

**The Political Quarterly** 73(4) 2002:436-444.

## **The Wrong End of the Telescope: Economic Migrants, Immigration Policy, and How it Looks from Albania**

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The prevailing orthodoxy has long been that the only effective way to deal with pressure from 'economic migrants' who seek to enter Britain and western Europe by illegal means or by claiming asylum is to implement ever more draconian, and costly, measures to keep them out. Yet so far that has simply led to migrants taking ever more dangerous routes to their destinations, and has failed to curb the activities of those who make money out of smuggling people. In the sending countries, such as Albania, the effect has been negligible.

At the heart of the problem lie a whole series of misconceptions on the part of Western governments (and Western publics). There is an unexamined assumption that, simply because they arrive, most migrants want to stay for good. Governments seek to influence migrants' behaviour without taking into account what it is that impels them to move. There is little serious questioning of their aims or intentions, or whether, given a realistic choice, they would want to come at all. When these questions are looked at more closely, it becomes clear that not only are western Europe's politicians and commentators looking through the wrong end of the telescope, they are doing so with their blind eye.

### **What migrants really want**

The dominant misconception is that most immigrants, including economic migrants, want to take up long-term residence, or settle. Ironically, in Albania at least, this attitude (seeking the good life) is found mostly among the highly educated whom the West is seeking to attract (but who generally prefer to go to North America), much less among the migrants it wants to keep out. Few of those who make a reasonable living in Albania (and many who do not) seriously even consider leaving. They compare themselves favourably with those who work abroad, and question the wisdom of those who have left, but have not improved their situation.

For most of those who leave, migration is a temporary expedient, not a long-term life choice. It is a solution to a problem *now* for the generation that was deprived of work by the economic collapse that accompanied the fall of communism and for the cohorts that have left school since. Their decision can be reversed at any time. Many move back and forth, spending only short periods abroad. What migrants seek is not to 'migrate', and certainly not to live on the pittance paid out in social benefits. What they want is to work and to earn real money. The word they use is *kurbet*—the term for periodic work migrations in the old Ottoman Empire—but they are also trying to replicate the examples of Greeks, Italians and Yugoslavs who worked in northern Europe as *Gastarbeiter* in earlier decades, then returned home better off. Most aim to stay away just long enough to save money to establish themselves in Albania (where modest savings go a long way) or

437

until they find work back home; a fair number have already returned.<sup>1</sup> Most emigrants maintain their houses, and improve them; many build new ones to return to. Some older emigrants privately doubt that they will be able to make a living in Albania before the end of their working lives, but keep their house in Albania to return to eventually. Others keep an open mind about returning, but few at the outset actively seek to leave for good.

### **Mixed messages**

Another misconception is that the desire to migrate is influenced by the steps Western governments take to control immigration; that immigration rules and the way immigrants are dealt with will somehow be known and understood in the countries immigrants come from, and will be a 'deterrent'. Those who have already arrived will, goes the argument, send home the message that the UK is not a 'soft touch', and immigrants will no longer want to come.

This assumption is hopelessly unrealistic. It trivialises the serious purpose of people who, in many cases, have no realistic means of making a living where they are. There could hardly be a clearer demonstration of the futility of deterrence than the continued migration of Albanians to Greece, despite the discrimination to which they are subject there and the repeated deportations. Moreover, it ignores the effects of the other, more powerful, messages that Western nations, not least Britain, convey to the wider world.

Britain is promoted throughout the world as a major industrial power. The message is aimed at groups such as 'young professionals',<sup>2</sup> but it reaches a far wider audience. In Albania it is understood as large factories with lots of workers, and hence opportunities for work. British institutions and non-governmental bodies are much in evidence and reinforce this image in various ways. British multinationals are prominent in the oil and cement industries. The BBC World Service has a high profile, and its broadcasts are widely listened to. Money spent by British NGOs conveys a message that Britain (and the 'rich' West in general) has a surplus to give away, one reinforced by apparent trivialities, like the English football fans filmed by Albanian television throwing money around in Tirana. Tony Blair's high-profile visit to Tirana in 1999 during the Kosova crisis vastly increased Britain's visibility and acted as a spur to the popularity of Britain as a migration destination. Indeed, 'Toni Bler' is arguably Albania's most popular politician. People were glad he (*sic*) won the June 2001 election, because he was perceived as a 'good' man, and so, they reasoned, 'he' would pursue a benevolent immigration policy.

One is often told that there are 'lots of lads from this village' working in the UK. There is a universal belief that migrants who come to Britain earn a lot of money, more than in Greece or Italy—especially the former, where the pressure of illegal immigrants has depressed wages in the black economy. There are stories in wide circulation like the one about the man from the village of Lapulec (in another version, the town of Peshkopi), renowned in its locality for the success of its emigrants, who is said to earn £2,000 a month. Another tells of a man from the same village (possibly the same man) who runs a car-wash in London employing other men from his area.

Less successful emigrants cover it up, claiming, for example, that the British government does not allow the export of sterling, or, in autumn 2000, that there was no work because of the floods (conveniently shown on Albanian television). Few appreciate before they arrive that the black economy is smaller than in southern Europe, and that finding work and, without papers, keeping it can be more

**438**

difficult. Some are without work, or work intermittently in different jobs. A few give up and use the free repatriation scheme (or are deported, but hide the fact),<sup>3</sup> and come home by air, which impresses their relatives. But over the longer term most seem to make out. All, even professionals, are better off doing menial jobs than they would be in Albania. They earn sums of money that to Albanians are large, and most send home substantial amounts. People mimic emigrants pulling wads of notes from a top shirt pocket, meaning they have a lot of money. In a society where everyone knows everyone else's business, this is the most influential message migrants send back.

**The bush telegraph**

The only information migrants send home about immigration regulations is how to get round them. It is common knowledge that many Albanians got into Britain posing as Kosovars, and they are admired for their cunning in fooling the authorities. By the summer of 2002 sufficient pseudo-Kosovars had been returned to Albania for many people to know one or more personally. Some of their relatives in Albania were under the impression that, before leaving, they had obtained documents allowing them to return to the UK, and others were said to be seeking ways to do so. Information about the perceived difficulty, or otherwise, of getting into different countries and how to negotiate the formalities is constantly refined, and circulates through the bush telegraph. Emigration is a major topic of conversation. Migrants do not need to be coached by people smugglers, as some in the West believe. However, they tend to be vague about immigration rules. Some assume, for example, that in all countries immigrants can regularise their status, because in the past this has been possible in Italy and Greece. Accounts of entry are usually so garbled that the messages they convey are by no means those intended by governments, and may even be the opposite. One story that circulated for a time was that, on arrival in Britain, immigrants were taken to a camp, where they learnt English. After six months they were let out and could find work. The proposals to open reception centres, announced in October 2001, bear a remarkable similarity to this account, so the 'signals' they send could well be misinterpreted. If would-be migrants are told that, for example, they face the prospect of eking out a living on vouchers, not being allowed to work legally, or even being detained, they are undeterred. They shrug all this off as discomforts to be put up with in order, eventually, to earn money.

Determination to do something about their situation is such that, in their desperation, many go to extreme lengths. This meets with widespread approval because they are trying to help themselves. They argue that 'anything is better than here', and for the many without work that is not far from the truth. Migrating illegally is a wager, and one they might lose; but if they do nothing, they will definitely lose, so they take the chance. The more repressive the immigration policy, the greater are the risks they will take. Shutting people in, the consequence of the absence of legal channels for migration and severe limits on the issue of *any* visas, to an extent that would not be tolerated in the West, ratchets up the desperation and frustration. The disparity between what is legal and what is seen to be just has created a climate in which it has become generally, if reluctantly, accepted as morally justified to use illegal means to emigrate.

**The ticket out**

However Albanians travel abroad, legally or illegally, they have to pay a fee. The cheapest British visa costs half a month's salary for a professional in state employment. The fee is paid in advance in full,

**439**

and is not refunded if the application is unsuccessful. Migrants who have obtained legal visas through the proper channels are sometimes turned back at a border, and so lose their money. Visas issued by Greece under the Schengen Agreement provisions are not always accepted for entry into Italy. Greek police sometimes cancel valid visas without reason. (The author has witnessed this.) There are also money-making scams which are not illegal. Money is taken off the more gullible by 'American' lotteries run by lawyers to recruit clients for businesses that prepare applications for the genuine lottery.

At any time more people are seeking to leave the country than can find a way, legal or illegal, to do so. It is a Western myth that people smugglers entice innocent and naïve people to migrate. Prospective migrants use many independent sources of information, and most have networks of kin and friends abroad. They deliberately, though reluctantly, seek out the smugglers. The smugglers (as distinct from traffickers, whose activities are condemned) are opportunists. They provide, on the black market, a service that is in demand. They are exploiting a niche created by the barriers the West has erected. If it had not existed they would not have sought to create it; they would have done something else.

Many people keep their distance from illegal activities by deliberately not knowing about them. In that way they maintain their personal integrity and, when close relatives emigrate, minimise their anxiety. Nonetheless they may assist migrant kin by taking telephone messages, handing over the money when the migrant has safely arrived, providing small loans to help finance a trip or receiving a migrant at their destination. They do not consider these things illegal. They are what one does for kin; thus the distinction between legal and illegal is blurred.

People smuggling is a commercial activity, but one that is clandestine, and it does not, as is sometimes mistakenly argued, operate like a business. It is effectively a cottage industry in which transactions are carried on through networks with many small players, all of whom get a share of the proceeds. (Some are undoubtedly frustrated work migrants, who get drawn into the fringes of criminal activity to earn a little money). Access is carefully regulated, and may depend on a prospective migrant's reputation, and whether they have kin or others to vouch for them. The amounts charged for the various alternatives are widely known, but the route taken does not depend solely on ability to pay (though it may be a limiting factor). People smugglers do not always deliver the goods—routes are sometimes closed because of police activity, or a broken contact; but, unlike providers of legal channels, they collect payment only when they do deliver (though they may ask for more than the agreed price). Otherwise they receive nothing. When the first contact is made a smallish sum, probably 500 lekë (£2.50) is paid to show good faith. The rest is paid when, and only when, the migrant is safely at the destination.

The least costly way to leave Albania is on foot over the mountains to Greece. This costs nothing, but the chances of being caught are high, and it is thought dangerous for women. Albanian police try to stop their nationals leaving the country illegally and on the Greek side considerable resources are devoted to hunting Albanians (buses are frequently stopped and searched). It is a criminal offence to enter Greece illegally. Crossing in a group using a guide costs around £100 per person.<sup>4</sup> To be taken to the border by car, then met on the other side, costs between £350 and £450 per person. A perilous and unpleasant night trip to Italy in an open boat (*skaf*) costs £750. Some migrants to the UK take this route (others travel through Greece). They are then taken on by another group

**440**

of smugglers, and are said to pay a total of £1,750. The preferred way to get to Italy is to obtain the passport of someone one's own age, replace the photograph with one's own, and travel by ferry. This costs £2,500 for two people.

Both forged and genuine visas can be bought on the black market. The most sought after, American visas, seem to be available in some numbers. They cost at least £2,500, but the price depends on the channels through which they are obtained, and may be twice that much. Schengen visas are also obtainable. A price of £1,000 was quoted for a German visa, but it rose to £2,000 before the visa was delivered. The going rate for false documents and an air ticket from Albania to London is £2,500 per person. Arrangements are made through a chain of contacts, none of which, except the first, is known to the migrant. They are linked to contact persons in embassies and consulates, known as 'green lights', who, with the knowing or unknowing collaboration of colleagues, arrange the visas. There is a constant stream of applicants to one Greek consulate where, in 2001 and 2002, few visas were being issued officially, even in pressing humanitarian cases, but where the trade in black-market visas is a notorious, and lucrative, sideline for officials. They work through Albanian intermediaries, known locally, with contempt, as *çerr* (in this context, someone who works for you like a slave) because they are subservient. The *çerr* deals with the clients, while the Greek officials keep their hands (relatively) clean but still make the most money. On the black market a six-month visa costs £1,000, compared with the official price of £37. The European Community Monitoring Mission in south Albania in the late 1990s made formal complaints about the illegal visa trade and the treatment of Albanians at the border, to little effect. Documents allowing residence are also sold to emigrants after they arrive in Greece.<sup>5</sup>

**The revolving door**

The large sums of money that migrants pay, and the risks they take, are testament to the scarcity of work, and the lengths to which people will go to find it. The costs of migrating are down payments on future earnings. They are often financed by loans, either within the extended family, from people who are relatively well off, or even from the smugglers. There are also reports of people selling their houses or their land, but this is rare.

Migration is invariably part of a family strategy. Some of its members work abroad for shorter or longer periods, living on as little as possible so they can send most of their earnings home. Many young men who are without work emigrate, often illegally, to contribute to the family budget. The emigrants' existence is an uncongenial one that few endure longer than necessary. Their families are proud of them for taking risks and making sacrifices, but this is also expected of them. Those who are left behind, especially women and old people in the countryside who have to work the family holding alone, have to cope with both extra work and anxiety about their relatives abroad. Albanian families are very close, so the personal cost of separation is high. Some illegal emigrants, unable because of their status to travel freely, do not see their families for years on end, leaving all concerned in an indefinite limbo. They maintain contact with their families by regular, and expensive, phone calls. Those who have the necessary papers (and some who do not) visit as often as they can, in summer and, especially, at New Year. Modern communications make this feasible wherever they are. There is continuous back and forth movement. Young men return to do their military service, a clear indication that they are keeping open the option of return. A common pattern is to work abroad for a few months, even a year or so, then return for extended

**441**

periods of residence, in some cases permanently.

**Migration is a development issue**

While the immediate imperative for emigration is to contribute to family maintenance, most emigrants amass savings, which increase in value when they are repatriated. Many build a new house, or improve an old one (and thus provide work for those who do not emigrate), but savings are also invested in existing or new small businesses. These range from small manufacturing enterprises (such as a paint factory) to innumerable one-person or family businesses: shops, filling stations, bars, fast-food outlets, workshops, minibus services, various forms of trading, contract agricultural work and haulage. Savings from migration have enabled people with skills to turn them into a means of making a living. Others have learnt new skills abroad, been exposed to new ideas and made contacts with potential suppliers;<sup>6</sup> but, crucially, it is the capital they have accumulated that has allowed them to use those skills.<sup>7</sup> One study found that 17 per cent of investment in small businesses came from migrants' savings, almost three times as much as was obtained from financial institutions.<sup>8</sup> Small entrepreneurs often complain that it is difficult to obtain finance from banks, but many are less reluctant to take risks with savings than to get into debt.

Returned migrants make a life for themselves in Albania that is less uncongenial than that of a migrant, and some make a comfortable living. They also make a valuable contribution to economic development, and thus help to reduce pressure to work abroad in the future. Even if micro-enterprises last barely a generation, they gain valuable time by filling a gap until longer-term developments come to fruition. Returned migrants are more cost-effective than conventional development aid: they produce results faster, and remittances maintain those with no incomes until new jobs are created. In Albania remittances are estimated to total about US\$530 million per annum, or about 18 per cent of GDP. Some estimates put the amount still higher.<sup>9</sup> Work abroad is the supreme example of a 'hand-up' that enables people to help themselves.<sup>10</sup> The 'hand-outs' of development aid are never likely to provide a substitute for input on this scale.

Migrants also continue to benefit host countries after their return home. It is not only elites or returning students who are potentially a source of goodwill for Britain abroad. The goodwill of a whole range of former employees, combined with their knowledge, can have substantial benefits for their erstwhile employers. At the very least they can be a conduit for import penetration. Albanians who have returned from Italy and Greece have set up businesses importing and selling their former employers' products. They thus enable even small firms to gain a toehold in foreign markets. By contrast, except for large firms in the oil and cement industries, Albania is a missed opportunity for British business. Former employees can also be an asset, perhaps a decisive one, for erstwhile employers who invest in their home country. Documented examples of use of this potential are hard to find, but the possibilities in countries currently sending economic migrants to Britain deserve to be explored.

**Solutions from the other end of the telescope**

Economic migrants are, for the most part, people who are trying to help themselves, not to live off others. They are not, as is often assumed, economic 'refugees' seeking handouts; nor are they simply, as the

**442**

latest White Paper asserts, 'seeking better economic prospects'.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they have definite aims to earn money and save, in many cases to accomplish a project in their home country. They do not, for the most part, come to Britain to settle. The historical evidence shows that return movement has always played a significant part in international movement. Observable patterns in Albania, and elsewhere in eastern Europe, show that it is also part of the 'greater complexity in patterns of migration' that has accompanied globalisation.<sup>12</sup> Tough migration regulations have the perverse effect of discouraging return moves because migrants are reluctant to risk losing the option of gaining entry again (even if they have no definite intention of using it). This in turn leads to family members joining men who had migrated alone. Thus, by default, they increase the numbers who eventually settle.

The aim of immigration policy is, in essence, to influence the behaviour of immigrants or would-be immigrants. This can be successful only if account is taken of the view from the other end of the telescope: the aims and intentions of the migrants, and thus how far various measures are likely, or not, to influence their actions. Merely to provide 'clear, managed routes into the UK' does not ensure that those it is desired to attract will use them, or use them 'appropriately'.<sup>13</sup> Still less does it ensure that others, denied legitimate access to entry routes, will not put them to inappropriate use.

The supreme irony of 'managed migration' to date is that it leaves most migration unmanaged. A scheme introduced in Albania by the Italian government, to admit selected immigrants who meet certain language requirements and pass an interview, is dismissed by would-be migrants as an irrelevance. Its effect on illegal migration is, at best, negligible. The original green card scheme, in the United States, has not prevented illegal immigration across its southern border, which still costs lives and is policed at great cost. The claim in the White Paper that legal routes are available for economic migrants is not true for most of those who currently seek to enter illegally. By definition, the majority are excluded from provisions to give work permits to the highly skilled. For the remainder, there is only the prospect, not yet a reality, of a limited expansion to the scheme for seasonal work. Access granted even by that route depends on decisions at embassies, and by immigration officers on arrival. Experience with existing schemes suggests that, in practice, few will succeed in passing through the eye of that particular needle. All Albanian applicants for the existing agricultural workers' scheme have so far been refused visas (and each lost over £100 in fees that had to be paid in advance). On the evidence from Albania, it is unlikely these schemes will affect the level of illegal immigration.

In practice, the main plank of migration policy continues to be 'deterrence', which benefits only those who make money out of smuggling people (and the bigger criminals for whom they provide a shield). Despite macho statements from governments about clamping down on smugglers, there is little to suggest this will change. Though they like to demonise people smugglers, governments are themselves complicit in the trade, because they create the conditions that allow it to flourish. When they refer to measures to counter illegal migration as 'sending a message' to the people smugglers, implicitly that the game is up, the message they in fact send is that business will get even better. Every new restriction increases demand for the smugglers' services, and the price they can charge. The message they send to prospective migrants is that they are still less likely to make it without using smugglers, and they will have to be prepared to pay even more. People smuggling and its

## 443

corollary, illegal working, will be reduced only when there is a genuine and viable alternative for the smugglers' customers: either a legal migration route or the means to make a living at home.

One thing is certain: economic migrants *will not go away*. This is one of the 'realities of the 21st century'.<sup>14</sup> They are not prepared simply to resign themselves to a life without work. Nothing the British, or any other, government does to 'deter' them will change that. Moreover, the constant emphasis on deterrence arguably exacerbates the problem of migration as a domestic political issue. Until more people can find a job and make a living in Albania (and other sending countries), whatever the obstacles put in their way, the young, enterprising, energetic, frustrated and, above all, desperate, will seek work elsewhere, whether they fit the criteria desired by Western governments or not. If governments across Europe—not just in Britain—were to accept this reality, and rethink migration policies so that they used the potential of economic migration to change the situation that gives rise to it, the problems of illegal migration from Albania and elsewhere could be solved within a generation. If they do not, whatever the destination countries try to do, those problems, and the costs they impose in both host and sending nations, will continue for decades to come.

### Notes

1 This is clearly evident from field observations. Research for the World Bank anti-poverty strategy, which is consistent with other studies, found that at least three-quarters of emigrants expect to return. See Hermine DeSoto, Peter Gordon, Ilir Gedeshi and Zamira Sinoimeri, 'A Qualitative Assessment of Poverty in 10 Areas of Albania', final draft, Washington DC, World Bank, 30 June 2001, p. 43.

2 See e.g. the booklet *Partners in Enterprise*, published by the British Council in 2000 and distributed by its library in Tirana.

3 Albanian nationals are among the most numerous deportees from Britain: Home Office, *Control of Immigration: Statistics United Kingdom, 2000*, table 7.2, <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html>.

4 Prices are those paid in 2000–2, assuming an exchange rate of 200 Albanian lekë to the pound.

5 'Illegal request to buy Social Security stamps to secure legalization from migrants with proven long stay in Greece', *Greek Helsinki Monitor* 11 July 2001: <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr> and personal communications from emigrants.

6 Beryl Nicholson, 'Economic Migration and Asylum: A Case for Rethinking Immigration Policies', UNU/WIDER Conference on Poverty, International Migration and Asylum, Helsinki, 27–28 September 2002.

7 Beryl Nicholson, 'From Migrant to Micro-Entrepreneur: Do-It-Yourself Development in Albania', *South-East Europe Review*, 2001, pp. 39–41.

8 Dhori Kule, Ahmet Mancellari, Harry Papanagos, Stefan Qirici and Peter Sanfey, *The Causes and Consequences of Albanian Emigration during Transition: Evidence from Micro-data*, working paper no. 46, London, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1999, pp. 8–9: <http://www.ebrd.com>.

9 DeSoto et al., 'A Qualitative Assessment of Poverty in 10 Areas of Albania', p. 35n; James P. Korovilas, 'The Albanian Economy in Transition: The Role of Remittances and Pyramid Investment Schemes', *Post-Communist Economies*, 1999, pp. 399–415 at p. 402.

10 'Not aid as a hand-out but aid as a hand-up, to help people help themselves': Tony Blair, speech to the Ghanaian parliament, 8 February 2002. <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page4399.asp>

11 Home Office, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain*, Cm 5387, London, HMSO, 2002. <http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm53/5387/cm5387.pdf>

12 *Ibid.*, p. 9, para. 2.

13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13, para. 15.

14 'UK Migration in a Global Economy', speech by the then immigration minister,

**444**

Barbara Roche, 11 September 2000: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/new.htm>.

15 The material for this article was obtained while doing extended participant observation for another project in South Albania in 2000-2002, financed by the British Academy and the Leverhulme Trust.