

# The Albanian population and migration in historic perspective

## Abstract

In our country the first population census was conducted in 1923. After World War II, the censuses were conducted every five years and after 1960, after every ten. The last census was in 2011. During this period, Albania has passed through three stages of demographic transition: before the liberation period, the natural increase in the population was low; during the dictatorial regime, the natural increase in the population was, conversely, very high due to various measures aiming at the stimulation of the birth rate and due also to a lower mortality rate; after 1990, with the onset of democracy, the fertility rate and the mortality rate have both decreased and, therefore, the natural increase in the population is again very low. In this situation, we have seen the significant patterns of influence that population growth has on migration, family planning, etc. This article explores the development of migration in the early years after the transition as Albania introduced an international labour market following half a century of isolation.

**Keywords:** population, migration, economic activity, labour force, women in the labour market, industrial structure, unemployment, transition, characteristics of migrants, remittances, migration factors, socio-economic development, poverty

## Introduction

In reviewing trends in the Albanian population, we can pinpoint a number of different pictures in the key moments of the country's recent history.

By the beginning of World War I, births were generally higher but, at the same time, mortality rates were also high and this was the major factor, especially due to the high rates of infant mortality and the high level of infectious diseases, which were particularly prevalent in our country, as was, without a doubt, the lack of medical services. In the aftermath of World War II, there was a large reduction in fertility and, at the same time, there was also increased mortality as a result of this war.

During the totalitarian regime, i.e. the period of 1945-1989, the total number of the population approximately tripled, with an overall increase of 138 % and an average annual rate of 2.4 %. This happened as a result of state policies that stimulated the birth rate, while migration was strictly prohibited.

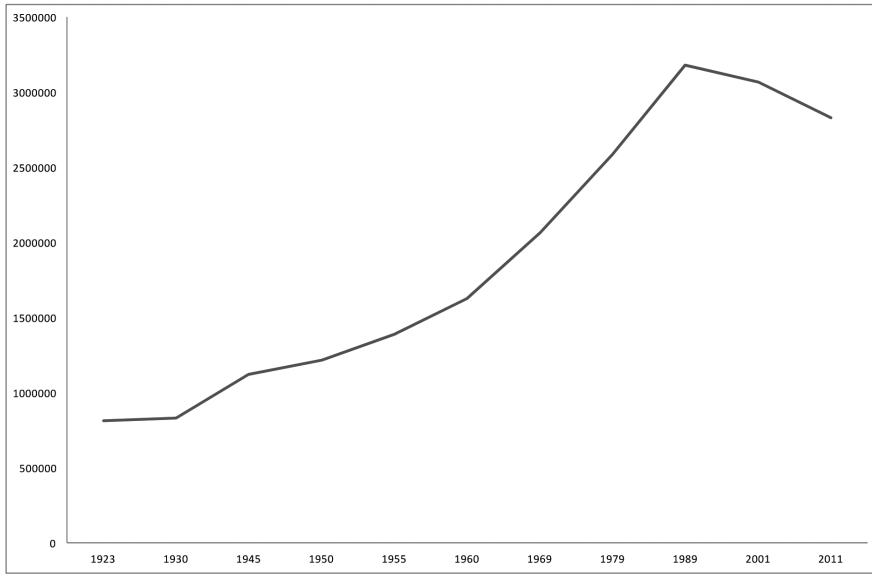
In the 1989-2001 transition period, the population has been reduced by approximately 10 %, with an average annual reduction of about 0.5 %. This population decline has occurred as a result of very large scale emigration on top of declining birth rates.

Albania has therefore passed through three stages of demographic transition:

- before the liberation of the country, the natural increase in the overall population was small because despite a high birth rate, deaths were also higher
- during the dictatorial regime, the natural increase in the population was very high, because the birth rate was actively stimulated and mortality was low
- after 1990 and the beginning of democracy, fertility and mortality both decreased and, therefore, the natural rate of increase in the population has been very low. It is worth mentioning that, in recent years, there has been ten births per 1 000 inhabitants when, before 1990, this indicator was three times greater. In terms of population growth, therefore, our country is approaching European countries.

The trends outlined here are explored in pictorial and numerical terms in Figure 1 and Tables 1 and 2, following.

**Figure 1 – Albanian population according to various censuses over the years**



### Economic activity

The Albanian population has a young age structure; consequently, a greater part of it is economically active. The large number of people of working age who have emigrated in recent years has been offset by the introduction to the labour market of cohorts of young people.

Table 3 shows the evolution of employment and unemployment between 1989 and 2005. The unemployment rate in 2005 was 22.7 % of the overall labour force. From observations of the surveys conducted by INSTAT, the Albanian Institute of Statistics,

Albania appears as one of the countries with the highest unemployment indicators in Europe.

The percentage of the total working age population (labour force plus inactive population) which is taken up by those in employment and the unemployed has fallen from 79.5 % to 62.1 %. This decrease corresponds to an increase in the inactive population which, in 2005, reached 823 156 people as against 517 254 people in 1989. This trend is largely a result of the withdrawal of women from the labour market, with the proportion of the inactive female population nearly doubling in this time. The number of inactive men also increased, but to a much lesser extent, from 237 362 in 1989 to 269 319 in 2005.

This result is also likely to reflect a return to a traditional family model mainly in villages, after the dissolution of co-operatives and the transition from state-controlled industry.

**Table 1 – The results of general censuses in Albania**

Year	Total	Male	Female	Families	Density per km <sup>2</sup>	Family members
1923	814 380	421 618	392 762	143 065	29.0	5.7
1930	833 618	428 959	404 659	146 249	30.3	5.7
1945	1 122 044	570 361	551 683	196 850	39.0	5.7
1950	1 218 945	625 935	593 008	211 613	42.0	5.8
1955	1 391 499	713 316	678 184	251 756	48.0	5.5
1960	1 626 315	831 294	795 021	279 805	56.6	5.8
1969	2 068 155	1 062 931	1 005 224	346 588	71.9	6.0
1979	2 590 600	1 337 400	1 523 200	463 333	90.1	5.6
1989	3 182 417	1 638 074	1 544 343	675 456	110.7	4.7
2001	3 069 275	1 530 443	1 538 832	726 895	106.7	4.2
2011	2 831 741	1 421 810	1 409 931	740 256	98.5	3.8

**Table 2 – Natural increase in the population, 1933-1940 (annual average)**

Index	In thousands of inhabitants	Per 1,000 inhabitants
Births	33.3	31.2
Deaths	17.7	14.3
Natural increase	15.6	16.9

Source: Bërxholi, Misja and Vejsiu (1987) *The Albanian Population*.

**Table 3 – The economic situation of the working age population by gender (active population)**

Total	Labour force	In employment	Unemployed	Unemployment (%)	Inactive population
1989	1 599 766	1 443 167	156 599	9.8	517 254
2005	1 347 281	1 041 775	305 506	22.7	823 156

Male	Labour force	In employment	Unemployed	Unemployment (%)	Inactive population
1989	841 706	779 271	62 435	7.4	237 362
2005	799 744	649 646	150 098	18.8	269 319

Female	Labour force	In employment	Unemployed	Unemployment (%)	Inactive population
1989	758 060	663 896	94 164	12.4	279 892
2005	547 537	392 129	155 408	28.4	553 837

Source: INSTAT (2006)

#### *The percentage of the labour force in the total population by age group*

The labour force consists mainly of young people. Nearly one-half (48 %) is concentrated in the 15-34 age group. The percentage of the labour force in the 35-44 age group is 26 % while the 45-54 age group takes up 21 %. The over 55s constitute only a tiny percentage of the labour force. In 2005, 77.3 % of the overall labour force was in employment.

#### *Industrial structure*

The most populous industrial sector is agriculture, which takes up 50.5 % of the total employed population. A significant percentage is employed in construction and transportation – 12.7 % – while employment in trade reaches 11.6 %, followed by industry with 7.1 %.

The districts that have the lowest proportion of their populations working in agriculture are those that appear more urbanised and industrialised than the rest of the country, such as Tirana, Durrës and Vlorë. Likewise, those districts that have the highest percentage of emigration also see the lowest proportions of people engaged in agriculture, such as Delvinë and Gjirokastër. Some districts have remained at the same level in terms of employment in agriculture, while in Lezhë, Malësia e Madhe, Pukë and Devollë, agriculture takes up more than 65 % of the employed population.

Most of those who are engaged in agriculture are self-employed (as opposed to employed by an employer), i.e. up to an extent of 71 %, followed by independent domestic helpers (28 %). This situation is the result of the agricultural reform which was conducted in the mid-1990s, in which land was redistributed to those families residing in rural villages.

If we look at industrial employment, we should note that this indicator reflects a distribution in some ‘industries that survive’, largely in mining for chromium and in oil processing. The industrial sector is mainly taken up by salaried employees, which make up about 85 % of the total.

The opposite position occurs in both transport and trade, where more than 50 % of employees are self-employed or are otherwise employers, followed in second place by employees. In terms of trade, we can say that this form of economic activity is organised completely in support of free market initiatives.

#### *Unemployment*

Unemployment reaches 28.4 % for women and 18.8 % for men. Most of the unemployed are young people.

Unemployment varies significantly from one area to another. The highest indicators of unemployment are in the northern districts of Albania, including Kukës (33.8 %); Kurbin (30.4 %) and Has (29.3 %); and in most-developed cities including Tirana (25.3 %), Vlorë (27.2 %), Shkodra (28.0 %) and Durrës (27.0 %). Unemployment is low in Gramsh (17.7 %), Kavajë (15.7 %), Lezhë (12.9 %), Lushnjë (14.9 %), Malakastër (16 %) and Mat (17.8 %).

It is interesting to note that unemployment is higher among people who have completed high school (26.4 %) compared to those who have completed only their primary education (22.4 %). This can be explained, firstly, in that unemployment is higher among the younger generation, which includes a greater number of people with high school education than university graduates. Secondly, in rural areas, employees in agriculture have committed fewer years of schooling.

University graduates are found less frequently among the unemployed (9.5 %).

#### *Migration: the early years of the transition*

The Albanian reality today is undoubtedly that of a society in transition, which is faced with a series of socio-economic phenomena, including international migration. The legacy of a collapsing economy, the new age of the population, the high level of education, the rapid opening up to the world, the strong desire to build a democratic society and the high level of unemployment, as well as other factors, have led to a rapid growth of international migration, which has some features in common with some of the other eastern European countries with economies in transition.

In Albania after World War II, internal migration was limited while international migration almost did not exist at all. The result of developments in a series of economic, social and political factors, starting from the second half of 1990, was manifested in explosions of Albanian citizens seeking to migrate to western Europe. In July 1990, a crowd of citizens which came to about 5 000 people in number were trapped in the

headquarters of western embassies in Tirana asking to leave the country. Thanks to the intervention of the international organisations, most of them were provided with political asylum mainly in Germany, Italy and France.

At the end of 1990 and the middle of 1991, about twenty thousand Albanian nationals arrived in Greece seeking political asylum. However, conversations with representatives of the international organisations and the asylum-seekers themselves clearly showed that the exodus was not politically motivated, but reflective of a plight existing in Albania which was mainly economic in nature.

In early March 1991, a crowd of Albanian citizens were put on ships in the port of Durrës, which arrived one day later in some of the seaports of southern Italy. According to the Italian authorities, twenty thousand Albanian citizens reached Italy during this period. In early August, another exodus addressed itself to Italy. Within four days, the coast of Italy had seen an influx of large numbers of people. Italian government authorities categorically refused their admission and, on 9 August, 17 000 people began the return journey on airplanes and ships. For the first time, the air route from Bari to Tirana experienced round the clock working, handling flights of civil and military aircraft which were returning migrants, and over a period of nine consecutive days.

Based on analysis conducted in March 1992 (INSTAT, 1992) the number of emigrants living abroad was 220 000, of which 200 000 were over eighteen years old. After a further four months to the end of July 1992, the total number of migrants living abroad was estimated to have risen to 280 000 people, while in October 1992 the total number of emigrants was put at 300 000 people. The following annual publication of the Institute of Statistics estimated that about 250 000 people had migrated by the end of 1992, and this figure does not include people who had gone to Greece for a few weeks or months and then come back (INSTAT, 1993).

There is no official data for the number of emigrants in later periods, a time when there are severe data fluctuations reported in the printed media. This is partly caused by there being occasionally *en masse* returns from Greece, one of the countries to which Albanian citizens have migrated. However, estimates related to 1995 record that the number of emigrants is about 450 000, equivalent to 14 % of the country's total population, 26 % of the working age population and 35 % of the workforce in employment.

Comparative analysis of emigration from eastern European countries during the early transition period shows that the intensity of migration from Albania was significantly higher compared to other countries in the region.

**Table 4 – Emigration to western countries from central and eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, 1991 to 1993**

Country	Emigration (000)		Net emigration		
	Total	Net	% of total population	Annual average (000)	Average annual per 10 000 inhabitants
Albania	400	300	9.2	100	308
Bulgaria	130	40	0.4	13	14
Czechoslovakia	25	25	0.2	8	5
Hungary	20	20	0.2	7	7
Poland	400	50	0.1	17	4
Romania	500	175	0.8	58	25
Former Soviet Union	1 150	1 050	0.4	350	13
Yugoslavia	1 350	900	3.7	300	126
Total	3 975	2 560	0.7	853	20

Source: *Misja (1998) International migration in Albania during the transition period.*

The annual average net migration per capita of the population of Albania for the three-year period 1991-1993 was approximately six times higher than the average of the Balkan countries of Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Romania. During this period, net migration in Albania as a percentage of the total population of the country was 9.2 %, compared to 3.7 % in Yugoslavia and 0.8 % in Romania, while the average for all the countries of eastern Europe was 0.7 %.

Compared to these countries, the backwardness of Albania has been greater and the economic collapse deeper, while the level of wages and the real income of the population has been lower. Another factor that has strongly influenced this trend is that, in other countries of eastern Europe after World War II, international migration was partially restricted while in Albania it was almost non-existent. For Albania, the characteristic is, therefore, the introduction of explosive speed into the process of migration to the international labour market, but with a delay of nearly half a century and in conditions which were not then conducive to integration as a result of a reduced demand for labour resources in the recipient countries.

#### Socio-demographic structures of migration

The structure of early migrants by marital status is that 59 % were single; 39 % married or divorced; and 2 % widowed. By gender, 73 % were male and 27 % female. Approximately 37 % of emigrants were younger than thirty; while the average age was 28.8 years. About two-thirds of migrants were city-dwellers while one-third were from

villages. Migrants to Greece were mainly from the southern and south-east of the country; while those to Italy came mainly from the central and coastal areas of Albania.

The structure of migrants' religious convictions showed that 73 % of them were religious, while 14 % were secular and 13 % 'did not know'. According to the religious affiliation of migrants, 54 % were Muslim; 29 % Orthodox; and 17 % Catholic. Evidence of religious belief is intended to create a database from which to analyse the extent to which the values of receiving countries guaranteed the practising of the religious faith of Albanian migrants; the extent to which they were not in conflict with national legislation and universally-recognised human rights; and the potential for non-discrimination against them in the areas of education, employment, etc.

The geographic distribution of migrants to receiving countries showed that approximately 90 % of the total were located in Greece and Italy; while the rest were in countries like Germany, USA, Canada, France, Turkey, etc. Most of the early migrants were located in those countries included in the table below:

**Table 5 – The main emigration countries**

	<b>Number</b>
Belgium	2 500
France	2 000
Germany	12 000
Greece	500 000
Italy	200 000
Canada	2 000
USA	12 000

*Source: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2000*

The identification of the socio-demographic structures of migration aims to create a store of information from which we may create an image, assumptions or estimates related to the problems of fertility; the natural increase in the population; the family situation and its socio-demographic problems; etc.

According to residential legitimacy, results showed that the majority of Albania's early emigrants were clandestine. In Italy, some 68 % of migrants were thought to be living clandestinely; while in Greece the figure was probably even higher. This is the weakest point of Albanian migration. Particularly from clandestine migrants, however, are derived benefits for family members living back at home, and consequently the national economy as a whole, i.e. via remittances.

A particular interest is the identification of Albanian families that have seen one or more family members emigrate. The number of Albanian families that have one or more members in migration has been steadily increasing, and it is estimated that about one-quarter of Albanian families have one or more family members who have emigrated.

## Socio-economic structures of migration

The socio-economic characteristics of early migrants prior to migration from Albania, in terms of employment, salary, lifestyle, savings and other characteristics, reflected the difficult economic situation of that period. Indeed, this was one of the main driving factors in the migration process.

The socio-economic characteristics of migrants in the reception country (largely Greece and Italy) in terms of the sector in which migrants developed their economic activity showed that nearly 45 % worked in construction and agriculture. However, significant differences were present according to the different countries: in Italy, the structure of migrants engaged in industry and tourism was, respectively, three and six times higher than in Greece; while those located in farming were nearly three times lower.

About 50 % of employees had seasonal employment and more or less commuted between the seasons. In Greece, the level reached 60 %. Regarding the duration of the commitment to work, 58 % of migrants had temporary jobs and 42 % permanent ones. In analysing the level of engagement in the work done by migrants, this depended on a number of factors, of which the most important were: educational attainment; ability to speak the language of the host country; internships abroad; and the presence in the recipient country of relatives and acquaintances.

Such socio-economic structures (by economic sector, seasonal employment and duration of work) serve to emphasise that Albanian emigrants worked in sectors which were not preferred in the local economy and which did not therefore affect the level of unemployment because incomes were low (about one-third the level of local workers).

Consequently, migrants served as a buffer regulating the job market, while they did not hinder but, instead, actually contributed to the growth of national product.

## The reasons for migration

In general, Albanian people are currently prone to migration, both internal and international, but international migration movements occupy the policy priority. The factors and reasons determining population movements are socio-economic in character rather than purely economic. In most cases, however, migratory flows reflect a set of causes and reasons which are much more likely to have an economic character. The group of socio-economic factors itself, spanning the entirety of the conditions of work and standards of living applying on a territory in comparison with others, classified into two major sub-groups: factors appropriate to waged labour; and the factors involved in the fulfilment of lifestyle requirements.

These migratory flows are conditioned by the needs of the economy and the distribution of labour resources, in accordance with changes in the structure of economic and territorial development. In this context, they may be analysed and addressed not as separate and independent of one another, but as related and conditional on one another, including from the perspective of the reasons for and the relationships between the varying socio-economic consequences. In the course of economic development, however, one of them is dominant. Also, there is no clear reason, because they are intertwined with each other at the same time as being differentiated. So, for example,

in identifying the reasons for an economic migrant as the pursuit of higher income, we can also isolate this from other reasons such as ‘business expansion and wealth’, ‘help family in hometown’, etc.

Besides the reasons which have a socio-economic character, there are also non-economic factors such as wars, political, religious and ideological frustrations and natural disasters that act in propelling migratory movements among the population.

There are three primary motives that led Albanian migrants to emigrate in the early years of the transition, based on the existence of six main reasons which have either a socio-economic character or a non-economic one, as set out in Table 6:

**Table 6 – Average importance of the primary motives that led Albanians to emigrate (%)**

Reasons	Average	Italy	Greece
Higher wages	29.0	27.4	30.8
Help family staying at home	28.4	29.2	27.5
Better working conditions (employment, technological level, etc.)	16.4	15.6	17.1
Better material conditions for everyday life outside of work	17.2	17.2	17.3
Material conditions for personal education or that of family members	6.0	7.0	5.0
Political reasons	3.0	3.6	2.3
Total	100	100	100

*Source: Misia (1998) International migration in Albania during the transition period.*

From this data, we can draw some conclusions of which the most important is that the primary motives were (and, actually, remain) those of a directly economic character. Thus we may reach the observation, as European Commission experts have also done, that the exodus of emigrants points to them being ‘People seeking to improve their economic situation’. The table sub-groups the motives for waged labour (higher wages, help family living at home and better working conditions), with these constituting 73.8 % of the total motives for migration; while the sub-group dealing with lifestyle motivations (better material conditions for everyday living and conditions for education overseas) constitute 23.2 % of the total motives reported.

## Conclusions

The employed population of Albania has declined. This has been due to the piecemeal withdrawal of women from the labour market and a level of population growth which is flat. On the other hand, unemployment has doubled, mainly as far as younger age groups and women are concerned.

Agriculture remains the main economic sector of the country and delivers the majority of production intended for the purposes of consumption. This has increased during the period of the transition, with 50.5 % of the population occupied in it. The privatisation of housing and agricultural land has strengthened the organisation of the family as the basic unit of economic renewal, bringing with it a revival of traditional family norms.

Construction, transport, trade and public administration present a disproportionate percentage of employment, reflecting structural adjustment problems in the economy. The gaps in appropriate education and training for people working in the service sector and the lack of modern industrial production capacity remain the major problems in the labour market.

Characteristic of Albania is the rapid, and indeed explosive, introduction of an international labour market, which has been delayed for nearly half a century and, actually, in unfavourable conditions for emigration as a result of host countries' own lower demand for labour.

Nevertheless, poverty remains the main cause of migration, jointly (in some cases) with family feuds and political uncertainty. Many rural areas have become de-populated. Remittances are key to the survival of those who remain at home which is, for the most part, the elderly, young women and children. This highlights the absence of young men from most rural families.

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