

# Reintegration Patterns of Return migrants in the Albanian Labor Market

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*Abstract:* - Over the last few years, the global economic crisis triggered an unexpected increase in the number of migrants returning to Albania. Regardless of the returnees' typology, the upward trend in return migration highlights the need for measures that could tackle reintegration challenges upon return to their country of origin. In practice, reintegration support consists mainly of project-based programs which are limited and not sustainable over time. The primary goal of this study is to analyze returnees' patterns and mechanisms of reintegration in the Albanian labor market. The study provides some evidence-based recommendations for policy stakeholders to design targeted reintegration programs and policies for returnees aiming to promote the investment of financial capital, know-how, and know who earned abroad. The findings show that returnees perceived the business environment in Albania as being unfavorable for the successful development of their business. The country's infrastructure gaps, feeble public investment, non-transparent business procedures regarding investments and soft loans, bureaucracy, and widespread informality seem to hamper foreign entrepreneurial investment from returnees.

*Key-Words:* - Return migrants, reintegration, labor market, patterns, strategy

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## 1 Introduction

Return migration is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by different structural and personal factors, such as *push factors*- factors motivating migrants to leave the foreign country; *pull factors*- usually referring to the economic and political situation of the native country; the individual characteristics of migrants and their agency; their migration experience, family relationships, and ties, etc. All these factors shape patterns of voluntary return, [1]. Over the last few years, the global economic crisis triggered an unexpected increase in the number of migrants returning to Albania. According to the National Albanian Household Migration Survey for the period 2011-2019, the total number of Albanian returnees by 2019 was estimated at approximately 95,064 citizens. A considerable percentage (85%) of the immigrants used to live and work in the three most popular emigrants' intended foreign countries, namely Greece, Italy, and Germany, [2]. Although the main drivers that usually shape outward

migration in the case of forced return were mostly associated with the hosting countries' migration regimes and policies, which might have led to the forced deportation of irregular migrants.

Regardless of the returnees' typology, the upward trend in return migration highlights the need for measures that need to tackle the reintegration challenges upon return to their country of origin. In practice, reintegration support consists mainly of project-based initiatives which are quite limited and not sustainable over time. In general, the lack of information on the services offered to returnees, as well as insufficient and inadequate institutional, human capacities at a local level are considered to be major barriers hampering their patterns of reintegration. Despite the Albanian government's measures in facilitating the reintegration of returned migrants, mainly through sectoral strategies, such measures seem to be highly fragmented, keeping returnees at the margins of the mainstream programs. So far, these programs and

policies have resulted in being insignificant and non-sustainable. Apart from this, comprehensive studies and accurate statistical data on returned migrants and their potential development at a national level are scarce. The 2021 European Commission Report on Albania, [3] pointed out that the institutional framework on the reintegration of returnees and particularly those in vulnerable categories should be improved with clear attributions of responsibilities among national and local actors.

On the other hand, despite the challenges migrants face during their reintegration process, they can also play a very important role in the economic and social development of a country. Returnees can bring back to Albania their savings, human capital (i.e. skills and know-how, new mentality and ideas, working habits, etc.), as well as their social capital. So far, the studies assessing the situation of Albanian returned migrants have only produced a partial picture of the situation, excluding the returnees' challenges and opportunities in the labor market. To address this gap, we have undertaken a thorough assessment of the returnees' situation in Albania. We relied on primary data, collected through 25 face-to-face in-depth interviews with Albanian returned migrants from Greece and Italy, as well as secondary data and desk review. The main aim of this study is to provide a robust understanding of returnees' reintegration dynamics in the labor market and the challenges they face upon return. In addition to this, the study aims to shed light on the human capital that returnees bring back contributing positively to the development of their native country. The study provides some evidence-based recommendations for policy stakeholders to design targeted reintegration programs and policies for returnees aiming to promote the investment of financial capital, know-how, and know who earned abroad.

This paper is structured into seven main sections. The paper starts with the introduction section followed by the methodology of the study. The third section provides an overview of patterns of return migration focusing on the contextualization, challenges faced by return migrants, benefits for the home country, and the reintegration theory and structural barriers migrants face. The fourth section analyses the institutional and regulatory framework and gaps in return migration. The fifth section starts with an overview of profiles of return migrants and reasons for returning followed by the next section on the labor market integration challenges of returnees. The final section concludes

and provides recommendations on how to enhance the effectiveness of reintegration measures.

## 2 Methodology

The primary goal of this study is to develop a robust understanding of returnees' patterns and mechanisms of reintegration in the Albanian labor market. This research adopts a combination of primary and secondary data. The primary data consists of 25 in-depth interviews conducted with Albanian returnees from Greece and Italy. From the interviews conducted, almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the samples consisted of returnees from Greece and  $\frac{1}{4}$  from Italy. The fieldwork was carried out in 2021 to better capture the dynamics of return in the aftermath of the economic crises and then it was supported by new data to understand the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on returnees. To ensure a geographic representation, we selected our respondents from three main regions in Albania: Voskopoja (north), Tirana (center), and Fier (south).

The questionnaire consisted of 14 open-ended questions which lasted from one hour to approximately 90 minutes and were all tape-recorded with the prior consent of the respondents. The interviews broadly employed a life-history approach, exploring life-course experiences in the intended foreign countries and then their post-return experience and reintegration challenges too. The reason we decided to choose this instrument is that it enables a better understanding and exploration of the topic and facilitates communication with the subject. In this way, not only does it help in collecting structured information, but it also encourages the interviewed subjects to provide their in-depth opinions, experience, and attitudes. When conducting this research, we looked at returnees' inflows consisting of Albanian citizens returning voluntarily to their country of origin or habitual residence usually after having spent at least one year in another country. Our access to participants largely depended on the 'snowballing sampling method' generated through multiple informal networks and referrals from local grassroots NGOs, operating in the targeted areas. The target group consists of 13 women and 12 men, aged 18 years old and above, who had stayed more than one year abroad and had at least one working experience in the host country. Concerning the returnees' educational level, the majority of the respondents had finished high school, nearly 67.5%. Meanwhile, 19% of them did have a

university degree. Out of these percentages, 38% of them migrated between the years 1991-1995, 49% between 1996-2000, and the rest after 2000. As for occupational status before returning, women were mostly employed in the service-providing and domestic sectors, whereas men were employed in the construction sector.

Among our target group of Albanian returnees, the returnees' inflows were mostly triggered by the Greek economic crisis. Referring to the latter one, it explains the fact that almost 81% of them set up their own business, which implies a high preference of returnees for self-employment mostly in the sectors of industry where they have gained the "know-how" and some experience.

As mentioned above, the data collected from the research were analyzed using the Maxqda software program, aiming at generating and analyzing qualitative data. The participants' information was coded to respect the confidentiality of their personal information and the ethics of the research conducted. The empirical findings from the analysis of interviews were supplemented with secondary data collected from official statistics, desk review of reports, as well as other official documents. Official information requests were sent to the appropriate institutions dealing with migration, the labor market, and business investment issues. The desk review included an extensive contemporary literary review of reports realized by international and national organizations, governmental publications, and academic articles examining the current state of research and policies on returned migration. In addition to this, it consisted of an existing analysis of regulatory and institutional frameworks in Albania. This review was also used as a preliminary means to identify the gaps and give a snapshot of the current situation.

In conclusion, the preliminary findings and recommendations will be consulted and discussed in a roundtable with stakeholders, consisting of senior representatives from CSOs, academics, key decision, and policy-makers from governmental authorities working on migration issues. The consultation aimed at validating the primary data obtained through fieldwork and fine-tuning the main findings of this study.

### 3 Patterns of Return Migration

#### 3.1 Characteristics of Recent Return Migration in Albania

International migration theoretical frameworks have shown that return decisions are part of a highly complex migration story, [4]. Danaj reveals that the factors that push migrants to come back to their home country have been divided into two groups: push factors, consisting of motivational reasons to leave the country of destination, and pull factors consisting of economic and political circumstances of the home country, [1]. In recent years, the return wave of Albanian migrants from Greece and Italy was mainly due to the economic recession and austerity measures in the aftermath of the crisis, [5]. Data from INSTAT and IOM provide some interesting information regarding the profiles and characteristics of return migration in the past few years, [6]. Those who return prefer to settle in Tirana and the vast majority of returnees are young men and part of the working-age population. Recent data from the National Albanian Household Migration Survey for the period 2011-2019 show that the total number of Albanian returnees by 2019 was estimated at approximately 95,064 citizens. A considerable percentage (85%) of the immigrants used to live and work in the three most popular emigrants' intended foreign countries, namely Greece, Italy, and Germany, [6].

Studies have shown that assistance and reintegration support to return migrants remain a big challenge. According to IOM's definition: "Reintegration can be defined as the re-inclusion or re-incorporation of a person into a group or process enabling migrants to reincorporate into the society of their country of origin. It enables them to be involved in the country's political and economic life, and cultural and social activities as well. Some of the reintegration obstacles faced by returnees are listed below:

Reintegration into social and economic life, due to lack of information on the available services. Bureaucratic procedures can impede the effective reintegration of migrants;

Return migrants often lack personal identification documents, making it more difficult for them to be included as beneficiaries of active labor market policies. Moreover, the lack of opportunities and the low level of trust in institutions further disincentives returnees to register and seek support from local institutions.

A large portion of migrant workers also faces specific challenges in terms of recognition of skills

and qualifications. It seems that oftentimes the skill set of the returnees may not always match the labor market needs.

Reinsertion into the education system is another impediment to their reintegration as they need to cope with both administrative obstacles to enroll in school as well as the unwelcoming attitudes and prejudices displayed by their peers [7], [8], [6].

### **3.2 Return Migration: Why Is It Potentially Important for the Origin/Native Country?**

Albania can benefit to a great extent from the skills, 'know-how', mentality, ideas, and working habits returnees bring in the country. Return migrants have a huge potential for human and social capital. The transfer of financial capital (remittances and accumulated savings) that return migrants bring back to their country can soothe liquidity shortages. Return migrants are considered to be a scarce source and they can be strategically deployed to stimulate the country's development. Moreover, Labrianidis and Lyberaki, [9] and Baldwin-Edwards, [10] argue that immigrants "tend to return to their country of origin after all and they are more likely to consider investments in small micro-enterprises, which give them opportunities to employ their family members as well and invest all the accumulated capital. A large number of studies King and Vullnetari, [11]; Dustmann and Kirchkamp, [12]; Ilahi, [13]; McCormick and Wahba, [14]; Mesnard, [15] argue that it does not matter whether return migrants register themselves as job seeker or entrepreneurs, the country itself would profit from all forms of capital they bring back. It is widely shown that there is an increase in the start-up investment curve and self-employment, transfer of skills and knowledge. Despite all of the above, it depends on the country's policy premises to effectively utilize the human, financial and social capital of returnees.

Different aspects of the reintegration of returnees have been partially tackled by various studies that have, for example, analyzed returnees' reintegration into the education, employment, or social safety systems of their home country [7], [16], [17], [1]. However, these studies did not provide a holistic account of how returnees reintegrate into the labor market of their home country. This study contributes to the existing scholarship in a variety of ways. This paper differs from the related scientific literature since it sheds light on how the returnees were able to transfer to their home country context their newly acquired human capital, entrepreneurial knowledge, as well

as their financial capital and their professional contacts and social networks abroad. In practical terms, the findings could offer important insights for policy stakeholders that they can use to design efficient post-reintegration programs for returnees and to create an environment that enables and promotes investments of the financial, social, and human capital of returnees over the long run.

Whether or not return migration becomes an empowering story for those who come back, heavily depends on the policy-makers potential to deliberately and coherently address the needs of returnees from a holistic, multidisciplinary, and coordinated approach.

## **4 Analysis of Institutional and Regulatory Framework on Return Migration**

This part of the study provides an assessment of the current legal, institutional and policy framework regarding return migration and reintegration.

### **4.1 Strategic and Regulatory Framework**

Currently, the Albanian government does not have a national strategy concerning the reintegration of returned Albanian citizens. The former Strategy on the Reintegration Process of Returnees (2010-2015) expired in 2015, and since then, no new policy document has been drawn up. Different aspects of the returnees' integration have been partially tackled through sectional strategic policy documents, which have considered and treated the reintegration of returnees in different areas such as education, employment, and social safety, recognizing them as a particularly vulnerable group. However, these policy documents do not provide a comprehensive and holistic approach toward a sustainable reintegration process for the returnees.

The two most important policy documents on migration are The National Strategy on Migration and its Action Plan 2019-2022. The development of the migration governance policy and its action plan does represent a key milestone in achieving SDG Target 10.7 to facilitate legal, safe, responsible migration and mobility of people, including the implementation of well-planned and well-managed migration policies. The Strategy and Action Plan provide a wide range of actions across four main domains. Although the strategy touches upon the reintegration issue, no significant progress has been achieved so far, [7].

Regarding the labor market reintegration, the National Strategy for Development and Integration as well as the National Strategy for Employment and Skills Development along with its Action Plan foresee several measures in addressing the challenges of the returnees as well as in accessing decent jobs provided by the formal labor market.

The National Strategy for Development and Integration (NSDI) 2015-2020 represents the core strategic document that meets the European Union's (EU) integration agenda with the country's sustainable economic and social development. One of the key objectives of this strategy is to enhance the sustainability of return migration through the support of these returning migrants' reintegration. The strategy sets up measures to increase the capacities of Migration Counters; to provide information and support to various categories of migrants; to enhance actions for the recognition of skills and qualifications (both formally and informally) obtained abroad by Albanian citizens and their integration into the foreign labor market; enhancing active labor market measures, including VET training, for returned migrants to facilitate their re-integration; promote self-employment and entrepreneurship activities among return migrants in rural areas and the formalization of their activities.

In addition, the National Strategy of Employment and Skills, 2019-2022, indirectly foresees several measures in terms of the labor market reintegration of the returned migrants. Some of these measures are: establishing a monitoring mechanism that will trace the situation, especially that of people affected by migration, diversifying VET offers according to migration trends, and improving the labor administration too, which is responsible for the state employment and migration policies.

The Development Strategy of Pre-University Education indirectly addresses the issue of the returnees' re-integration, providing free coursebooks and psycho-social assistance for the returnee pupils.<sup>1</sup> In some cases, Regional Educational Directories are charged with specific responsibilities and tasks to assist in the reintegration of these returned children.<sup>2</sup>

The National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020 foresees the recognition of vocational training certifications, including work experience acquired

abroad too. The action plan aims to support returned youth through the establishment of financial support mechanisms (such as the youth support fund scheme) and the creation of facilities for information exchange and communication sources.

The Law "The Emigration of Albanian citizens for employment purposes" No. 9668, 18 December 2006 stipulates several measures for the reintegration of returnees and protects the economic, political, and social rights of emigrants. According to Article 13 of the law, "The state shall encourage the voluntary return of migrants to their homeland and their reintegration following the economic and social life of the country, through the creation of legal, financial and fiscal facilities and implementation of business, employment and vocational training development programs."

The National Strategy of Diaspora (2018–2024) sets up several measures to promote the return of skilled migrants and empower sustainable business development for those who return.

Law No. 65/2016 "On Social Enterprises in the Republic of Albania"

The purpose of this law is to regulate the activity of social enterprises, intending to protect and social inclusion of vulnerable groups through the provision of employment opportunities. They contribute to social protection and the support of the disadvantaged including migrant workers who relocate or are displaced within the country<sup>3</sup>.

## 4.2 Institutional Framework

The Ministry of Health and Social Protection is the primary state institution charged with the responsibility of offering social protection and access to health services for returnees. The Ministry supervises the activity of the State Social Service which provides crucial services to vulnerable categories, including returnees too.

The Ministry of Interior, through the Department of Anti-Trafficking and Migration, constitutes the main governmental institution in charge of the migration policy. The Migration sector of the department is responsible for the drafting of strategies and policies related to migration, the exchange of information, and the provision of technical assistance to regional and local structures.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Instruction No. 44, date 21.08.2013 on determining the criteria and procedures for the recognition of pre-university certificates and diplomas of Albanian students returning to the country

<sup>2</sup> See [https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/1-final-consolidatedreport\\_gcm\\_vr\\_albania\\_27\\_tetor\\_2020.pdf](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/default/files/docs/1-final-consolidatedreport_gcm_vr_albania_27_tetor_2020.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> DCM No. 56, date 31.1.2018 On the definition of Concrete Categories of Disadvantaged Groups

<sup>4</sup> Internal Regulation, Ministry of Interior. <https://mb.gov.al/wp->

Monitoring reports on the implementation of the National Strategy of Migration, 2019-2022, and Plan of Action is prepared by the Technical Committee on Migration, established in July 2020 as a horizontal body at the Ministry of Interior's Emigration Section.<sup>5</sup>

Department of Border and Emigration, Albanian State Police is responsible for collecting desegregated data on returned migrants (forced or voluntary). However, it is to be admitted that the information on the district of residence is seldom registered as well. Returnee's access to information regarding the available institutional support for this category of people is rarely provided by the authorities, [7]

The Ministry of Finances and Economy is responsible for labor migration in the country in cooperation with other ministries. It develops policies about employment and vocational training which facilitate the labor market reintegration of Albanian returned citizens. It develops and monitors employment, the labor market and education and professional training, emigration and labor migration, health and security in the workplace as well as pensions. Through its Department for Employment Policy and Professional Training, the Employment and Migration Policy Sector, this ministry is responsible for maximizing the impact of policies on employment to all citizens, including migrants.

The National Agency of Employment and Skills Development offers employment and migration services through the establishment of migration counters to facilitate the migrants' reintegration into the labor market<sup>6</sup>. Returned migrants can obtain information on employment opportunities and employment services from the regional and local employment offices.

The former Strategy for the Reintegration of Albanian Returned Citizens (2010-2015) foresaw the establishment of 36 migration counters (information desks) located in the regional employment offices across the country. They were supposed to serve as information access centers for immigrants, emigrants, and potential emigrant groups, offering them guidance, consultation, and information upon return. Furthermore, they would serve as mechanisms for registering returning

migrants<sup>7</sup>. However, the establishment of these centers did not prove to be successful, because they provided a limited number of services, and only a few migrants registered voluntarily. Return migrants faced challenges in accessing personal identification cards, certifying their school diplomas, and receiving legal assistance, [7]. Only a few return migrants are aware of the information provided by the governmental programs on migrants' reintegration, [18]. In addition, the establishment of a returnees' database and the strengthening of the capacities of migration counters continue to be far behind, [19].

The Government established the State Ministry of Diaspora which was responsible for designing and monitoring the implementation of the diaspora policy in coordination with other ministries. The Ministry was closed in 2021 after the announcement of the new governmental structure consisting of only 11 ministers. In addition, there were established several agencies responsible for addressing Diaspora issues, such as The National Agency of Diaspora, the Diaspora Development Fund, the Diaspora Commerce Chamber, the Research and Publications' Center of the Arbëresh, and the Publishing Center of Diaspora. The Parliamentary Sub-commission of Diaspora and Migration, State Committee of Diaspora, Diaspora Coordinative Council, and the Nation's Ambassadors Network have also been created over the past years.

The Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA) is an institution that is part of the Ministry of Finance and Economy. The focus of the Agency is on enhancing the competitiveness of the private sector, strengthening the export potential of the country, and promoting/supporting foreign direct investment in Albania, as well as promoting the country's tourism potential. AIDA provides access to up-to-date information, provides an efficient way of communicating with government bodies, and serves as a "One-Stop-Shop", supporting investors throughout the investment process. Although the Agency undertakes all necessary initiatives for the development of the private sector and the improvement of the business climate, it does not discriminate between investments from returning migrants, diaspora, or foreign investment.

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content/uploads/2019/06/Rregullore\_Ministria-e-Brendshme.pdf

<sup>5</sup> PM Decree no.99/2020.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.shkp.gov.al/sherbimet/sherbime-punesimi-prove/>

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<sup>7</sup> Amendment to the Order No. 2086, dated 13.11.2007 "On the Form and Content of Migrant's Register and the Registration Procedure in conformity with Article 104(4) of the Constitution of Albania and Article 12 of the Law No. 9668/2006 on the establishment of a database on Returnees Registered at Migration Counters



Currently, there are few committed initiatives/programs led by DIMAK- GIZ,<sup>8</sup> and IOM<sup>9</sup> on returnees and the Albanian diaspora.

## 5 Profiles of Return migrants and Reasons for Returning

Although the economic crisis is generally seen as the main push factor that triggered this wave of return migration, recent studies, [20], [21], have suggested that there were other reasons why migrants returned to Albania, including family reasons and obligations, nostalgia for their home country, psychological reasons, health-related issues, or a desire to pursue better jobs or investment opportunities in Albania. Most of the migrants who returned voluntarily had achieved their migration goals and were seeking to advance their careers or to invest their accumulated capital by establishing a business in Albania.

However, the existing literature on return migration does not provide a clear picture of the precise numbers of returnees, the trends of (permanent or temporary) return migration, or the trajectories and reintegration struggles, [21]. In addition, previous studies have provided little evidence on the reintegration patterns/paths of individuals who decided to return to and settle in Albania. Most of these studies provided a snapshot of the current reintegration policies and institutional frameworks, [22]. However, this scholarly research on return migrants has indicated that there is a general trend of self-employment among returnees, [23], [24]. It has, for example, been reported that the majority of these migrants communicated regularly with family members they left behind, with many visiting Albania several times a year, either for seasonal holidays or whenever they had an opportunity, [18].

Findings from the interviews have pointed out three main reasons behind the decision of migrants to return to their home country, Albania. It is crucial to pinpoint the fact that the return to Albania was mainly affected by the above-mentioned "push" factors in host countries, rather than "pull" factors in the origin country.

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<sup>8</sup>The programme facilitates the reintegration process of returnees. For more information see: <https://www.startfinder.de/en/advisory-centre/german-information-centre-migration-vocational-training-and-career-dimak-tirana>.

<sup>9</sup>The programme engages the Albanian diaspora to the social and economic development of Albania. For more information see: <https://www.adbc.al/en/iom-albania-diaspora-programme/>

## 5.1 Reasons for Returning

### 5.1.1 Economic Crisis

Experiences of return migrants indicate that the decision to return was somehow constrained by the economic crises that swept Greece and Italy. Due to the economic downturn, many migrant workers lost their jobs and were unable to survive financially in the target countries. The Albanian immigrant men were the first to be hit by the Greek austerity measures since they were mostly employed in the construction sector, which was heavily affected by the crisis. Returnees' efforts to find employment and reintegrate into the labor market may be hindered for several reasons, such as a lack of employment and economic opportunities in their origin county; concerns that the wages offered in their home country do not match their abilities or the compensation levels of their host country; and differences between the labor markets of their host country and their home country, [25].

In addition to concerns related to employment, the extremely high taxes and the decreasing demand for jobs due to Greek austerity measures and economic downturn worsened their families' incomes. In turn, they either started to work in extremely precarious occupations or were left without jobs at all. So, in the aftermath of the crisis, it seems that they were left with no choice other than to return.

In the meantime, they proved that Albania had changed considerably from when they first left. Yet, although in their view changes had occurred, these developments were only minimal, and in reality, they faced another type of depression in their home country, accompanied by a sense of alienation, as well.

Those who were constrained to return because of the crisis, unemployment, or lack of opportunities in the host countries seem to be less likely and unprepared regarding their investment paths in Albania. Although this group of returnees does not consist of those who were somehow forced to return because of the host countries' authorities and their irregular status, they seem to be far away from achieving their migration goals and closing successfully their migratory cycle. Subsequently, due to insufficient financial capital, this target group was also amongst those who were still thinking of re-migrate again to other EU countries.

### 5.1.2 Nostalgia

Another important reason for the prompt return was the homesickness that had overwhelmed some of these migrants. This was combined with nostalgia, memories of their childhood, and feelings of belonging. Some of these migrants already owned property in Albania, which was inherited by their parents. They yearned for a stable and comfortable life in their own country, and having a property back home pushed them to make the return decision faster.

### 5.1.3 Family Reasons

Other reasons for returning were family obligations and mostly the "duty to care" for the older generation. Most of the returnees had considered the deteriorating health conditions of their parents, who needed constant care from their children when deciding to return to Albania. Some return migrants had left their children in the care of their parents, so they could work longer hours in the hopes of building a stable future for their children. Yet, the long working hours and the distance from their children pushed them to come back. Although the economic crisis was not among the major reasons for returning, they could not take their children to Greece either due to their irregular status or other personal reasons.

The stories and reflections shared by many migrants reveal the worries they had for their parents as well. There was a strong attachment to family and kinship members, parents, and the homeland in general. Although one interviewee had taken their parents to Greece, they did not feel comfortable living in a foreign country despite the high number of Albanian migrants living there. The older generation could not resist staying in Greece. They expressed concern about their properties back in Albania, in which they had invested their earnings. It is to be noted that some migrants expressed their anguished feelings and duty to take care of their parents:

Therefore, as it can be understood, the return path was to some extent shaped by their desires and obligations vs their families.

### 5.1.4 Free will- Achieving the migration Goals

Finally, another group of migrants that we interviewed was the ones who had accumulated enough earnings and thought of investing in Albania. This group seems to have lots of potential in terms of financial, social, and human capital since their return was entirely voluntary and not necessarily constrained by the economic crisis or

other family-related factors. These migrants constitute those whose migration trajectory could be seen as a success story, or as a report, the ones who have achieved their initial migration goals, [26].

One interviewee, for example, pinpointed the fact that there were certain needs in their home country, Albania that could be achieved with less capital than if they had opened the same venture in Greece. Moreover, this interviewee expressed their awareness of having to work in physically demanding jobs (i.e., construction) in Greece, which was beginning to take a toll on their health. Returning to Albania was a low-risk decision for them as they could get a job back or start a new business through connections if they decided to return to Greece again.

## 5.2 Investment Avenues after Return

The maintenance of interpersonal and family bonds with the home country facilitated the decision to return and created the premises for the investment of capital. It is interesting to note that our empirical evidence suggests that return migration was not a necessary permanent decision, but a dynamic cycle involving multiple back-and-forth migration episodes before settling. The propensity to set up and manage a business seems to be a viable option for those willing to transfer the capital gained abroad. Our narratives show that some migrants had already developed an investment and business management plan in advance.

Our narratives show that business ventures were primarily focused on tourism and agriculture; this was due to the lack of experience in other business opportunities. These businesses came to life slowly, as return migrants started to save and invest in their homes year by year.

### 5.2.1 Social Networks Hinting Where to Invest

We observed that social networks served as safety nets for ensuring the labor market reintegration of returnees when other resources were not available. They were helpful in a variety of ways, either assisting migrants with information or facilitating their entrance into the labor market. The acquaintances of these return migrants had opened similar businesses in the sectors of catering and tourism, and their experience helped facilitate and bring to life their businesses, directing them on the risks associated with certain business ventures, and providing them with information on legal and business procedures in Albania.



## 6 Labour Market Integration Challenges

Previous work experiences in construction or catering have enhanced the human capital of migrants. They got new ideas and knowledge on how to set up and manage a business. Besides technical skills in cooking or construction and modern use of technology, they have also benefited from hospitality skills or even from the social capital gained abroad.

### 6.1 Reintegration Support and Assistance by the State

Re-integration support constitutes an essential component of the post-return experience of returnees, particularly in the labor market. Concerning institutional support, returnees state that they are unaware of any supporting programs at all. As Meri 41 states, "I'm not even aware that there are institutions which offer assistance. I have no information about this, nor have I read about it anywhere". Returnees find it hard to adapt to the labor market although their experience has equipped them with 'know-how', skills, and competencies which give them a competitive advantage in this market. Besides this, they claim that the experience gained abroad was sometimes not useful or not as much appreciated as they expected it would be. Nela, a 50-year-old woman claims: "It was hard for me to adapt to the labor market, even though I was open to working anywhere, in the beginning, I felt that my experience was not appreciated. Communication and contact with government institutions were quite challenging. Even for insignificant things like obtaining a simple certificate, they barely replied". The central government on the other side has announced several supporting schemes for the labor market integration of returned migrants, but most returned migrants declare that they have not received any support or concrete assistance. "We've heard of the government aid and reintegration programs, but only theoretically. In practice, we haven't benefitted from any of these" claims Ilda, a 34-year-old woman. They declare that they do not find a way to approach these programs and some others aren't even sure if they exist. The same was mentioned by other migrants.

As identified previously in this study, most of the returnees opened their own business upon return. These entrepreneurship initiatives came out because they wanted to valorize their abilities, skills, and 'know-how' gathered in the host

country. None of them received any support from the government for their start-ups

It is interesting to note the fact that few participants claim that civil society organizations have been the only support for their reintegration into Albanian society. This support was mainly focused on business management assistance and different aspects of business promotion and communication. The support during the pandemic situation was another area of interest for this study. Overall, there was not any dedicated support targeted for their businesses. For the ones who were registered, the government provided financial incentive packages that were the same as for all other businesses in Albania.

The returnees reported that they have not received any support from the state for establishing their businesses, not even basic support related to services such as getting electricity and water. Not only that, but others faced difficulties in the recognition of documents and papers related to their businesses.

### 6.2 Challenges in Setting Up and Managing a Business

Our narratives showed that being a successful entrepreneur in Albania depends much more on how enabling or friendly is the business environment. Businesses operate in an environment that includes both macro and micro factors. So, it is important to manage the factors that come from the macro environment and which are related to the economic situation, political and legal environment, social environment, etc. If the environment provides proper and favorable conditions, of course, the business will have more chances to be successful. In our study, this environment is not as encouraging to develop successful businesses. Their narratives show that bureaucratic procedures were one of the main challenges they faced:

Bureaucratic procedures in the recognition of previous learning certificates were revealed by other respondents.

Return migrants also criticize the work of the institutions that are supposed to financially help them in building a business. They state that they did not receive any soft loans assigned for businesses, which was a priority sector of the home country, and normally as such should be supported with grants to push investors to engage in this sector. Nevertheless, they declared they have been faced with lots of pressure and bribing from

officials who were in charge of soft loan distribution schemes.

As it is evident from our narratives, complaints were mostly related to the tax system, such as high taxes, fiscal and administrative burdens, volatile tax rules, frequent changes to tax regulations and difficult taxation procedures and access to loans, and unfair competition.

### 6.3 Unfriendly Business Environment

Strict rules and punishment-oriented behavior from authorities are also other problems for the proper function of the returnee's business and remain an obstacle to doing business.

Returnees do not feel safe about their investments and properties. The issue is related to the fact that in some regions in Albania they still have problems with property owners and property certificates<sup>10</sup>. Not being equipped with the property certificates means difficulties related to potential investments in the future which might be essential to improve its functionality and use it properly. So, the returnees state that conditioned by this situation they were obliged to break the rules and invest in their properties without permits.

Uncertainties over land and property rights were present in the narratives of many migrants along with the gaps in public infrastructure (unreliability of the energy supply; poor water infrastructure). In addition to that, some of them were also concerned about shortages of skills in the labor market, since they could not find skilled workers. The bottlenecks of the business environment seem to hamper foreign investment from returnees which are essential in enhancing the competitiveness of the economy.

They were indeed disappointed by the fact that not only did they not have any incentives, but on the contrary, authorities scrutinized them to a larger extent compared to other businesses. Although few returnees from Italy had already set up transnational economic partnerships, bringing back modern technology and work ethic, they felt abandoned and acknowledged the lack of support as a major drawback.

The majority of participants in this study revealed that they had been faced with administrative and institutional constraints due to bureaucratic

procedures, corruption, high taxation and informality, and unfair competition. Moreover, the instability of political and economic systems has further hampered their business efforts, which in turn produced feelings of disappointment and regret for investing in Albania.

## 7 Conclusions

In recent years, Albania has faced a comparatively large influx of return migration, which sloped significantly upwards in the aftermath of the global economic crisis. Due to the deep recession crisis, the economic situation of Albanian migrant families in the two major destination countries Greece and Italy has suddenly worsened, with unprecedented rising levels of unemployment, resulting in financial hardships. Among those who returned voluntarily, the economic downturn was the predominant reason behind the outward migration.

Regardless of the pull and the push factors that shaped return decisions, almost all the returnees experienced several reintegration challenges, particularly concerning labor market reintegration. Our study found that none of the returnees had the chance to receive information from Migration Counters, and the reason behind this was that they were not aware of the existence of such mechanisms. They found it difficult to receive information, orientation, and guidance about possible sectors they could invest their savings. Narratives from our respondents revealed that they had little information about local regulations and legislation for starting a business or public services deemed for returnees. Such information was mainly provided by their family members and friends.

Though the business environment is of utmost importance for private investors, the findings show that returnees perceived the business environment in Albania as being unfavorable, which in turn had adverse implications for their business. Policies for attracting (foreign) investments do not discriminate between migrant entrepreneurs and (foreign) investors. Although in terms of business management this is related to business competitiveness in the market, returnees felt disappointed with such policies.

The majority of interviewees stated that bureaucracy, widespread informality, and corruption have been major impediments to their reintegration into the labor market. They struggled to get the papers done and said that the state exercised a tough policy against them by demanding several documents. In addition, the country's infrastructure gaps, feeble public

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<sup>10</sup> Access to land is particularly difficult issue in Albania, as land ownership is highly fragmented. Albania is ranked 111 out of 180 countries in the in-property rights protection. The lack of a properly rights and land market, discourages Investors. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 'Albania Diagnostic', EBRD, London, 2019.

investment, and non-transparent business procedures regarding investments and soft loans were perceived as serious impediments to their successful reintegration into the labor market. The prevailing services and information available to returnees lag far behind the desired standard. Such services were either fragmented or *ad hoc*, mostly project-based ones.

In addition, none of them had received financial aid or incentive packages upon their return. They voiced their concern about favoritism for providing such incentives. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 outbreak, they expressed concerns that their enterprises will be closed down. Interviews reflected negative rhetoric and regret about investing in Albania. Feelings of disappointment and helplessness were present in all those who had invested in Albania.

Although for some interviewees, the return trend was permanent, for many others, the return was temporary. This might also be related to the circular patterns of Albanian migration, which consists of many back-and-forth movements between the origin and the host countries. Yet, the lack of reintegration policies might as well serve as the main push factor for the remigration of returnees soon<sup>1</sup>. Return migration, according to our narratives, was viewed as a disruption to migratory plans and ambitions in the face of economic adversity rather than the endpoint of their migratory trajectory. This group of migrants felt quite insecure about their future in Albania.

It is noteworthy to emphasize that such pre-mature return of migrants in the wake of the financial crisis was not accompanied by the accumulation of necessary social and financial capital before relocation to the origin country. On the other hand, those who were prepared for their return well in advance and had an orientation and investment plan seem to be more economically stable upon return. They maintained strong family and kinship ties, either by visiting Albania several times or by using social media communication tools, which in turn proved to be essential when resettling back home. Our study found that returnees whose migratory goals were fulfilled were more likely to be considered potential investors and agents of economic development. They were able to capitalize on the skills they gained abroad and, as such, they had better employment prospects in Albania.

Our findings suggest that re-integration infrastructure and structural factors have shaped patterns of post-return in the labor market. Such

factors constitute among the necessary conditions for promoting the investment of capital, know-how, and "know-who" earned abroad. It is noteworthy in that it emphasizes that pre-return preparation looms large in post-return experiences, a finding that is consistent with other research scholarships in the field, [27].

In conclusion, the current study contributes to our understanding of factors and actors that shape and hinder reintegration patterns in the labor market. Although there is no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all solution for addressing the labor market reintegration challenges of return migrants, a holistic approach is necessary to address their complex needs. Failure to address the immediate reintegration needs of returnees through creating an enabling policy and institutional framework might further exacerbate and undermine their development potential. Therefore, to take advantage of returnees' potential and harness their "know-how" for economic and social development in their home country, the entire cycle of reintegration should be enhanced and made more efficient through the following policy recommendations:

## 8 Recommendations

### Increase information and awareness

Given the considerable changes in their country of origin, it is of primary importance to inform return migrants on the legislative framework, employment, and private business opportunities in Albania. To achieve this goal, the following measures should be undertaken:

Enhancing technical and human capacities of information centers (migration counters-MC) to provide support and counseling; Scaling up and operationalizing MC at all local self-government units to ensure a better outreach to the target group; MC should facilitate the provision of information on the domestic legislation; information on medical services, social programs, pension security, and documents related to citizenship; as well as practical information for investment and labor market opportunities in easy absorbable language; Developing an information portal that provides comprehensive information to return migrants; Raising awareness on the available services to return migrants through informative brochures/advertisements in airports, municipalities, health centers, schools, and other institutions (such as ADISA) to make sure that they are well-informed on the services available to them;

Systematic information provision and distribution of return migration data by respective authorities; disaggregated data and factsheets uploaded in the online platform/ websites;

Effective communication and advocacy tools to inform, influence, or raise awareness of public officials, media, and other key actors involved in issues concerning returnees.

Addressing the employment issue is an essential step in the reintegration of returnees in their country of origin to ensure their financial independence.

Promote targeted employment promotion programs that maximize returnees' human capital and provide an impetus for profiling them to specific sectors of the economy;

Requalification training and workshops should be conducted to increase and diversify the skills of the returnees according to the most demanded jobs in the domestic labor market;

Improving and/or establishing procedures for validation of knowledge and facilitating the process for the recognition of education/VET certificates obtained abroad;

Job placement support and skill matching programs to increase employment prospects of returnees; Liaise with private operators for the provision of job placement programs/ apprenticeships;

Benefits, in the form of financial or technical incentives, should be made available to companies that employ returnees.

Develop tailored programs that support entrepreneurship and start-ups in sectors where migrants could apply the skills and experiences acquired abroad;

Establishing a more enabling business environment through specific incentive schemes for businesses established by returned migrants; institutions and donors should provide financial support to promising business projects and start-ups; maintaining favorable fiscal policies, custom facilities, technical assistance, financial incentives such as tax reduction and better loan conditions for those who generate employment;

Long-term mentoring and coaching assistance for those willing to pursue a self-employment sector;

Raise capacities of business-related institutions & CSOs to support returnees in developing business plans and applying for start-ups programs; assisting them in preparing business plans, financial and business management and tax payments, etc.;

Organize awareness-raising workshops regarding the legislation surrounding the area of micro-entrepreneurship.

Enhance policy & institutional framework on return migration and reintegration

Reintegration measures should be fully mainstreamed into other intersectional strategic documents and local action plans for sustainable inclusion;

Institutions that directly work with migrants should periodically undertake assessments on the policy implementation and the institutional gaps that may exist;

Implement a regulatory impact assessment instrument to review, monitor, and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of current legislation and measures on return migration and reintegration;

Return migrants should be included as a beneficiary group in local action plans and other strategic and policy documents of LSGUs; prepare briefs on lessons learned "Good practices of service delivery for returnees;

Draft guidelines and protocols for service providers on how to deliver services to returnees; providing public healthcare services, and psychological consultation in due time;

Conduct a comprehensive assessment of capacity needs and gaps in municipalities affected by return migration & assess the socio-economic potentials of returnees;

Establish and operationalize a clear and timely-efficient procedure/ mechanism for horizontal cooperation among key institutions involved in the integration of returnees, such as collaboration memorandums and other forms of inter-institutional partnerships.

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