are the main support and solidarity structure through which the Albanian migration phenomenon unfolded in Italy and in the rest of its diasporic ramifications. At a deeper level and besides the logistical implications of people's reliance on family networks, most migrants referred to themselves as part of their (extended) families, even when this is hypothesized in the future, such as in the case of young people.

I left with my family when I was 7. It was a family reunification visa, 17 years ago... My father found a job as a caretaker in a building, in Milan. My mother was working as an assistant to elderly people, in a home; she even got a diploma to do that. Then, a few years ago, because of the crisis, my father lost his job and my mum started having back problems, so we all came back. It was a real shame for me because I had almost got all the criteria to ask for citizenship, I have now lost them. They are lucky as they have long term permits, which they keep updated by going to Italy often. But I will go back at the first opportunity because I can't get used to the mentality here, it is too different from how I was bought up in Italy. (circular migrant, female, 24, Albania)

I would have liked to stay in Italy, but because I only had seasonal contracts I did not have the right to take the family with me then... And I also wanted my children to have a good education, so I sent them to my brother and to my brother in law in Italy, and they are still completing their studies. I wish I could join them but with the laws that Berlusconi introduced I can't claim for family unification and they only give you short terms contracts. At the moment I am looking for someone who could offer me a long term work contract, so that when my younger daughter completes her studies here in Albania, me and my wife can join the rest of our family in Italy, through family unification. (circular migrant, male 51, Albania)

My family is now in Italy, we don't know what is going to happen in the future. For the moment, they keep their permit to stay. My sons are working in the tiles factory and my wife and daughters will probably return once they get the permit to stay. I came back because I got papers and I now work between here and there. I think this is what we will all do in the future, as things are changing all the time and you need to keep a foot in the two places. (circular migrant, male, 55, Albania)

Well, I went to Italy to be with my twin brother, because we can't stay away from each other. I came to study. Then my boyfriend came, after a few months, undocumented. It was very difficult at the time, we had to be careful, which became even more difficult because I became pregnant while we are still living at the student dorms. Now that our parents are ageing, we are trying to find a way to be closer to them, maybe by opening a small activity in Albania or by getting them to come here... But they would not be able to get their pensions while here, which is a problem. We have considered returning to Albania, but we are working here and my son is going to school... So it is not an option for the moment, we are going to spend as much time as possible there during holiday for the time being. (circular migrant, female, 32, Italy)

It is the system of family affiliations and livelihoods which needs to be considered when understanding the nexus between circularity, legal documentation and socio-economic sustainability, not only individual experiences. For instance, one partner of the same family unit can work in Italy

while the other takes care of children/the elderly in Albania. At the same time, one partner can work in Albania while the other completes her studies in Italy, in order to have a better position, which would benefit the family in the longer term. Being close to an ageing parent, to a partner and/or children are often the main motivations stimulating people to return and/or circularity and sometimes override economic and migration legal status considerations.

### 2.3.5 (The absence of) Significant Policies

The interplay between migration, integration, return and circularity takes place notwithstanding the lack of supporting policies and targeted initiatives at a governmental level both in Albania and in Italy. As we mentioned in the previous subsection, networks of family members and friends are the most important source of information, support and solidarity for Albanian migrants, both at home and abroad.

In Albania, nobody received help from the government in setting up an economic activity on his or her return or in obtaining information about migration. Only one interviewee availed herself of a recruitment programme promoted by the government, through the IOM. The networks associated with the Catholic Church were a significant source of opportunities, support and solidarity for many migrants in Shkoder, where the Catholic Church has historically been more established. Providing assistance and support to returning migrants is seen as a priority for future governmental interventions, as most interviewees feel that such initiatives could attract resources and knowledge which would benefit the socio-economic development of Albania. People dealing with import-export activities felt that the taxation regime was too high for them to break even, particularly in times of crises. All migrants though that the lack of an efficient road network and of regular electricity and water supply was preventing Albania from developing an economy based on production, rather than on construction and import-export services fuelled by remittances. On a positive note, some migrants appreciated the relatively low level of taxation for firms in Albania, whose potential for the setting up of new enterprises was seen as being undermined by a parasitical and inefficient bureaucracy and by the widespread practices of favouritism and corruption.

The continuing political instability and the lack of a culture of democratic governance were also blamed for the unavailability of foreign companies to invest their capital and knowledge in Albania. Most returnees complained about the endurance of a culture of personalism and corruption which was blamed for the unequal redistribution of already limited work opportunities. Almost all migrants admired Italy's 'work culture', which they understood in terms of the valorisation of the experience and value of professionalism and work per se. Many felt that the shame associated with 'humble' professions and activities, such as cleaning or taking care of the elderly, in Albania was undermining the dynamism they felt the country needed to lift itself out of poverty and instability.

In Italy, very few migrants resorted to the services of Albanian associations and authorities as sources of information, support and solidarity. Again, most relied on family and friends' network, who guided them through very complex and often discouraging bureaucratic procedures. The regularisation campaigns that took place in the 1990s were the main sources of regularisation for Albanian migrants, many of which complained about the restrictions posed by the 2001 Bossi-Fini revision of the 1998 Turco-Napolitano law. The impossibility to convert a seasonal permit into a yearly one and then upgrade gradually towards an indefinite leave to remain and citizenship, a restriction which was introduced by the Bossi-Fini, is mentioned by many migrants, and by seasonal migrants in particular, as an important obstacle to their integration in Italy and to their return to Albania.

This year I decided not to go anymore to Italy, as they only offered me short contracts and short permits to stay. It's not worth it in terms of money, the rules have changed now and it's not like

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before. They said you could convert the seasonal visa into a longer one, but this is not possible anymore. Now, I have a job here, but... I am changeable, like the weather at the moment... I don't know if I am going to stay here as I am not used to work without rules and contracts. And the pay is low. Then the way of working is different. (circular migrant, male, 34, Albania)

The main problem I had was documents; that's why I won't work as seasonal anymore. They give you short term documents as a seasonal worker, for 6-9 months only...and they cost more than documents for 5-10 years!!! If I had a 5 years long permit it would be ideal, it would be cheaper, I could come here for a couple of months, then go home whenever I finished and then come back again. (circular migrant, male, 52, Albania)

In many cases, the impediments introduced by the Bossi-Fini law to the process of regularisation forced migrants to stay in Italy even in times of crises, or to circulate irregularly, in order to keep legal, because their mobility was de-facto criminalised. On a positive note, the granting to migrants (particularly students) of the right to use the receipt of the permit to stay rather than the permit itself (which was often not ready until it was expired) when returning home for holidays allowed many to circulate between Albania and Italy while they were documented and to remain in touch with their families and friends on both shores.

The liberalisation of EU Schengen tourist visa was seen very favourably by all interviewees. Many felt that the main associated advantage was the possibility for migrants in Italy to keep in touch with their families, which could finally visit them, and also for potential migrants in Albania to try and see the actual possibilities available in Italy, without having to commit to the social and cultural capital needed to put together a work permit. Most migrants felt that the liberalisation of EU visas would not have coincided with an outflow of people as Albanian people were more aware of the actual opportunities available in Italy and also of the unfeasibility of working and living in Italy undocumented. At the same time, many migrants were also disappointed, but not surprised, about the rejection of Albania's application to be a candidate member of the European Union, which they saw as linked to a validation of their cultural and historical heritage, to a higher level of investment in infrastructures and industrial production and to a potential stabilisation and democratisation of their polities.

### 3. Concluding remarks

The Albanian migration to Italy is a strategic context for the study of circular migration for several interrelated reasons. Firstly, Italy played an important historical role in the development of the Albanian national identity and in the emergence of a transnational imaginary which encompassed its post-communist migration experience. Secondly, Italy was the second most important foreign destination for Albanian migrants and a very relevant geopolitical actor in the development of the Albanian migration and development agendas after 1991. Thirdly, Albanians in Italy were both intensely stigmatized and particularly integrated within Italian societies. The specificity of the diasporic experience and of the socio-economic and cultural capital accumulated by Albanian migrants in Italy offer an ideal background for the study of circularity, especially in a comparative perspective to the experience of Albanians in Greece.

Within the Albanian migration to Italy, the interplay between migration, integration, return and circularity unfolds notwithstanding the lack of supporting policies and targeted initiatives at a governmental level both in Albania and in Italy. The absence of an overarching model of immigrant incorporation in Italy and of policies supporting returning migrants in Albania has meant that networks of family members and friends have been the most important source of information, support and solidarity for Albanian migrants, both at home and abroad. Because of their hard work, their preventive assimilation within Italian culture and their resourceful networks, Albanian migrants' fast progress along the integration trajectory has been achieved in a short space of time compared to longer-established immigrants in Italy. However, until 2008, more than any other group in recent years, Albanians were subject to a brutal campaign of stigmatisation and criminalisation by the Italian media. The paradoxical coexistence between aspirational integration into and selective Albanophobic exclusion from Italian society underpinned Albanian migrants' partially-successful integration into Italian society.

Nowadays, while new moral panics are erected regarding the presence of (Roma) Romanian migrants, Albanians are increasingly and equally arbitrarily defined as a virtuous example of positive integration. While this has always been true, it has only been publicly recognized very recently, with the vast majority of Albanians being regularly resident in Italy. During this process of strategic rehabilitation of Albanians within the Italian public consciousness, important experiences of discrimination and social exclusion, against which Albanians were able to develop their life trajectories, risk being obfuscated in the present and forgotten in the past. While it is true that the majority of Albanians were able to extricate themselves from poverty and marginalisation, it is also true that their experience of emigration and return unfolded in the absence of support to their integration in Italy or their reintegration in Albania. In the process, many Albanian migrants keep being both ambivalently integrated and marginalised within and between Albania and Italy, in relation to their legal status and their socio-economic needs and priorities more in general. As a result, they resort to circulating between the two countries while waiting for sustainable opportunities of more permanent integration in Italy and/or re-integration in Albania.

The findings of the METOIKOS research project do not corroborate a politicised celebration of the circularisation of migration as a win-win situation for both countries of origin and destination. The majority of migrants interviewed in this research were reluctantly and ambivalently oscillating between Albania and Italy. For most, circulating is a way to achieve the migratory flexibility they need to negotiate their livelihoods between societies and labour markets characterised by the different opportunities, predicaments and degrees of socio-economic and political instability. Most Albanian migrants do not choose to circulate, but accept to do so in order to secure the sustainability of projects of settlement abroad and/or return home which are still not completed or which became unsustainable in the context of the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. For younger people and women, particularly if they are studying, oscillating between Albania and Italy is both a way to reconcile the

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contradictory moral worlds brought together by their diasporic trajectories and a way to gain the socio-cultural capital to bypass widespread dynamics of corruption and preferential access to the labour market in Albania.

In the last ten years, returning to Albania has become a priority for many older and younger migrants who want to capitalise at home on the knowledge and experiences they gained in Italy, while being in the company of their family and friends and living in a context in which they are not made feel as undesirable foreign people. However, these ambitions clash against enduring political instability and economic underdevelopment in Albania, which makes obtaining and keeping legal documentation in Italy a priority for the socio-economic survival of families and individuals. In the present context therefore, those who are fully documented, tend to either stay put in Italy or return to Albania. Those who are not, have to circulate in order to meet the legal, social and economic requirements of a sustainable integration in Italy and/or return to Albania.

The findings of the *Metoikos* project suggest that the current situation could be strongly improved by providing Albanian prospective and current migrants with the possibility of looking for employment in Italy and to circulate between Italy under conditions of both flexibility and legality. The life trajectories of Albanians in Italy are marked by the difficulty in obtaining and maintaining legal status. Allowing them to oscillate between Albania and Italy with the receipt of the permit to stay, rather than being locked in Italy waiting for permits which never came on time, was a necessary concession, in the face of the inefficiency of the Italy bureaucracy. The liberalisation of EU entry visa is only a partially positive step in this respect, as it does not allow migrants to work legally in Italy, while allowing them in the country as visitors for a short period of time. As most migrants rightly indicated, Albania's full participation into the EU system of rights and opportunities would be the best way to for the all subjects involved to capitalise on the socio-economic and cultural potential embedded in the Albanian migration experience. However, before that will happen, the introduction of creative and flexible instruments could interface the migratory potential of the Albanian population with the increased flexibility of the Italian economy in mutually advantageous terms.

In Italy seasonal work has been managed in the last 12 years through databases and training/selection initiatives which had limited success. More in general, the implementation of quota-based managed migration schemes in Italy has systematically fallen short of the actual needs of the labour market, which implicitly and unofficially relied on the presence of irregular migrant labour. So far, Italian attempts to manage migration ended up by operating as a retrospective and contorted mechanism of regularization, which produced a highly exploitable and ambivalently documented migrant labour force (King and Mai 2009). However, some of the creative solutions adopted by the Italian governments in order to meet the quota systems might have a role within contemporary debates about the 'circularisation' of migration. For instance, between 2000 and 2001, in order to implement the Italo-Albanian bilateral agreement and to contrast the effects of the stigmatisation and exclusion of Albanians from the Italian labour market, the Italian centre-left Prodi government allowed selected (1500) migrants to obtain 'job-seeking' visas, which could be converted in a work visa after they obtained a permanent contract. IOM functionaries defended the success of this scheme and claimed that it allowed most participants to get access to regular employment and also to avoid the risks relative to irregular entry in the country. Successful as it might likely have been, the 'job-seeking' visa was scrapped by the subsequent Berlusconi centre-right government as it was deemed too vulnerable to manipulation from migrants who did not correspond to the needs of Italian society.

Flexible and fluid instruments such as the 'job-seeking' visa are unlikely to be re-proposed in current times, which are marked by the proliferation of new and old moral panics about the presence of migrants in Italy (Mai 2010). However, the 'job-seeking' visa might prove to be a possible policy suggestion, should it be associated with the political opportunity to promote the 'circularity' against the 'integration' of migrants. The combination of legality, mobility and flexibility embedded in such an instrument would provide prospective and current migrants with the best opportunity to look for

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dignified and regular working conditions, as well as allowing them to go back should the experience of migration be unsatisfactory or unsuccessful. At the same time, the offering of 'job-seeking' visa towards in relation to strategic jobs and skills would enable the Italian labour market to meet its needs, while Albania would get some needed relief from a still problematically high youth unemployment rate.

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