

‘For a Better Life’? The Role of Networks in Social (Im)Mobility after Return to Albania

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This article addresses the question of what influences the opportunities for social mobility in the context of return migration to Albania from a meso-level perspective. It applies a network-theory-based analysis to 104 qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of returned migrants, conducted in Albania between 2019 and 2022. The interviews are clustered into three categories according to the stated economic need for migration. The analysis shows that the geographical dispersion, the support capacities and the influence of these networks on migration decision-making differ significantly between the three categories. Despite some dynamics, individual network embeddedness reflects the overall socio-economic and ethno-political stratifications of the origin society and distinctively shapes migrants’ modalities and means of migration, the opportunities for resource accumulation abroad and their ability to re-establish themselves after return. Thus, social networks mainly contribute to continuity rather than change in terms of social stratification, even over the course of migration(s) and return(s). Yet, these effects are mediating, not determining, outcomes and are context-dependent. Lastly, network effects differ not only between but also within the categories, depending, for example, on the gender or age of the migrant.

Keywords: social mobility, return migration, social networks, inequality, Albania

Introduction

The exceptionally high levels of migration and rising migration potential in and from Albania (King and Gëdeshi 2020) call for further inquiry. The fact that Albania ranks second last in Europe regarding opportunities for social upward mobility (WEF 2020) inspired me to conduct an analysis of a qualitative interview dataset on migration and return from this angle: to see if and for whom migration may constitute a means to achieving social upward mobility which would not be possible otherwise.

Migration and return are social processes and thus ought to be studied in their social context (cf. Hagan and Wassink 2020); this article thus focuses on interlinkages between spatial and social mobility while specifically considering the role of migrants' social networks as a meso-level and potentially mediating factor in this regard. Social mobility is linked with economic development in a variety of ways (WEF 2020: 8). Empirical studies mainly point to a positive impact of social mobility on economic development indicators ranging from per-capita income to child mortality (see, e.g., Neidhöfer, Ciaschi, Gasparini and Serrano 2021). Research on the links between return migration and development points to a more complex relationship (King 2022; King and Kuschminder 2022). In this article, I will look at social mobility as a potential outcome of return migration, i.e. in terms of aspired-to achievements that have been made possible by the migration and which materialise or are maintained after return. My aim is to contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms which facilitate or constrain social mobility after return and, as large-scale quantitative studies thus far have not yielded conclusive results in this regard, I will focus on meso-level factors such as migrants' networks, which have not received much attention in this particular context. Empirically, this paper draws on qualitative interviews with 104 returned migrants in Albania, collected between June 2019 and April 2022 and representing a diversity of regional and socio-economic backgrounds as well as migration trajectories.

Links between social and spatial mobility

A growing body of literature deals with the subject of social mobility after migrants' return (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Two strands of research can be distinguished: one focusing on the economic outcomes of migration and return, the other delving into the individual trajectories of migrants in their social and political contexts. Studies from the first strand are usually quantitative and often based on survey data. Their results thus far are inconclusive – for instance, identifying occupational upward mobility under certain conditions in Egypt (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021), more downward than upward mobility in Bulgaria (Nonchev and Hristova 2021) or, in the case of Mexico, finding that 'US work experience is associated with higher odds of both upward and downward occupational mobility and entry into self-employment' (Hagan and Wassink 2019: 53).

For Albania, such studies have found indications for the occupational upward mobility of migrants returning from Italy and countries further away but not from Greece (Carletto and Kilic 2011). There are also indications of human and financial capital transfers by returning migrants, although with impacts concentrated in and around the capital city of Tirana and without significant developmental effects (Germenji and Milo 2009). In view of the higher propensity of return migrants to become self-employed, Piracha and Vadean (2010) introduced the distinction between 'own-account work' and entrepreneurship, thus highlighting contrasting reintegration trajectories.

Following Cassarino's (2004) call to broaden the theorising of return migration beyond economic and financial considerations, researchers began to study the 'heterogeneous patterns of resource accumulation and their uneven consequences for labor market reintegration and mobility upon return' (Hagan and Wassink 2020: 535). This strand of research understands migration and return as complex social processes, emphasises the

importance of the temporal dimension (Hagan and Wassink 2020) and identifies a need to understand reintegration processes more strongly through the experiences of the returning migrants themselves (Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019).

Qualitative studies on return migration to Albania – for example, in the wake of the financial crisis in Greece and Italy (e.g. Cena and Heim 2021; Kerpaçi 2019; Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019) – have established that social relations and perceptions in migration destinations, circumstances of return decision-making, transnational connectedness and mobility as well as local-context conditions after return all play a role in shaping economic reintegration. However, existing research has rarely addressed the role of pre-existing socio-economic inequalities in shaping the outcomes of return. Research on return to Afghanistan found that inequalities became reinforced through migration and return due to ‘unequal opportunities to accumulate skills, knowledge, and savings whilst abroad’ (van Houte, Siegal and Davids 2015: 693). Another study attributes these effects to the social-network embeddedness of the migrating and displaced persons, mainly the variations in the support capacities of their networks (Grawert and Mielke 2018). Previous studies have established the impact of transnational family networks on the decision to migrate (Stampini, Carletto and Davis 2014) and an important role of family networks for both migration and return to Albania (Kopliku Dema and Drishti 2022). This makes Albanian migration a well-suited example into which to further dive by looking at the role of networks across the entire cycle(s) of migration, including reintegration.

Network theory

In migration studies, network theory has become one of the most influential paradigms through which the emergence and – even more so – the perpetuation of migration systems are explained (Sha 2021; Vandenbelt 2020). The general assumption is that migrants’ transnational social ties facilitate migration by lowering its costs and risks (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993). Regarding return migration, maintaining contacts in the country of origin is understood to be positively associated with the willingness to return and return migrants are assumed to have expanded their social capital during migration (Cassarino 2004). These general applications of network theory have been criticised for – among other things – their lack of specification regarding when, why and for whom migration is facilitated and which type of connection plays a role (de Haas 2010).

For a more nuanced understanding, distinguishing between social networks and social capital is essential (Kuschminder 2017). Social capital here is defined as the resources which are embedded in and accessible through social networks and connections (Lin 2001). The distinction between social relationships *per se* and the type and value of resources that a person can mobilise through relationships is present in Bourdieu’s initial writing on the subject but has become blurred over time (Kuschminder 2017). It draws attention to the varying support capacities of different networks and to the fact that resources which are available in a network are not automatically accessible to any member of the network at any time. Access to network-based resources is a result of active networking (Schapendonk 2015) and depends on network internal norms, e.g. hierarchies or reciprocity; it is also a function of individual and shifting positionalities and mediated through social categories (Anthias 2008; Grawert and Mielke 2018).

Unlike social-capital theory, which views social relations *as* resources and establishes the closure and density of networks as requirements for mutual benefits, social-network theory assumes that dense networks are more likely to convey redundant information (Kuschminder 2017; Lin 2001; Portes 1998) and that weaker ties (i.e. less-frequent and less-intimate contacts) are more likely to be sources of *new* knowledge and resources (Granovetter 1973). The study of social networks also recognises that socio-economic and ethno-political stratifications within societies are often mirrored in transnational networks (de Haas 2010: 1602; Portes 1998)

but equally understands networks and networking to be dynamic. With this in mind, the empirical part of this paper will look into the influence of different types of social connection – including but not limited to kinship and family relations – on migration and resource accumulation patterns abroad.

Data collection and methodology

The data for this paper were collected from 2019 to 2022 by the author and by Albanian researchers based on a semi-structured interview guideline and on a shared ethical guideline. It took place in the context of a project that studied reintegration trajectories over time and with German government funding. The author first went to Albania for this project in 2019 and has familiarised herself with the context since then through several subsequent visits. The collaboration and regular exchanges with the Albanian researchers contributed tremendously in this regard, which also helped with the contextualisation during the process of data collection and analysis. Respondents were selected through the (professional and private) networks of the author and the local researchers, through organisations providing reintegration assistance and through snowball sampling, while aiming for maximal diversity of the sample. A total of 104 respondents were interviewed for this analysis – 48 males and 56 females. Possibly, the gender (im)balance within the research team had an influence on the gender ratio of the respondents, as the majority of return migrants are known to be male. Of the female respondents in this sample, however, the majority had migrated and returned in the context of family migration. Data collection followed pre-defined ethical procedures: all respondents were informed about the aim and framework of the study, guaranteed full anonymity and asked for their consent to the use of the data. Participation was entirely voluntary and unpaid; respondents were also informed about their right to end the interview at any point or to withdraw their consent to the use of the data after the interview. Consent to be contacted a second time was granted by all respondents on the occasion of the first interview. For various reasons (such as the re-migration and availability constraints of the researchers), just over one third of the respondents were, in fact, interviewed a second time. Some respondents, mainly those returned from Germany against their will, expressed the hope that participation in the study would support their wish to go back to Germany, despite our utmost clarity that the interviews would not result in any (positive or negative) changes regarding opportunities for legal migration or assistance. This occurred in interviews conducted by the German as well as by Albanian researchers. The selection of interview locations followed the aim to include diverse contexts from across Albania. Interviews were conducted in Tirana, Kamëz, Durrës, Fushë-Krujë, Shkodra, Korça, Kavajë, Kukës, Fushë-Arrëz, Fier, Roscovec and Peshkopia, including villages and suburbs around some of these towns, as well as villages in the municipality of Himarë. The returns occurred at one or more points in time within the past three decades, from various places and for all kinds of reasons, both willingly and unwillingly. For this article, interview transcripts were analysed according to four aspects, which correspond to questions or sections in the interview guideline:

- aspirations at the point of departure and migration decision-making;
- constraints and opportunities whilst abroad;
- type of return and the transferability of acquired resources; and
- social mobility after return.

Information corresponding to these four points was extracted manually from each interview and compiled in a table to visualise the diachronic dimension.

Through testing and adapting typologies from the literature, the three clusters (see below) emerged as a pattern and interviews were ordered accordingly for further analysis. While the main source is qualitative interview data – which express subjective perceptions, experiences and meaning-making by returned migrants – participant observation, exchanges within the research team, additional interviews with experts and other

stakeholders (state and non-state) as well as literature and statistics were consulted in order to triangulate the data to the greatest extent possible.

Country context: Albania

Albania has experienced unique migration dynamics in the past three decades (see e.g. Barjaba and Barjaba 2015; Gëdeshi and King 2020; Gemi and Triandafyllidou 2021; King 2005; Vullnetari 2013). Under communist rule (1946 to 1990), the country became increasingly isolated and both internal and international migration were extremely restricted. When this political and economic system disintegrated and the borders opened in 1991, people were faced with ‘an almost complete production shutdown, a paucity of capital and a lack of managers trained to deal with the vagaries of a market economy’ (Zickel and Iwaskiw 1994: 118). Migration became an essential coping and livelihood strategy and Greece and Italy emerged as the main destination countries, while the economic and political transition took time. In 1997, the collapse of several financial pyramid or Ponzi schemes destroyed people’s hard-earned savings – equaling around 40 per cent of the national GDP at the time (Burazeri, Goda, Sulo, Stefa and Kark 2008). This sparked widespread violent protests, more migration and a major political crisis. A decade later, the global financial crisis of 2008 severely affected the two main destination countries of Albanian migration, triggering large numbers of premature returns and significantly reducing income-generating opportunities and remittances (Cena and Heim 2021; Gemi and Triandafyllidou 2021; Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019). In 2015, Albania became the second largest sending country of asylum-seekers in Germany, though with low recognition rates (Dubow, Tan and Kuschminder 2021; Gëdeshi and King 2020; Hackaj and Shehaj 2017). Thus, while return migration to Albania became increasingly significant and visible over time, with peaks in 2010–13 and 2015–16, this was not for positive reasons (Gëdeshi and King 2022).

Economic framework conditions impede reintegration in many cases, which needs to be considered with a view to opportunities for social mobility. Most industries and agricultural infrastructures were neither maintained nor modernised after the transition; today, around 54 per cent of Albania’s GDP is generated by the service sector (Central Intelligence Agency 2016). In terms of production, clothing and footwear constitute a large share of exports (around 35 per cent); however, evidence exists of ‘regular labor law and human rights violations’ in this sector (Arqimandriti, Llubani, Ljarja, Musiolek and Luginbühl 2016). According to the Social Mobility Index, the most problematic field is employment – specifically access to work opportunities. Unemployment is higher for people with high and medium levels of education (around 20 per cent compared to 14 for people with basic education), but 54.4 per cent of workers are in ‘vulnerable employment’ (WEF 2020: 39) and youth unemployment is twice as high as unemployment for the members of the oldest working-age cohort (Leitner 2021). Economic policy is liberal and 35 per cent of the economy is estimated to belong to the informal sector; the Gini Index ranking for income inequality is higher than the EU-28 average, 49 per cent of the population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022) and there is a large urban–rural divide.

With this contextual background in mind, I now turn to the presentation of the empirical results of the research.

Clustering migration aspirations and network capabilities

To include the socio-economic background prior to migration, the interviews were clustered into three groups, based on the main reasons that people reported for their decision to migrate.¹ The interviews strongly support the understanding that it is the total sum of the resources that an individual or family possesses *and* can mobilise

through their social relations that defines necessities and capabilities to migrate. Drawing on and adding to the distinction between an instrumental and an intrinsic aspiration to migrate (de Haas 2021), I clustered the interviews into three types of migrant: intrinsically, instrumentally and survival-or-crisis-motivated (cf. also Betts 2013, who uses survival for migration resulting from governance failures). These three clusters serve as a heuristic tool to include the situation prior to migration as well as deliberations and expectations regarding the migration itself. This allows me to assess the links between aspiring migrants' resources and their migration decision more holistically than would, for example, data on household income or property ownership, as it includes the network dimension.

The *intrinsically motivated* are people leaving without *economic* necessity. They want to see the world, gain experiences, join family members or acquire additional resources, such as human capital, which they could also acquire without migration. Some leave with concrete plans to return, while most assume more vaguely that, sooner or later, they will return. In this group, there are two sub-types: those leaving Albania with the main aim of pursuing higher education abroad and others migrating mostly for social reasons, for example (re-)uniting with a spouse.

Keta, who moved to Greece in the mid-1990s to live with her husband, leaving a well-qualified job, fits the intrinsically motivated typology. She comes from a well-situated family and notes about her migration that

We decided to migrate for a better life as a couple. It's not that we lived the hard life immigrants do, only working hard to make money. We made money and we spent money. We were young and went for fun and enjoyed the Greek lifestyle.

Second, the *instrumentally motivated* are people who mainly leave to find remedies to economic problems which they feel cannot be solved by staying, such as a lack of (family) income or a need for investment capital, as well as health problems. While some pursue a specific aim, the majority in this group are engaged in a somewhat more open search for opportunities, such as the opportunity to work or to gain documents. The time for return is also often unspecified, as it relates to the fulfillment of migration-related objectives.

Illir comes from a middle-class family in a small town in Northern Albania. His family owns property and runs a small business there but opportunities are limited and his migration falls under the category of the instrumentally motivated. As he states:

Since I was 15 years old, I worked here after school. My aim was to earn money and to invest money into the family business. But here, there is no possibility to really earn money (...). Abroad, it is much easier to earn a certain amount in a short period of time – here not. When I was 25, I went to the UK, illegally.

Finally, the *survival-or-crisis-motivated* are people who leave to escape overwhelmingly difficult conditions, either economically or in terms of security. Their migration decisions respond to structural challenges – which affect them so badly that their basic needs cannot be reliably met – or to insecurity, such as the lawlessness resulting from the pyramid crisis, the demolition of houses for urban development, revenge threats against family members or domestic violence. Most of them hope to leave for good and have no aspirations to return, unless under fundamentally different conditions.

Loreta comes from a small village in the North of Albania. She married young and her first children were twins, one of them with severe health problems. She tried to make money for her family as a vegetable seller, as her husband did not have an income:

My husband was not faithful to me and on top of that he would beat me almost every day. He never brought money home. (...) Then my husband left for Germany. And I was left in the middle of the road. I slept with my children in an old car. (...) That was when I decided to leave. (...) So, we followed him to Germany.

The differential effects of social networks on emigration

Network connections played a variety of roles, which differed within and between the three above-mentioned groups. For *intrinsically motivated migrants*, connections in the destination country had a strong effect in terms of informing the decision to migrate and choosing the destination but were not instrumental in organising or financing the move. Only for international students did connections at the destination play a (minor) role; choosing the destination was based on personal and family interests, the expected quality of education or the availability of scholarships (see King and Gëdeshi 2023, in this issue). Qualified employment abroad was rare and mediated through loose connections or through forging new ones.

The group of *instrumentally motivated migrants* shows the strongest network effects, which is consistent with the finding that migrant networks play the largest role in the context of labour migration (van Meeteren and Pereira 2018). By providing information about opportunities, facilitating the journey logistically and financially, and supporting the migrants upon arrival with shelter and connections to employers, transnational ties determine the time and the destination of migration.

The role of network connections can go beyond facilitating the migration of aspiring migrants to increasing or inducing an aspiration to migrate (cf. de Haas 2010). A young man from Durrës explains why he went to Italy in 2008, at the beginning of the financial crisis, even though he thought that he would be wasting his time there:

In 2008, one of my friends, who was living in Italy, invited me to go to work in Italy. He would help me to do the papers. I didn't want to leave but I had given him my word, so I moved there.

For the *crisis-or-survival-motivated* migrants, network effects depended on the time of departure. Those who left around 1997–98 either tapped into existing channels and networks and moved, for example, to Greece or Italy or they relied on more costly and complicated ways to travel to the US or the UK, realising that the momentum of the ‘almost civil war’ was providing them with an opportunity for a permanent stay there. In contrast, the asylum migration to Northern European destinations after 2010 consisted mainly of people who did not have contacts at the destination prior to the migration. Thus, the information these migrants had about their destinations was not from first-hand sources but from contacts in Albania. An asylum-seeker who had returned from Germany remembers: ‘We asked for economic asylum, but later we found out that there was no such kind of asylum’. It was the combination of rumours about Germany accepting people that were possibly initiated by informal commercial networks – and hearing about many people leaving – which informed people’s decision-making (see also Gëdeshi and King 2020). Collyer (2005) correspondingly found that asylum migration is not predicted by network theory and Epstein and Hillman (1998) spoke of ‘herd effects’ as opposed to network effects for this scenario.

Only a few were able to mobilise resources for the migration through their own private networks; they were more likely to depend on loans from banks or money-lenders. In this group, in particular, are instances of ambivalent or outright harmful network relations. Failure to receive support or being exposed to harm (such as domestic abuse or revenge threats against entire families) were among the reasons to migrate.

Social mobility after intrinsically motivated migration and return

For most *intrinsically motivated* migrants (non-students), life abroad was characterised by professional downward mobility – working as a cashier, waitress or household help despite their academic degrees and/or professional experience.² This was due to legal, bureaucratic, social and linguistic obstacles to accessing professions corresponding to their qualifications. Also, their migration aspirations were not linked with career objectives or the need to support family members.

Reasons to return ranged from wanting to end occupational downward mobility, expecting better opportunities in Albania in terms of self-realisation and family concerns. Most people in this group were able to plan their return and set the time for it themselves. Yet, transferable gains from the migration were limited. Only exceptionally did people in this group set up businesses in Albania with money and skills gained abroad. Few had substantially expanded their transnational networks, which allowed them to re-emigrate under professionally and socially more rewarding circumstances. Most commonly, the migration was reported to have influenced the respondents' personal development. Social remittances also played a role, for example when returned entrepreneurs refused to follow expected practices of bribing tax officials and public agents; however, this cannot be generalised. For their relatively smooth reintegration, these migrants relied mainly on resourceful local networks and less on assets from the migration. This is well summed up in the following quote:

Currently, I have no difficulties. To be plain, I never had any. All my relatives are well off and in leading job positions in different sectors of the public administration, thus making it easier for me and my husband to start over after returning. In Albania, connections are really important in achieving goals. It is not that we did not deserve the job positions; we were well qualified, however one always needs some help.

The clientelistic nature of these networks, however, is at the same time an obstacle to the reintegration of migrants who lack these connections. Even in those few cases where legal reasons ended the migration prematurely, respondents were able to rely on their local and family networks for a relatively smooth reintegration, indicating that resources from network connections are more relevant than the type of return, at least in the middle-to-long term. At the same time, low salaries and legal uncertainties affected some respondents even in this relatively privileged group. Some had to rely on financial support from parents or they accumulated debts, even while working full-time. Obstacles to transferring financial resources from the migration also relate to the context of legal insecurity: respondents reported huge difficulties in acquiring building permits – putting some houses built with remittances at risk of demolition – and some purchases of land or houses were contested in court for years due to conflicting property claims, thus making the investment unusable.

The other type of migrants without immediate economic necessity are people who move abroad for higher education. Despite facing initial difficulties regarding access to information – e.g., on the recognition of certificates or the diverse access criteria of universities – this appears to be the main migration channel to acquiring new skills, which can be capitalised on later in almost all cases.

Return was the first choice for many of these educational migrants but not for all. Besides the wish to build a career and contribute to development in Albania, frustration about integration barriers and discrimination in destination countries also influenced their decision-making. Local network connections played a smaller role for reintegration in this group. In fact, some respondents strongly emphasised never having relied on anything except their CVs, which include the degrees from renowned foreign universities. Others benefitted from brain-gain programmes and related organisations providing otherwise-lacking connections and financial incentives. Still,

a lack of connections and perhaps a degree that did not match a lot of vacancies can present obstacles to professional reintegration. Contradicting some of the other accounts is the experience of this respondent from Korça: ‘I studied abroad, but there is a clan (mentality) here. Therefore, I never got to prove myself in my profession’.

Business founders and entrepreneurs from this group³ often appreciate that Albania allows them to realise their projects with lower investment capital and more flexibility than would have been possible abroad. While this can mean ‘working significantly more for less money’, some choose deliberately to accept a lower income to establish their (niche) businesses according to their own vision. In these cases, migration has an impact mainly in terms of values or ideas, while business premises may already be in family ownership and investment capital is earned along the way. In terms of development implications, most of the returnee businesses in this sample are unlikely to create employment for more than a handful of people and not all are registered.

Social mobility after instrumentally motivated migration and return

Not just the migration, also opportunities abroad were most strongly shaped by network effects in the group of *instrumentally motivated migrants*. All the respondents who went to Greece and Italy were helped by family members or other close contacts with finding work and accommodation upon arrival. Especially in the early years, they were mostly confined to low-skilled work due to the predominantly irregular nature of their migration (cf. King, Piracha and Vullnetari 2010). After some years and coinciding with regularisation opportunities, a few businesses and joint ventures emerged, not many surviving the financial crisis though. The aim to earn money was usually achieved (at least up to 2008) but gaining new skills occurred only in the context of practical work experience and through the education of children.

People from this group have also migrated to and returned from the UK, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, Turkey and Qatar. Only in one case (Qatar) was a work contract negotiated prior to departure. Generally, migrants also relied on networks to choose destinations and find opportunities, mostly unskilled, either on Schengen tourist visas or undocumented. Thus they were constrained by the lack of regularisation, without health care or any kind of insurance. It turned out that having connections was not always sufficient to receive support: one student, who had hoped to pay his study fees by working in Germany, ended up in an asylum-seekers’ home, because ‘My relatives didn’t do anything to help me, to tell the truth’ and another migrant could not find legal work in any of the four EU countries he went to despite having connections in each of them.

Returns in this group were for family reasons, the effects of the financial crisis or for legal reasons. Some also grew tired of the exhausting work and difficult living conditions abroad and chose to return (sometimes triggering siblings to leave at around the same time). A minority returned at a self-determined time – e.g. in order to start their own business with their savings from abroad. Difficulties emerged when the return was unexpected, such as when a work contract was suddenly cancelled or when the financial crisis destroyed the hope of building a life abroad. Mostly, however, people expected their return sooner or later and simply moved on with their lives, at times through re-migration.

Regarding resource transfers, added skills from practical work experience were rarely applied after return, either because they were acquired in production processes not taking place in Albania or because the respondents could not find employment in the same field after return. Others had completed higher education or, in fact, interrupted it to migrate and were not hoping to accumulate anything abroad except for some income. Earning enough to be able to save was a challenge for many due to low incomes and sometimes high living costs. Also, earnings were more often remitted than accumulated. Respondents who returned with savings were wary of investment risks. One respondent, who had worked for three years informally in

construction in London, describes weighing his commitment to support the family business against his doubts regarding its economic viability:

In the beginning, I needed a lot of time to think. Should I stay here, or migrate again? I took a year of reflection: is it worth investing here? After a year, I decided to rebuild and renovate the family business and invested a lot.

Other respondents, mainly single young men, live off their savings until they are used up and then migrate again. All in all, there are few instances of actual social mobility from migration. On the contrary, several respondents in this group have interrupted or not even started higher education – due to a migration opportunity opening up – some of whom later regret not having pursued their degree. Others in turn have invested in their higher education in Albania and either did not find work in the corresponding field or left it again due to unsatisfactory conditions. Businesses were mainly opened in sectors with high competition and low profit margins. Generally, the structural, institutional and political context is fraught with insecurities for small entrepreneurs and protection against income losses from external shocks, such as the earthquake of 2019 or the Covid lockdown, is minimal.

In those instances when people achieved social mobility after their return, the migration played much less of a role compared with the realisation that migration was also not going to work as a solution. Upon return – without having accomplished their migration-related aims – some decided to complete their education or to invest in their livelihood in Albania by other means and thereby accomplish their goals.

What most people in this group owe to their migration is not so much change but continuity in terms of maintaining a livelihood. ‘For me, a good life is not having to ask anyone for help and to depend only on myself for a living’, stated one returned migrant from Greece; another returned labour migrant felt satisfied about having achieved the aims of his migration, which had been ‘to raise my children and to educate them’.

Social mobility after crisis-or-survival-motivated migration and return

Regarding the Albanian crisis migration of 1997, in this sample the parents’ generation experienced occupational downward mobility but their move enabled their children, some of whom later returned to Albania, to benefit from education systems in the destination countries. A recently returned founder of a small start-up in the north of Albania recalls:

My father was an architect by training but, due to the language barrier, he only found work as a construction worker. My mother used to be an accountant in Albania but, in England, she developed a mental illness and never went back to work.

Other people from this group are mainly those who applied for asylum in Northern European and Scandinavian countries after 2010. The reasons for the asylum migration have been extensively documented elsewhere (e.g. Gëdeshi and King 2020). A minority had contacts in the destination country which, however, proved to be of little use, as people could not even choose their place of residence once registered as asylum-seekers.

Regarding opportunities, some were able to work informally, the majority were not. Education, daycare and extracurricular activities for children were appreciated when they took place; some of the children picked up the new language quite quickly. However, the average duration of stay was too short to have a lasting impact on people’s professional or educational careers. In some cases, treatment for serious health conditions and other immaterial benefits accrued. Depending on the type and place of their accommodation they

established new contacts – both with citizens of the destination country and with other immigrant communities – and gained better knowledge of the actual conditions for labour migration. Some report that they appreciated the exposure to a less discriminatory environment and that the education system enhanced their children’s self-esteem. For many, this experience has made them determined to provide their children with an education that they hoped would allow them to re-migrate.

Return was, in almost all cases, legally mandatory and implemented through so-called voluntary return schemes or deportation. A few returned without waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim, either after learning that finding work abroad was highly unlikely or due to family or other reasons in Albania. Even migrants who say they feared for their life upon return had to leave.

In terms of reintegration, there was only a minor difference between assisted return and deportation. Cash and even valuables were confiscated by the police and not returned during deportations. More importantly, the re-entry ban to Schengen countries prevents people from making use of their newly gained networks, language skills and knowledge about regular migration opportunities. Some waited for the end of it, while others, often out of economic need, accepted services offered by ‘lawyers’, to remove the entry ban for money, which only increased their debts. A young student from Kamëz, who returned with her family from Germany in 2017, reported in 2022:

My father tried to go to Germany again five months ago. He had this entry ban. He had asked a lawyer to have it removed and (...) was told that he could travel freely. But at the German border he was fined 1,200 Euros and banned again for another three years.

Re-migration aspirations were also blocked for other, non-legal reasons; a young woman, who lives with her three children in an informal settlement, in a small hut that she built with savings from living in Germany as an asylum-seeker, says: ‘I would like to go back to Germany but I cannot afford the journey. I am indebted to everyone I know; nobody is going to give me any more money’. The EU entry ban also blocks previous livelihood strategies, such as transporting goods from Greece to Albania. The one tangible benefit were language skills which helped some – mainly young – returnees find work in call centres. For many, however, on balance the losses outweigh the gains. To migrate, people sold off livestock or property, increased their debt with banks, family or money-lenders or left a job. An asylum-seeker, returned from Germany, who lives again in the same village near Korça but under even more challenging circumstances than before, says that ‘Migration was the worst mistake I ever made in my life and I’m bearing the consequences even now, six years later’. Many respondents do not have any faith in public institutions and have neither the networks nor the resources to improve their livelihood locally. This is reflected in their accounts of their post-return situation, as illustrated by this returned asylum-seeker from Sweden:

I guess you are aware of the fact that living conditions here are not good. You feel unsafe. (...) You will never receive support from the government and you will never find justice. Here the state is treating you as nothing. It’s the mafia state that is taking away the breath of our people. If you go to them [public services, institutions] and ask for help, they look at you in a such way, ready to peel your skin off (...). Like the beast chasing the prey. This is our state. Wherever you go you see fake faces and broken promises.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has analysed the role of networks in migration and the potential for social mobility after return to Albania, considering the socio-economic stratification of society and corresponding network dynamics. The

findings contribute to larger debates on return migration and development by drawing attention to meso-level effects, mainly migrants' networks and their diverse and nuanced roles in mediating migration outcomes. They are also relevant in the context of recent politicised debates on increasing return rates, where any type of return has been presented as potentially conducive to the development of origin countries (van Houte *et al.* 2015).

Over 100 interviews with returned migrants to Albania were clustered according to the weight the respondents attributed mainly to economic factors in their decision to migrate – hardly any: intrinsically motivated; migration to solve (economic) problems: instrumentally motivated; migration to escape from overwhelming (economic) problems: survival-motivated. The analysis showed that the role of migrants' social networks differed between the three groups, both in the role they played for migration decision-making and in terms of the quality and quantity of support they had to offer. This, in turn, had a strong influence on the migrants' capability to utilise their migration for the acquisition of skills or resources.

For *intrinsically motivated migration*, social and transnational networks play a role in providing information and choosing the destination but are not required to organise or finance the migration and the migration is not required to extend support to family or network members. This group shows two contrasting patterns of resource accumulation during migration: international students gain the type of capital that can open doors and can (but does not always) facilitate reintegration independently of established network connections. Those who do not migrate for higher education are most likely to face social downward mobility during migration and usually do not gain tangible resources to an extent that would make a significant difference upon return but can rely on pre-migration networks for smooth reintegration. *Instrumentally motivated migrants* have the strongest network effects in terms of shaping their migration as, for them, the time and destination of migration and occupational opportunities upon arrival mostly depend on existing contacts in the destination countries. In terms of resource accumulation, network effects are ambivalent here: they play both a huge role in facilitating migration and also a limiting one, facilitating irregular rather than legal migration and offering certain types of jobs (mostly low-skilled and informal) but not others (cf. also Ahmad 2015). For this group of migrants, the migration is often successful in terms of supporting family members back home and maintaining a livelihood but less so in terms of unlocking opportunities for social mobility. A lot of the *survival-motivated migration* was also induced by networks but in an entirely different way: these people left based on information they received from local contacts in Albania and without having transnational connections in the destination countries or without relying much on their help. Due to inaccurate information about the conditions at destination and legal constraints, their opportunities for resource accumulation were limited from the start. They gained new contacts, language skills and information that improve their chances of re-migration rather than of reintegration but they also show the highest losses from ill-prepared migration and return. An exception are survival-motivated migrants who were able to stay abroad more permanently, such as in the context of the 1997 civil unrest in Albania. Even though they experienced social downward mobility through the migration, mainly professionally, the second generation benefitted from good education and dual citizenship. This points to one of the limitations of this analysis, which is that it looks mainly at intra- but not inter-generational social mobility. Across the three groups, migration led to a significant devaluation of human capital – an aspect that is not always taken into account when assessing migration outcomes. A high degree of flexibility and quick learning skills were more useful during migration than any specialisations gained beforehand. The only exceptions were the sub-group of educational migrants and international students as well as some second-generation returnees who gained human capital during their migration.

Going back to the initial question of how social and spatial mobility relate to each other, the findings indicate a very limited role of migration for social mobility after return. Social networks play a mediating role in this by shaping people's migration as well as reintegration trajectories in different ways, i.e. contributing more to continuity than to change. The data also show that networks are themselves a driving force of the high

migration levels in terms of a self-reinforcing dynamic of migration systems. The fact that networks increase aspirations to migrate means that they also contribute to a certain redundancy in migration endeavours, at least from the perspective of social mobility (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Thus, perhaps counter-intuitively, the strong support through translocal networks that instrumentally motivated migrants often receive does not support them in achieving social upward mobility upon return. Adapting a quote used by van Hear (2014: 101),⁴ one could conclude for network-based migration that ‘I went as far as my networks would take me’, in terms of both spatial and social mobility. Internal network dynamics and social norms are also important to consider: looking at whose migration is not facilitated by networks, not only socio-economic status but also gender and age play a role (also see Gold 2001 on these aspects). Women are significantly less likely to migrate on their own in the context of transnational networks. Female respondents in this sample either migrated with or to their husbands or independently of social networks, as students or professionals and sometimes to escape from their local networks (asylum migration). Finally, people who migrate in the context of networks tend to be of working age. The only cases of elderly people migrating that were found in the data were in the context of the asylum migration of entire families. Contrary to the assumption that network connections are by default something positive, they can also be restrictive, indifferent or even exploitative (cf. Portes 1998; Sha 2021). Also, networks differ in terms not only of support capacities but also of quality of information provided. Information spread through networks may be factually incorrect, for example by glorifying migrant life abroad (Sha 2021).

These findings should not be understood to overemphasise or attribute a deterministic role to migrants’ networks. They show that applying network theory and a focus on meso-level factors provide a useful lens to study dynamics of migration and migration outcomes but, importantly, both micro (such as personality) and macro factors (such as institutional structures) are equally important and network dynamics interact with both of them. In the context of Albania, labour-market conditions and clientelist structures, the rural–urban divide and legal uncertainties (among others) limit the transferability of resources gained through migration. The literature also mentions the influence of the institutional context, establishing that networks offer more effective support mechanisms in contexts where formal institutions are weak (see e.g. Barjaba 2018), which has not been discussed here. Also, the social context in destination countries needs to be considered. In the main destination countries in particular, Albanian migrants were faced with different forms of stereotyping and othering (cf. Zenelaga, Kerpaçi and Kseanela 2013), which can lead to assimilation or to increased reliance on existing migrant networks (cf. Sha 2021); for asylum-seekers the location and conditions of their accommodation had an impact on their ability to create new connections. Yet, it is important to move beyond the essentialising notions of (in Putnam’s 2000 terms) co-ethnic bonding vs otherwise bridging capital (cf. Ryan 2011). In all groups, there are instances of non-migrants becoming part of migrants’ personal networks, not only in the sense of ‘weak ties’ but also as employers, business partners, helpful neighbours, friends or spouses. All in all, transnational networks interact with and respond to both the structural context – such as immigration and economic policies – and the social dynamics in destination countries (Sha 2021; van Meeteren and Pereira 2018), which means that their support functions and capabilities are always context-specific (see also Hagan and Wassink 2019; King 2022; King *et al.* 2010).

The observations presented here are thus specific to the current Albanian context. Future research will have to establish whether the support capabilities of Albanian transnational network connections will change over time and in what ways.

Notes

1. Not all the respondents were actively involved in the decision-making for migration. Some migrated as young children or were born abroad. Others, especially women, report simply having followed the decision of their husbands. The following thus refers to those respondents who did make an active and conscious contribution to the migration decision and includes information that respondents were able to share about the decision-making of parents or spouses.
2. To an extent this finding relates to the fact that women moving abroad to live with their spouses are over-represented in this group and that the men – some of whom were well-established abroad – were not interviewed for this study. However, this bias explains only a part of the effect found here.
3. At this point, I include returning students who left Albania as children, for example in 1997. Even though their parents' emigration was motivated by prevailing insecurity, their return is completely voluntary and is often about re-discovering their roots and contributing something to society. Thus, from an intergenerational perspective, this may be seen as an example of social mobility.
4. The original quote is 'I went as far as my money would take me'.

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