

Challenges of Albanian Migrants - Integration of Migrant Children in Albanian Education System

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Abstract

Migration has been at the center of academic and political debate in the recent years. Albanians are among the biggest flows of immigrants moving to Europe from the beginning of 1990s. Various crises in Europe have forced Albanian emigrants living and working abroad to return home due to difficulties in their residence countries. But their return is not as simple as it seems, because they would have to start over again from the beginning. The scope of this work is to offer a panorama on the situation of migration flow of Albanians and problems faced by migrants upon returning home in order to offer recommendations to make their integration easier. Does the integration system work for them? This research will also make evident the problems concerning integration of migrant children and address integration issues of their situation in Albanian schools, faced in particular during their enrolment in various education levels. Data from the Albanian Ministry of Education and Institute of Statistics, as well as information offered by IOM and other relevant international organization, will be used to make evident all the issues concerning the integration of migrants and their children. This work shall fill the gap of studies about migrant integration and integration of Albanian children after immigration of their parents.

Keywords: integration, migrant, education, children, challenges

1. Introduction

Existing data do not report or do not duly specify the exact number of migrants, leaving room to “assumptions”. Nevertheless, continuous efforts are underway to determine as accurately as possible the precise number of migrants leaving Albania and their migration-related problems. This is just one side of the story, because the majority of data remains undocumented. And when it comes to taking preventive measures, data are missing.

There continues to be large movements of migrants between regions, often from low and middle income countries toward high-income countries. (UN Report 2017) Migration is not a new phenomenon for EU countries and their integration matters also to locals and governments. The nature and evolution of migration policies have changed in the last years. (Natter, Vezzoli 2016: 1/44) European policies in this research fields, in particular Euro 2020 strategy, point out to societal challenges such as inclusive, innovative and reflective societies, which would be incomplete without the integration of all migrants arriving in these countries.

Free movement in the European space has offered people the opportunity of living in various countries all over the world. Meanwhile, these movements are associated with major challenges. World economic crisis and other personal reasons have forced Albanian emigrants working and living abroad to return home. This return seems to have a lot of problems regarding re-integration at school and society of the emigrant children. They need to enroll their children in various levels of Albanian education system (OECD, 2018). This problem is present in many countries involved in migratory movements due to conflicts or wars. Children of families leaving their zones have the right to go to school regularly and a competent system must support individuals regarding improvement of their opportunities to afford a good lifestyle.

The objectives of this research are to make evident problems concerning children of these emigrants, faced during integration in school environment, especially during the early education stages, analyze the level of integration of these children in education systems and offer information for recommendations to make integration of migrant children easier. With the help of interviews, we received the necessary information about the calvary of their return home, adaptation in Albania, registration in school and integration.

Taking into consideration the unprecedented migratory wave, new approaches of Albanian policy toward migration and re-integration, lack of a strategy, human and financial capacities to manage a successful reintegration, sources from Ministry of Social Welfare declare that return of emigrants and asylums refusal is accompanied with a considerable number of children and illiterate or unqualified youth and responsible institutions - regional directorates/educational offices - have noted the lack of training for application of specific teaching plans.

2. Migration of Albanians

Emigration from Albania is mainly generated by economic causes (unemployment and efforts for better living standards), even though other considerations have been noted. Two categories of the population, youth and women, find the labour market situation really difficult in Albania. According to 2019-2022 National Strategy for Migration and National Action Plan, the youth aged 15-29 years old, who were not employed and did not attend school, higher education or vocational education consisted of 29.7% of the total of youth in Albania, while only 50.3% of women were

employed, compared to 64.3% of males.

Albanian government met the visa free regime standards since the beginning of visa liberalization process. These efforts favoured the reduction of ungrounded requests for asylum applications filed by Albanian citizens in EU member states and the Schengen area countries. The number was reduced by 20% - from 31,737 applications in 2016 to 25,528 applications in 2017. In January 2018, France registered 720 requests for asylum, while Germany counted 300, respectively 30% and 52.7% less compared to January 2017. In line with commitments taken with EU, it is expected a further improvement in the area of tackling the illegal migration sources. Albania has intensified dialogue with most affected member countries, while in June 2017 government approved an action plan to prevent abuse with asylum in EU and Schengen area countries. In parallel, bilateral agreements were signed with destination countries. Likewise, according to the strategy, in December 2017, Albania and France signed an agreement to strengthen police cooperation and assign four Albanian French-speaking police officers to France and the four are currently supporting the fight against criminal organizations of Albanian origin, as well as identification of intermediates organizing travel of asylum-seekers to France. Another category of Albanian citizens abroad include persons whose asylum applications have been turned down or those with an illegal residential permit in EU countries.

As a recent trend, it is noted a considerable number of repatriations of these individuals to Albania. It is difficult to register voluntary returns to Albania due to their nature. Statistics on non-voluntary returns indicate a decrease from EU countries. Majority of non-voluntary returns from EU member states and neighbouring countries are completed through repatriation operations (from air and land). In 2017 was registered a considerable growth in number of unaccompanied minors, where about 452 underage children were accepted by border authorities in cooperation with State Social Service (SHSSH). The number of returned Albanians according to group-ages in 2016 was estimated at 21681, 978 out of them being males under the age of 18, and 222 registered females. In 2017, 382 males and 34 females out of 20632 were underage returned emigrants.

The voluntary return is another mechanism employed by the Albanian authorities for repatriation of illegal immigrants, because such a mechanism secures a dignified and assisted return in the country of origin. Nevertheless, the number of assisted voluntary returns from Albania in the course of 5 years has been insignificant.

The assisted voluntary return of unaccompanied minors is especially difficult and a real challenge, due to lack of proper sheltering, determination of the best interest of the child because of difficulties to contact authorities. According to 2019-2022 National Strategy for Migration and National Action Plan, the assisted voluntary process includes operational and procurement procedures, which at the moment are carried out by officers responsible for readmission that requires appointment of special employees for voluntary return and assisted voluntary return.

Hence, in 2018, we notice that most educated and qualified persons aim to migrate mainly to Germany, North America and other developed countries in Western Europe. While, less educated and qualified travel to Greece and partly to Italy, where through social networks manage to find unqualified work, even in the informal sector. (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2018).

3. The return home

Unaccompanied and separated minors usually are referred to the National Reception Center in Tirana together with the youth accompanying them. The same report of UN team highlights that individual interviews of children at the border are not carried out only in those cases when children are immediately identified as unaccompanied. Interviews with accompanied minors are carried out in the presence of the family or a group of adults even when their relation is not certified, which in fact limits the capacity of selective interview for the proper identification of unaccompanied minors, who do not declare themselves as such. Lack of comprehensive assessment, lack of mechanism for case management and reference, likewise indicate that children did not have the right to receive needed services, such as psycho-social support. Approval of Council of Ministers Decision for rules and procedures of return and repatriation of Unaccompanied Child in line with Law No. 18/2017 on Human Rights and Protection of the Child, is expected to define clear mechanism for management of cases of unaccompanied minors, either Albanian or foreigners. The decision shall determine the obligation of border and migration police to hand in the unaccompanied minor to Regional Unit for Minors Protection, which is responsible for offering shelter to the unaccompanied minor to meet basic needs of minors, as well as to appoint a psychologist and a legal guardian. According to 2019-2022 National Strategy for Migration and National Action Plan, the Contingency Plan shall carefully treat aspects of the situation with minors that cannot be covered by this strategy, which envisages focused action.

Based on the opinions of the returnees, assistance for public services shall be completed with a specific support to access labor market in Albania, public education, professional training, healthcare and housing services, as well as to obtain support for opening a business. The issues point to the need for an in-depth analysis of the current supporting mechanism for reintegration in the country. According to 2019-2022 National Strategy for Migration and National Action Plan, in particular, it is necessary to have a redefinition of the purpose of support for reintegration, as well as adaptation criteria that could determine shape and content of national government programs for return and reintegration of migrants for employment services. According to data from Gallup World Poll for 2010-2015, Albania ranks sixth in the world regarding percentage of adults planning to migrate. (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2018)

Table 1. Data of INSTAT on migration

Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net migration
2016	23,060	32,533	-9,473
2017	25,003	39,905	-14,902
2018	23,673	38,703	-15,030
2019	20,753	43,835	-23,082
2020	7,170	23,854	-16,684

Return during 2016-2018 period is mainly related to return of asylum seekers from Germany and some other EU countries. According to data from European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in the course of 2013-2017 period, about 147,000 Albanian citizens asked for asylum in EU countries (mostly in Germany, France, etc) and majority of them returned in the successive years. During 2015-2016, according to available data, Albania ranks first in the world for the number of citizens returned from EU countries (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2018).

Irrespective of the legal status, children of emigrants enjoy the right for education¹ and the Albanian legislation guarantees the right for education in the Republic of Albania with the help of dedicated integration program. The disadvantaged situation of migrant students and their educational outcomes can be improved with the right educational initiatives and wider integration policies.

4. Data and Methods

Previous studies mainly focused on ways how migrants organize the migration project starting from the moment of departure from the place of origin and adaptation of their plans and development of strategy depending on social and institutional environment of the destination country; experiences that migrants have told scholars; various contexts of integration of migrants in societies of destination countries, legal framework, context of the labor market, social environment and role of social connections. (IOM 2006, 15)

Majority of interviewers (83%) affirm that are aware of risks coming from illegal migration, whereas, about 5% of them are not aware about these risks and about 12% do not know their position. Percentage of individuals who are not aware and that do not know their position is estimated up to 17%, which is a percentage that indicates that this category of individuals must be taken into consideration. (IOM 2006, 18).

¹ Article 13/2 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 envisages "everyone has the right to return to his native place"

It is a known fact that previous experiences of migration force people to try and migrate again. This happens because previous migration experiences might not have been successful. People who have some type of experience try to use it to complete their plans. According to this study, previous experiences of illegal or legal migration become an integral part of migrants' experiences (IOM 2006, 30). Regarding methodology, this work is prepared with the help of direct interviews and data from public institutions, such as INSTAT, regional educational offices, Ministry of Education and Science.

For a better understanding of Albanian migrants experience with their children, this work adopts qualitative methods using interviews with their children, taking into consideration the level of integration, types of education, academic performance and integration status of their parents. The research is useful for various stakeholders, professional organisations, policymakers, such as school principals, teachers, social workers, local community, human rights organisations, and higher-level policy makers.

In the framework of this work, we interviewed emigrants who returned to Albania. The age group of participants varied from several education levels and consisted of boys and girls, in order to have a better panorama also of their gender aspect of integration. The research took into account different educational background, different levels of integration of their families and provide information about integration process of these children. The majority of their parents have returned in various periods of time (Danaj, Caro 3/2016); as a result they have different integration levels. This spectrum of backgrounds would allow me to gather a range of insights and provide the bases for the analysis.

5. Challenges of migrant children education

According to the data provided by Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Institute of Statistics, thousands of children returned from emigration are attending different cycles of studies in Albanian educational institutions. Their major difficulty is Albanian language and adaptation with new environment, teachers and classmates. Beside the emigrants returning home are also those who have been refused asylum and other reasons. ¹Return and social economic reintegration consist of an important part of the migration cycle.

Recognition of diplomas and other qualifications obtained abroad are a decisive factor for a successful return and reintegration in Albania. ²

¹ "Returnees" shall be considered all those persons who have returned to their place of origin following an emigration into another state. The returnees may have done a permanent or interim return, who have decided to return upon their wish or forced by other factors or unforeseen circumstances.

² There is a Guideline of Minister of Education and Sports No. 17 dated 03.08.2016 on recognition of diplomas according to Albanian Framework of Qualifications.

Beside economic difficulties, return of Albanian families, who used to live and work in other countries, is accompanied with problems related to incompatibility with Albanian education environment.

Teachers themselves encounter unpredicted issues: social-emotional needs of these children, conflicts in the community, lack of a common communication language with others, etc.

Migrant children are in a disadvantaged position due to social-economic barriers, social isolation and difficulties in understanding Albanian language. In this framework, parents hire private teachers to give their children additional lessons, but in majority of cases this is not a solution to the problem. Likewise, this concern can cause problems also regarding physical capacities of schools, mainly in areas where these returns are considerable.

According to data from MoES, a big number of returned children, who will attend pre-university and university education, face a number of issues. Children also have important needs in education. About 30 migrant children were registered in one elementary school in Tirana only.

Table 2. Number of migrant children registered in various education levels

	2019–2020	2018–2019	2017–2018	2016–2017	2015–2016
Basic education	838	1,021	1,794	961	2,389
Elementary education	470	611	956	581	1,336
Lower middle education	368	410	838	380	1,053
Higher middle education	198	288	333	255	341
High school	156	200	224	181	270
Oriented high schools	8	31	36	40	54
Vocational schools	34	57	73	34	17
Total	1,036	1,309	2,127	1,216	2,730

Stakeholders included in this inter-action are the Teachers, Students, Parents, Society, Government, while problems faced by these children can be grouped as following:

Language difficulties. After the return to Albania, migrant children are forced to face not only the challenge related to change of lifestyle, new classmates, but also the language challenge. Children transferred from foreign school to Albanian, according

to statements of children in the interviews, they know the native language either a little or not at all. It is very difficult for these children to get used to teaching material.

Majority of these children either left at a very young age or were born abroad and they almost do not speak Albanian. Some of them know how to speak, but do not write or read the Albanian language. They all have different problems and therefore it is necessary to carry out a differentiated work with them. According to interviewed teachers, these children face serious difficulties in pronouncing and writing Albanian language.

The pedagogical staff has problems with these children and they make great efforts to improve their language skills. Some of them do not understand anything at the first lecture. They have difficulties understanding some words and as a consequence they cannot do the assignments. Ministry of Education has decided to provide additional study hours for improvement of Albanian language knowledge.

Free of charge Albanian language courses for students returning from emigration seem to be the best solution in this situation. Courses can be offered only when this is deemed necessary from school institutions or when parents/guardian of student requires it. These children need months only to improve their Albanian language proficiency.

Study programs. Educational institutions shall consider individual teaching plans for migrant children in order to meet all obligations in a certain subject in relation to their respective gaps. The educational program they find in Albania is different from some subjects, mainly social subjects. Albanian school program is more theoretical, whereas foreign schools are more focused on practice. A differentiated work is necessary in this respect, because an entire focus on them may cause problems with the rest of the classroom.

Students arriving from Greek schools find it difficult to learn world literature because in the Literature program back in Greek schools were focused mainly on Greek literature and did not learn other world authors. But, this runs counter to our school program which includes all world writers.

As a result, children who had high results at schools in other countries, receive low grades. They have a low academic performance. Teachers have difficulties in completing their teaching plan, because in parallel they need to work also with migrant children.

Progress in learning. It is not easy for migrant children to get used to the new environment, classroom dhe and classmates.

OECD statistics (2015) show that migrants children get lower academic results than other children.

Communication in mixed classes requires skills and experience due to presence of various stereotypes. Schools can develop bicultural identities and treat children needs to overcome cultural borders: ethnic, racial, age, and geographical ones.

Measures must be taken to provide normal education for these children. Ministry of Education should draft study programs to include teaching of these children, e.g. extra teaching hours. Teachers dealing with these children should have additional programs for them. This intermediate period is very important in education of the children, i.e the pre-school years.

In this framework, Ministry of Education and Science sent a guideline¹ to regional educational directorates, where is underlined that children of emigrants that have returned to Albania shall be registered in respective educational institutions immediately. The children risk school abandoning, because without the necessary support children cannot follow the teaching process. The social-economic disadvantage may have a negative influence in school results.

6. Conclusions

Albania has created a mechanism for reintegration of emigrants returning home, but the complex phenomenon of migration and global crises have shown that this mechanism did not meet its expectations.

Government bodies shall focus on policies devised to generate a number of measures for teachers in a social inclusion system through education, focusing on an analysis of reintegration system and services offered in Albania and formulation of programs recommended for Albanian authorities in order to harmonize the reintegration process for migrants returned to Albania, based on their needs, as well as to secure a sustainable return.

Potential recommendations that this work can highlight are as following:

- government shall favor mixed classes to encourage social inclusion;

¹ Paperwork No. protocol 9240 Prot. dated 10.11.2015 issued by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Plarent Ndreca

- teachers training to handle cultural diversity regarding needs of migrant children and increase of teaching capacities to be capable of meeting the demands of these students;
- intervention at early age to improve basic skills;
- encouragement of parents 'engagement;
- mentoring schemes;
- smaller classes that could favor individual support for migrant children;

Municipal initiatives and schools to offer supporting extracurricular activities in the afterschool and leisure time.

Likewise, it is recommended the drafting of a data base and establishment of a commission for admission of students returning from emigration with data on education that students have attended before, during emigration or in the course of a period they might have stayed home.

Migrant children offer a rich cultural and diverse environment in the classroom and introduce various methods of understanding the world to teachers and students. At the same time, these children encourage teachers to develop new strategies that require multiple communication forms, enabling them to think beyond Albanian curricula.

This research is original and with a broad perspective, due to this sensitive issue that requires an immediate action and could be exploited for improvement of migration policies. The outcome of this research would help practitioners to compile adequate study programs focused on cultural diversity and train teachers to address also the needs of the Albanian migrant children in particular and migrant children in general. Policy-makers in this field need this information to better understand the situation in order to take respective measures.

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