

Rosa Chiara Buoncuore

Mobility, Migrations and European Integration

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# Out of Albania

## The transition from Communism to fragile democracy and the first "migration crisis" (1990-1991)

As the Communist regime in Albania was collapsing, for the first time after 50 years the Albanian people could finally leave the Country. And many indeed left or tried, in the attempt of searching for a better life for themselves.

The Communist regime had been established in the Country at the end of the Second World War by the head of the Communist Party, Enver Hoxha. Under his rule, Albania became the most underdeveloped Country in all of Europe: the Albanian economy was based on a rural model, relying mostly on agriculture. The industrialization level was the lowest in Europe, as low as the literacy one among the people. In addition, Albania was the most isolated Country in Europe and even the most isolated one among the Communist block: any kind of exchange and information coming from, or going towards foreign countries was prohibited. This led the Albanian people to be completely ignorant regarding the external world, as well as the international community neglecting Albania and its people, since information on their conditions was scarce. As of today, the regime led by Hoxha is recognized as the most repressive and authoritarian one among the Communist governments that spread in Eastern Europe.

A significant change in the politics of the regime was introduced by Hoxha's successor, Ramiz Alia. Despite initially following the steps of his predecessor, Alia slowly opened the Country to foreign influence and allowed opposition parties to operate. He established diplomatic relations with a few foreign countries and granted foreign media both to talk about the country and to be spread around Albania. Through this, the Albanian population could finally realize that the Communist regimes in the rest of Eastern Europe had started to collapse and eventually, Albanian rose against the regime. Borders were finally opened after almost 50 years of isolation.

As soon as the news of borders being opened was spread, Albanians started leaving their hometowns and moving towards the coastal towns of Albania, Vlorë and Durrës, aiming to jump on one of the ships sailing towards Italy. Not only was Southern Italy geographically close and easy to get to, but several links existed between the two Countries: in fact, Fascist Italy had colonized Albania until the rise of Hoxha's regime and after the end of the Italian

rule, even though it was officially prohibited, many Albanians managed to watch Italian television since the signal could reach the Albanian territory. Through this, Albanians could learn the Italian language, but television also spread the image of Italy as a wealthy and happy country, where everybody could find a job and have a house. This kind of fascination towards Italy, rooted in the Albanian perception, is well exemplified by the 1994 movie by Gianni Amelio "Lamerica".

Indeed, by March 1991, Roughly 28.000 Albanians reached the shores of the Apulian ports: men, women, entire families arrived through the first flux. Despite the overwhelming numbers, right off the bat the Italian reception was utterly positive: Italians felt deep empathy for the people, as they were Europeans fleeing from a dictatorial country. In fact, the Italian people welcomed the Albanians as best as they could: pools of solidarity were organized, providing the migrants with food, clothes and everything they might have needed. Even the Italian government had a positive attitude towards the Albanian migrants, actually classifying them as refugees on a first moment. On a second thought though, the government realized that most of them had actually migrated in search for better living conditions and jobs, thus classified the second batch of people as economic migrants. They were granted long term permits that allowed them to reside in the country while looking for jobs and accommodation; the Martelli law then in force was temporarily dispensed for humanitarian reasons.

Unfortunately, this state of solidarity and cooperation was destined to die out quickly: as soon as it became clear that the situation was going to worsen with time, Italy changed its attitude towards the crisis. Furthermore, by the same time when Albanians were rushing to the Italian shores, similar turmoils were developing in the Balkan area, particularly in Yugoslavia, thus Italy feared that a new flux of migrants coming from that region could direct itself towards Italy as well. Italy wouldn't have been able to face another migration crisis as it was already struggling with the one already incoming, and the fear of being overlooked by the international community rose within the government. In the meantime, the media coverage of the phenomenon changed as well, along with the general public opinion, as more and more news on criminals joining the migrants was spread.

As a consequence, Italy began with the repatriation policy and signed a deal with the Albanian government promising to provide Albania for a loan up to 10 billions of Lire in food and medicines and the support for holding democratic elections, while Albania promised to avoid new flows of people to come to Italy and not to punish those repatriated. Meanwhile, the European Community was quite silent on the issue: despite providing 1 million of ECU to Italy for helping for the emergency, practically the EC could not do much, since Albania was not an EC Member State and NGOs not operating on the territory could not provide for data and information about the Country. Actually, crisis and turmoil continued to spread in Albania and Italy feared the incoming of new migrants feeling more and more neglected by the EC. After having realized that the most efficient way was to strengthen the ties with Albania, the "Minister for Italians Abroad and Migration" was established. Led by the socialist Margherita

Boniver, the main task was to deal with the landings on the Italian shores and try to appease the discontent rising within the Italian society. On this note, repatriations continued, with the Albanian government being complacent, and further action was taken for preventing migrants to land at all, by rejecting the ships coming from the coast and redirecting them towards the Albanian ports.

For a moment, it felt that the crisis had stopped, but during summer 1991 disorder rose again. Once again, Italy and Albania decided to cooperate and tie their relations by trying to prevent another exodus and providing basic supply to Albania. Despite the efforts, around 18.000 people reached the Apulian shores. Unlike the first time, the Italian society was much less eager to provide for help. The Italian government, trying to deal with the exodus, utilized the stadium in Bari as an emergency facility to gather the people while waiting to repatriate them. This emblematic event caused two reactions: on one side, critiques from the Italian people and the Catholic community reached the government, as they worried for the migrants conditions in the camp; on the other, the move was successful in stopping other people to migrate towards Italy, ending the crisis.

Formally, the question was closed with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the two Countries that established further cooperation, with Italy promising to train the Albanian police, while Albania agreed to work to prevent further migration flows and to allow the Italian Navy to operate in the Albanian territory.

Nowadays, crisis has stopped and trough datas is possible to notice how, in the span of 30 years, Albanian migrants have merged into the Italian society. Indeed, as of 2019, the Albanian community is the second largest foreign community in Italy, after the Moroccan one, counting around 400.000 legal residents. The integration is evident by looking at the high education rates, also in high-level education, and high employment rates. Also, the presence of second generation Albanians (children of Albanian migrants born and raised in Italy), recently helped in further integrating within the Italian society. Today, despite having faced discrimination and prejudices from the people and the media in the past, Albanians are not perceived as any "threat" to the Italian society. Interestingly, right before the pandemic, in spite of the economic boom that Albania was enjoying, only a few of them has returned to their home Country. Over all, the Albanian exodus towards Italy, even though having create much chaos in the beginning, can now be looked at as a successful integration process.

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