Identity in the Narratives of Albanian Return Migrants from Greece

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Abstract: Immigration is one of the most important social and economic phenomena in post-communist Albania. Following the fall of communism in 1989, hundreds of thousands of Albanians fled their country in search of a better life. Their destination was mainly Greece and Italy, because of their geographical proximity. After having lived in Greece for a considerable time period, a small but increasing number of Albanian migrants decided to return. The number is increasing rapidly during the last year, because of the Greek debt crisis. In this study we try to explore the main factors that motivated their return to Albania (we do not include the last years' returnees. This is another project of ours for the near future). Such might be family, success or failure in their personal life, in their work, etc. Did the Albanian government provide incentives for their return or was it a decision based on their limited knowledge of Albanian reality? A second aim is to understand the difficulties of their re-socialization. Albania has changed vastly since they left and, therefore, a reintegration to the new conditions is necessary. It is a different cultural setting that favors a double identity, a new Greek identity, and an old Albanian one that needs to change in order to adapt to the new conditions.

Key words: return migration, motivations, resocialization, double identity.

1. Introduction

Many theorists have suggested that migration is a 'one-way trip', that there is no 'home' to go back to (Hall 1987: 44). But if we look at recent history of international migration movements, we will see that this suggestion is far from the truth. Migration is not a no-return process. According to Russell King, the problems of return migration have been to some extent neglected by geographers and by social scientists in general. He argues that this fact comes out because of the temporal character of international migration within the European labour market (King, 1977: 241). King (2000: 7) thinks that return migration 'is the great unwritten chapter in the history of migration'. Klinthäll (1998: 2) also argues that there is a surprising lack of empirical work on this issue, and Cassarino (2004) observes that although return migration has been a topic of various interpretations, its content remains hazy.

In this paper we try to shed some light on one aspect of the phenomenon of return migration in Albania. We do this with reference to our ongoing research with regard to first-generation Albanian migrants returning from Greece. During the conduct of our research we became aware of the fact that there are no published statistics on this specific issue. In this paper we discuss the motivations of Albanians to migrate to Greece, the reasons for returning, and the re-creation of their self-identity upon return. By exploring these motivations of migrating and returning we aim to construct a framework that would help us to understand the phenomenon of return migration in Albania. We believe that the reasons for migrating and returning are interrelated to each other, and that they will lead us to understand the returnees' identity.

The paper is structured as follows: First, we present an overview of the few empirical studies on Albanian return migration. Second, we develop the methodology chosen to conduct this research, and finally, we provide the findings.

2. Albanian return migration

Greece and Italy are the two most reachable countries for the Albanian migrants because of their geographic proximity. To losifides and King (1998), the massive movement of Albanians towards Greece during the 1990s is linked to the geopolitical changes in the socialist countries of the Eastern Europe after 1989. The fall of the communist regime caused the free internal and international movement of Albanians (losifides & King, 1998:207). Fakiolas (2000) notes that despite the political and social push factors, the economic ones were more important in constraining the Albanians to

leave their country and migrate to Greece. He goes on saying that "the wages earned in Greece are about four-to-six times higher than those that might be earned at home in Albania." (Fakiolas, 2000: 67). The largest group of Greece's foreign population is composed of Albanians, followed by the Bulgarians (Triandafyllidou, Maroufof & Nikolova, 2009: 13, 17). Different researches show different results concerning the total number of Albanians living in Greece or even in Italy. One research estimates this number between 400,000-550,000 in Greece and 150,000-200,000 in Italy (King & Mai, 2004). In another (Labrianidis & Hatziprokopiou, 2005) their number is more or less the same, i.e., 450,000-550,000, but they constitute more than half of the migrant population in Greece.

According to Berryl Nicholson, many Albanians move back and forth, spending only short periods of time abroad. Most of them aim to stay long enough so that they earn a considerable amount of money and get by until they find a steady job in Albania. A considerable number of migrants have done so and have already returned (Nicholson, 2004). But there exists a gap in research with regard to Albanian return migration from Greece and Italy, with the exception of only a few projects. According to previous studies the return is largely a temporary option (Mancellari *et al.* 1996; Kule *et al.* 2002), but they leave aside the particularities and implications of it. Nicholson (2004) notes that many return migrants use money earned abroad to create a means to make a living in Albania, to start up a small business or to buy equipment in order to improve the productivity and efficiency of the different activities in which they and their families are already engaged. The benefits to the economy from investments in small business are considerable. This is more evident in some villages in the south of the country.

In general, the return of the Albanian migrant has been viewed as an ideology of failure. Two categories of migrants are thought to have returned: those who have not been able to integrate in the country of their destination and those who have been deported (Labrianidis and Lyberaki, 2004: 84). The work of Labrianidis and Lyberaki (2004), Labrianidis and Kazazi (2006) on Albanian return migration from Greece and Italy is focused on the performance of the Albanian migrants in their country, their employment status, and their after- and pre-migration circumstances. They also tried to discover the push-pull factors that lead the immigrants to choose the country of their destination, and the regions of Albania they chose to settle after their return. Another research on the same topic carried out by Germenji and Milo (2009) is centered on the investigation of the labor status of the Albanian return migrants in their country. Their research shows that migrants in Greece and Italy have done unskilled works and this had negative consequences on their educational and professional knowledge. They also highlight the preference of migrants to start up their own business.

3. Methodology

This article presents the results of 20 in-depth semi structured interviews with Albanian migrants returning from Greece. The interviews were held in café-bars, at the work place, or at home of the returnees, during the period November – March 2012. We interviewed 7 women and 13 men belonging to the first generation of migrants, currently living and working in the city of Tirana. We chose Tirana because, firstly, it is the capital and the most developed area of Albania. Hence there are more chances for the returnees to be employed or self-employed in the field of their preference. Secondly, due to the economic development, Tirana is transformed into a modern city, and the way of life is similar to Greece. And finally, Tirana seems to be on "open-minded" society.

4. The findings

4.1 Motivations of migrating to Greece

There are different theoretical approaches to the motivations or reasons that lead to migration. Lee's theory (1996) is based on the synthesis of *push* and *pull factors*. He argues that migration is determined by the attracting (*pull*) factors at the receiving country, and the repelling (*push*) factors at the sending country. Öberg (1996) explains that the factors for the international migration can be *hard* or *soft* ones. Hard factors are different dramatic circumstances like humanitarian crises, civil wars, environmental catastrophes, etc. Soft factors are less immediate problems, such as poverty, social exclusion, or unemployment.

Beside these theoretical approaches, a great contribution to the explanation of motivations for migration is also the theory of Taylor (1986). His theory is constructed on the basis of the presence of interpersonal migrant networks in the country of destination. These networks, constituted by people sharing the same kinship, friendship or origin, serve as ties that can facilitate the life of migrants in many aspects, and also the movement of migrants between the sending and receiving countries.

The case of Albanian migration can be explained on the basis of economic (push and pull) factors, rather than on political, social or environmental ones. Our study revealed that the Albanian migrants left their homes for economic or political reasons, and to some extent for the desire to seek adventure. The economic migration of Albanians was mainly triggered by the unemployment, low income and future low-income expectations. The difference in wages between Albania and Greece is another factor that pushed Albanians to migrate to Greece. With their income earned in Greece they supported their families in Albania. And it appears that Fakiolas' (2000: 67) argument is valid.

"How could we stay here? After 1991 everything was destroyed and the wages were scarcely enough to maintain our family. So where else to go? Greece was a solution that time".

Some of our interviewees migrated during the tumult of 1997, caused by the fall of pyramid schemes, which triggered riots in big cities, and the general anarchy thereafter. The period before the riots was considered a period of economic growth. Some of them were self-employed and doing well in their small business. As the political, economic, and social circumstances worsened, they decided to leave Albania forever. While they were describing how they lived those circumstances, we noticed how terrified they were. Under the pressure of the events they were convinced that Albania would never progress. In Öberg's language, these were hard factors for migrating.

"My family was horrified. Our business was doing well, but the situation in 1997 was a disaster, worse than in 1990. There was a situation of anarchy, there was no state power, and all the people were armed because the gangs were braking into their houses, kidnapping their daughters and stealing their money. We were all shocked, and so I ... took my wife to Greece. There was no way to stay here".

Despite the push factor, there are also some pull factors that have influenced Albanians to chose Greece as a country of destination, the most important being the presence of fellow-countrymen migrant networks (Taylor, 1986). Friends or relatives would serve as facilitators to their quick adaptation within the Greek society

"My brother was in Corinth and so I had someone to wait me there. He found me a job and so I lived in his house till I got a scholarship to learn Greek language as foreigner..."

"A friend of mine took me to where he stayed the first time. He knew a bit Greek and his friends found us a job to harvest oranges..."

Some of female returnees migrated to Greece because their husbands were there. They passed the border illegally by paying individuals, members of larger groups that were transporting people illegally through the borders, or by buying a visa. According to them, the Albanian men were the first to experience migration. Most probably this phenomenon can be explained by taking into account the Albanian traditional family structure, where man is the head of the family and has the responsibility to provide the family with what's necessary for living. Hence, the Albanian men headed to Greece with the aim to offer to their family a better life, either by sending them money, or by taking them later to Greece, when they had a steady job and a home. During the first years, they were constrained to live with other fellow Albanians, in order to share the living costs and save money which they sent back home. The Albanian migrants in Greece can be characterized as transnational migrants, especially before 1998, because of their constant moving back to Albania and forth to Greece. The main reasons for this movement were their illegal status, their intention to stay in Greece only temporarily, and their homesickness. Living in Albania periodically, i.e., until they found a way to go to Greece, made them realize that the political and economic situation would never improve, although they continued to consider their stay in Greece as a temporal solution. This belief was then justified by the fall of the pyramid schemes in 1997. Going to Greece was the only solution, and they tried to find legal or illegal ways for doing so.

"I stayed in Veria, it's a place near Thessalonica. I stayed there for a while and returned back. Even my friends the first years acted the same. We were illegal, because only in 1998 the process of migrants' legalization began in Greece ... we were caught by Greek police and sent us to the borders. And so one, one time, two times ... after 1998 we settled in Greece".

"I married a man who was an immigrant in Greece. I was a teacher here, my parents and brothers were here and I didn't want to go there but my husband said that he would do the best to make my life better there. As it was a difficult and long process to make the documents of family reunion, he had to pay a Greek official to let me pass the border".

"My husband is a sculpture. We were very young at that time and he had a great curiosity to go to Athens and see the Parthenon. Our financial situation was not good. I was a teacher of history that time. He went there and after some months we bought a visa for me and I found myself in Athens".

A limited number of our respondents saw Greece as a passageway to other western countries. They went to Greece to work for a short period of time in order to accumulate the money needed for their illegal trip towards mainly the United States. But when they made the money, they had become a part of the Greek society. Migrating again to another far away country was not regarded with a sense of adventure any more. Although they always regarded Greece as a temporary destination, they adapted to the Greek way of living.

"I went to Greece because there was no other choice. My brother was in England and told me to go to Greece and from there someone would send me to England. I had no money and so I decided to work in Athens for a while, make the money and then go... but it was too late. The network who would organize the trip to England was discovered by the Greek police. So I remained in Athens"

"My husband and I saw Greece not in long terms. We went there to stay for a while and then go to America. But then, we liked the way of living there and we were integrated. My husband is an engineer and had a good job. So we decided not to leave".

Some of our respondents considered Greece as a place where they could earn enough money, go back home and invest in building a house or setting up a small business. Others considered it as a place where they could study or learn a profession. There was a great desire among Albanian students to study in universities of western countries. They wanted to abandon the traditional Albanian society and embrace the new western one, as it was presented by the Italian television (Mai, 2004). Hence, the desire to study abroad and explore a new modern world pulled them out of their world.

"I was 22 years old when I went to Greece. I was young and I wanted to see something different and to enjoy my life. My parents had a considerably high status in Tirana and there was no need for me to migrate in another country. But I had to... I was eager to explore a different world that was showed to us by the Italian television. During the communist system we attended what was going in the other world but carefully not to be noticed by the neighbors or any police officer".

4.2 Motivations for returning

In the second section of this paper we tried to explain how migration as one of the most important issues in human geography has an extensive literature while return migration is highly neglected. This is the case for Albanian return migration. During our research we became aware of the fact that there is too little empirical evidence and statistical data about this phenomenon. So this part of the paper aims at discovering the main reasons that pushed Albanian migrants move away from Greece and return to their home. To explain these return motivations, we use the theoretical typologies of Cerase (1974), King (1986) and Gmelch (1980) that seem to be related to our case.

According to Cerase (1974) the group of migrants who return after having satisfied their initial ambitions such as saving enough to buy a home or to start a business, belongs to the category of return because of conservatism (5-15 years abroad). King (1986) thinks that this category of migrants constitutes the type of planed return migration.

In our research we found that some of our respondents returned, because they fulfilled their initial objectives, such as the accumulation of the money needed to set up a small business in their country. It is evident that the Albanian migrants like to be self-employed. They have tried even in Greece to start a small business. They return to Albania, mainly to look for chances of self-employment.

"I went to Greece with the intention to earn the money needed to start a business. I went there and I was always exploring ways of how a business functions. My wife and I were selling in the market. I thought that it was better to work for yourself than for others. One day, I meet by chance a Greek trader who needed someone to collaborate with him in Tirana, [where he decided to do business] because of the cheap labor costs. So I decided to collaborate with him and everything was going well till he died and his son took over the business. His son didn't know how to manage a business so I was obliged to stop the collaboration. Then I bought a boutique in [the area known as] Bllok in Tirana [Bllok, in english literally Block, was the forbidden area in the center of Tirana where the heads of the communist party lived. Now it is transformed into the most cosmopolitan area of the city]. The business is going so well and I bought another boutiques in the same place. For now everything is okay".

Some of the returnees returned because of unanticipated developments. This type of return is defined by King (1986) as spontaneous return. Two male migrants returned because it was impossible for them to afford economically and

psychologically the long process of family reunion in Greece. As we were reading their interviews, it became clear that beside of this main reason, it was although hidden the great nostalgia for their home, deeply in their hearts.

"I was tired of the bureaucracy in Greece. I had to wait for a long time to get my wife there. It was a matter of time and money. Then I said to myself, so many years alone here, what I am doing? Better to go to my home where I can be the owner of it and not the renter".

Some young returnees who have studied in Greece returned believing that it is easier to penetrate to Albanian labour market than abroad. They also think that the labour market in Albania holds more opportunities, especially in undeveloped areas. They see Albania as a chance for doing a carrier and also for contributing to its development. Cerase (1974) defines this type of return migration as return for innovation (15-30 years): in this case successful migrants decide to return home with the hope to invest and to apply new ideas, or generally to contribute to the development and social or political change of their country.

"I finished my studies there and I found myself employed as waiter, or doing jobs not related to my degree. I had worked very hard to get the degree and so one day I decided to try my luck in Tirana. Some of my friends went there and I learnt that they were doing well... there was no way that I could make a carrier in Athens so one day I left".

"I was working in a beauty center there and while I was visiting Tirana I saw that there is a great demand for this kind of business. I said to myself, what I am doing here in Greece? It's better to go back home and start my own center. There was a great lack of knowledge in this field and with my knowledge and abilities learnt in Athens, I would provide something new to my clients".

One of the problems the returnees faced during their staying in Greece was the Greek language and culture. The language and the unknown environment slowed down their integration. Their slow integration in the Greek society had negative effects in their professional carriers, especially for those migrants who had graduated from Albanian universities. To get by they worked for many years in fields not related to their studies. This made them feel inferior within the Greek society, because, according to them, there is a positive correlation between the labour and social status. They think that the lower the first, the lower the second, and vice versa. Hence, to some the return seems to have been motivated by the possibility of being employed in their profession.

"Before migrating I was a teacher and I had good reputation in my city. Everyone spoke to me and I felt good. Migrating to Greece, I felt killing myself. I had to work in the domestic domain. I worked hard so as to have a good relation with my boss. In the beginning they behaved to me as I was nothing, only when began to learn their language they understood that I wasn't an ignorant. But then it was too late. I was tired of fighting to show my abilities. One day I got an invitation to work as a teacher in a private college in Tirana. I accepted the offer immediately".

4.3 Being both Greek and Albanian

Richard Jenkins (1996) stresses the fact that identity is a social construction and makes us social beings. The construction of identity is an active process of categorizing and classifying things or people according to their characteristics, and of associating oneself with something or somebody. He argues that social identity defines who we are, and who the others are. A person chooses his identity or is forced by others to accept one. Identity in time and space can be perceived as flexible and negotiable process of self-ascription and attribution (Jenkins, 1996: 21). Hermans (2001) considers identity as a dynamic construction, responsible for the co-presence of different cultures in one's self-construction.

The Albanian returnees feel that they have changed a lot because of their experience in Greece. Now they have more in common with Greek citizens than Albanians living in Albania. Entering to a new process of socialization in Albania, which in fact is a re-socialization, they feel like living between two different worlds. The consequence is with regard to their self-identity. While they try hard to adapt to the changed aspects of their home environment, they cling on to their migrant identity, as it was constructed under the influence of Greek way of life. Hence, the rapid social changes occurring in Albania make the returnee feel like a foreigner, with attributes similar to those that Simmel (1971) has given to the stranger. To Simmel one person is defined as stranger because of the uncommon characteristics, such as language, nationality, culture, way of living and thinking, between him and the majority of the people within a society. In our case, the Albanian migrants returning to their home see these differences and feel alienated.

"Albanians and Albania have changed a lot. I see how the people behave and I say to myself, this is not the Albania I left. The people are aggressive and impolite. They construct the relations on the basis of interest. When I came everything was black to me even the nature".

"I felt as a foreigner. The environment and the people have changed a lot. Firstly I didn't recognize Tirana. Not only Tirana but even the people. I thought that here I would find a little psychological support from my relatives and friends but they have changed a lot. I don't feel the same. May be I have changed, not they".

It is very clear that the returnees feel as foreigners in their home. They think that everything has changed, the environment, the people etc. Everything seems to be strange to them. We think that this feeling of being alienated stems from the experiences they had in Greece and from recent political and economic developments in Albania. While planning their return, the picture of Albania and the Albanian society the returnees had in mind was the initial one, the one they left many years ago. There is an antithesis in them between the old, known Albania and the new, unknown one. This antithesis between these two different worlds makes them feel foreigners in their homeland. They admit the fact that while they are in Greece they feel more the Albanian side of identity and while they are in Albania they feel more the Greek side of it.

5. Conclusions

From the above, it is clear to us that the Albanian return migrants share the desire to become an active part of their society. They see their return as a reconnection with family and friends, a new start or a chance for new careers. In the 1990s the Albanians left their country mainly for economic reasons, in pursue of a better life. Greece was regarded as the easiest way to better opportunities or as a passage towards more developed countries. The presence of fellow countrymen influenced the decision of Albanian migrants to choose Greece as their primary destination. However, Greece was regarded as a temporary destination where they could earn enough money, go back home and invest in building a house or setting up a small business. Others saw it as place where they could study or learn a profession.

During the last years many Albanians returned home. The solution to their new or old problems is no more Greece, but their country. They returned home after having fulfilled their initial objectives, such as the accumulation of the money needed to start up a small business in their country. A small number of migrants returned because they believe it is easier to penetrate Albanian labour market than abroad. They also think that the labour market in Albania holds more opportunities, especially in the underdeveloped areas of the country. They see opportunities for pursuing desired carriers in Albania, and also for contributing to its development.

But Albania has changed. It is not the country they left many years ago, when they migrated to Greece. The ideal of Albanian society they had in mind is very different from the society they found upon their return. Although they had been moving back and forth, they couldn't notice the deep social changes that had occurred during their absence. Upon noticing these changes, they felt the differences that divided them from the other Albanians. They regarded themselves as strangers within this society, alone and alienated from the rest. In order to integrate to this new society they are entering to a new process of socialization, which in fact is a re-socialization. Until it is completed, they would continue to feel strangers in their homeland or living between two different worlds.

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