

Youth on the Move: Examining the Motivations for Emigration among Albanian University Students

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Abstract

Since the collapse of the communist regime, Albania has been struggling with a substantial wave of population exodus, a phenomenon that endures at a notably elevated pace, positioning Albania among the nations with the highest emigration rates in Europe and beyond. Notably, Albania is recognized for its relatively youthful population, which confronts the dual challenges of population reduction and aging amidst recent socio-economic shifts, including the prominence of emigration. Young people represent a vital demographic within society, holding the potential to instigate policy shifts, influence economic trajectories, and reshape social dynamics, thereby contributing to sustainable development. This article explores the complexities surrounding youth emigration, delving into the contemporary trend amidst the turbulent circumstances of today, with a concentrated focus on exploring the motives for departure or the expressed aspiration to leave. The study centers its attention on university students, whose departure significantly affects the increase of the brain drain phenomenon. Notably, although official statistics may not reflect a substantial surge in the number of young individuals departing, studies and reports highlight a consistent decline in the youth population each year, undoubtedly influenced by factors beyond emigration. The article underscores that developed countries are the preferred destinations for young individuals, offering opportunities for personal and professional growth and economic stability. Factors like high unemployment, financial difficulties, low wages, limited career opportunities, lack of stability, tough competition, and the absence of meritocracy contribute to the decision to leave or not to return for those who have already emigrated. It's notable that the pandemic, rather than merely intensifying the desire to leave, has tangibly set in motion the concrete plans and strategies, to translate this aspiration into reality.

Keywords: *Emigration, Students, Albanian Youth, Brain Drain, Social Issues*

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1 Introduction

Migration is a phenomenon with multiple consequences, often contradictory in all areas of social, economic, political, and psycho-cultural activity (Dervishi, Z., 2003:1-2), and such has been its impact on Albanian society. Migration with both its forms, internal and external, is one of the main factors that has influenced the socio-economic developments in the Republic of Albania, especially after 1990. Migration is not a new phenomenon for Albanian society, but due to its size after the fall of the regime, it makes you think that Albanian society was presented with this phenomenon at the beginning of the 90s. Migration has been one of the most dynamic features of the country's transition and one of the most important social and economic phenomena (King and Vullnetari 2003).

In the early 1990s, the initial waves of population migration displayed movement both across international borders and within domestic regions. It appears that the policies of the newly established state displayed weaknesses, and many state institutions and factories closed or ceased functioning by increasing unemployment significantly high and concerning levels rate. The downfall of the previous regime and the subsequent establishment of the new state increased the challenges faced by the population. Emigration, especially, became perceived as the sole remedy to address the economic necessities of the population, particularly among the youth. These years witnessed the adoption of both external and internal migration strategies, encompassing cross-border shifts as well as rural-to-urban relocations, serving as survival strategies for the population in their pursuit of securing their livelihoods, as highlighted by De Waal (2007: 241).

Particularly within the initial decade following the regime's collapse, a multitude of challenges and societal transformations accompanied the spread of migratory patterns among the population. The absence of political stability, escalating poverty rates, heightened unemployment levels, increased social turbulence, and the notable collapse of the financial schemes in 1996 (Zezza, Carletto & Davis, 2005) were among the pivotal factors exerting substantial influence on the amplitude of population migration in Albania. According to data compiled by INSTAT in 2000, it was approximated that a significant segment of the Albanian population, approximately 600,000 individuals or 18.0 percent, had migrated from Albania. The majority of these migrants comprised males aged between 20 and 30 years (UNICEF Albania, 2000: 15).

Owing to a substantial surge in emigration, particularly among the younger generation, Albania was ranked as the ninth-ranking nation globally and one of the first in Europe concerning the emigrant stock relative to the resident population within the country in 2010 (King & Gëdeshi, 2018). A report from the World Bank indicated that approximately 1.4 million Albanian nationals resided outside Albania in 2010 (World Bank, 2011). The impetus behind migration primarily stemmed from factors such as employment opportunities, family reunification, educational pursuits, and even the pursuit of political asylum (Carletto et al., 2004). By the conclusion of 2011, an estimated 1.4 million individuals, constituting roughly one-third of the Albanian population, were presumed to be residing abroad, predominantly in Greece and Italy (World Bank, 2011). The "National Migration Strategy And Action Plan 2019 - 2022" underscored that, in 2017, approximately 1.5 million Albanian citizens were located beyond the nation's borders, amounting to nearly half of the total population. Notably, Albania persists as the country with the highest emigration rates (Ministry of the Interior, 2019: 7-8).

As per Gedeshi's recent findings (2021), the number of Albanians residing beyond the borders of their home country has surpassed 1.6 million, accounting for slightly over half of the domestic population. Notably, the migration trends during the initial decade (1991-2000) were defined by illegal migration, predominantly undertaken by males, particularly among the youth. In contrast, the subsequent decade (2001-2010) exhibited a shift towards migration for family reunification purposes, accompanied by reduced migration levels compared to the preceding decade, and with a notable increase in legally sanctioned migrations. Conversely, the third decade's distinctive feature is the proliferation of child migrants and the perceived lack of prospects within Albania, in contrast to the economic motivations that predominated in the earlier two decades. In the contemporary context, international migration is particularly pronounced among highly educated and skilled individuals in their twenties (p. 5).

Based on the publication "Population of Albania, January 1, 2023" by INSTAT, immigration figures stood at 46,460 individuals, marking a 10.5% increase from the year 2021. The net migration, depicted as the difference between immigrants and emigrants, displayed marginal improvement over the previous year, moving from -32,853 to -32,497 residents in 2022. Notably, net migration remained negative, indicating that more individuals left than arrived, with approximately 16.7 thousand people departing in 2020, as opposed to arrivals (INSTAT 2021 (b): 7). The peak in the migration potential rate was observed within the age group of 27 to 30 years. This stands in contrast to a 2007 survey that identified the age bracket of 18 to 25

years as the peak for Albanian migration potential (King & Gëdeshi, 2018). Economic factors persist as the primary impetuses behind migration (King and Vullnetari, 2003; Zezza et al., 2005). Factors such as unemployment, low wages, pervasive corruption, a lack of confidence in the justice system, and physical insecurity collectively contribute to the inclination to emigrate (King and Gëdeshi, 2020: 31).

Numerous research endeavors have underscored migration's substantial influence in improving the livelihoods of numerous families, for whom emigration-derived income stood as their sole financial resource. The influx of earnings through emigration has played a role in mitigating poverty and strengthening economic well-being within many Albanian households (King and Mai, 2013; INSTAT, 2015(a)). Migration has even been posited as the differentiating factor between relative wealth and poverty (Soto et al., 2002: xiv). The impact of migratory flows resonates significantly, primarily due to the infusion of remittances that serve to alleviate poverty and contribute to the nation's economic landscape (Ministry of the Interior, 2019: 7-8).

Scarce prospects for education and employment serve as impetuses propelling young individuals to seek opportunities beyond the borders of the Republic of Albania (United Nations Development Program, 2010: 38). Beyond economic imperatives, young migrants are driven by aspirations of greater autonomy, better opportunities for realizing their aspirations, or even the pursuit of more contemporary and tranquil life, distanced from the complexities and predicaments of Albanian society (Mai, 2002; King and Mai, 2013: 176-177). Moreover, the yearning for emancipation from parental oversight and the quest for financial independence drive a substantial number of young individuals to decline their high school education and embark on migration (Dervishi, Z., 2002: 64).

Considering the multifaceted challenges characterizing our nation, a high number of motivations drive the youth to seek refuge elsewhere. Particularly during the initial waves of emigration, the phenomenon seemed to disproportionately affect the younger population (King, R., and Mai, N., 2013: 218-219), with a higher prevalence of migration observed among males and young adults (Castaldo et al., 2005). Notably, the extensive emigration rates have resulted in a loss of this invaluable human asset, explicitly the youth (Bogdani, M., and Loughlin, J., 2007: 79).

The research findings further illuminate an apparent trend in the data about potential migration, with a pronounced emphasis on the inclination of young individuals to express their desire or intention to leave the country. As evidenced by numerous studies and investigations centered

on the youth population within Albania, it results in a prevailing inclination of seeking the future elsewhere. For instance:

a- In a study with about 1200 participants, when asked whether they would consider departing the Republic of Albania if provided the opportunity, a significant 61.0 percent of respondents affirmed their affirmative stance (AIIS, Albanian Institution for International Studies, 2013: 19). Similarly, an additional study published in 2013 highlights that although young individuals are optimistic about their nation's future, most cases manifest a tendency for international migration. This study reports that approximately 70.0 percent of young respondents express their intention to leave Albania (Friedrich Ebert Foundation; IDRA Research and Consulting, 2013: 16).

b- Meanwhile, within the "Albanian Youth 2018/2019" investigation conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, it is revealed that around 40 percent of young Albanians exhibit a strong inclination towards emigration. This aspiration predominantly stems from the quest for improved living standards and more fulfilling employment opportunities (2019: p. 37).

c- In another study undertaken by the Mary Ward Loreto Foundation, dedicated to migration within Albania, the data unveils a substantial figure, with 83.86% of participants expressing their desire to emigrate from the country. The study's findings indicate that this desire exceeds occupational boundaries, encompassing both the employed and unemployed demographics, with a pronounced preference for developed nations. When asked about the motivations propelling them to depart from Albania, 84.9% cited socio-economic factors as their impetus, encompassing unemployment, the lack of basic facilities, and living conditions (2019; 44-49).

Based on the aforementioned studies, it becomes evident that the inclination of young individuals to seek opportunities abroad has exhibited persistence over the years. This enduring pattern underscores the continuing challenges and predicaments that persist within our society, motivating the youth to consider building their futures abroad. As suggested by King and Gedeshi, Albanian migration has maintained its drive and is likely to endure into the future. Their data compilation and survey results indicate an escalation in the intention to migrate, rising from 44% of the surveyed population in 2007 to 52% in 2018 (2020). Given the background of difficult living conditions, rising unemployment rates, political instability, and pronounced regional disparities, both forms of migration are expected to sustain their crucial roles in the coming years (INSTAT, 2015(a)). From King and Gedeshi's (2020) investigation, the principal motivators for emigrating from Albania primarily include the prospects of

securing employment with a higher income (61.1%) and accessing improved educational and training opportunities (22.2%) (p. 23-72).

Furthermore, research findings underscore an escalating trend among young individuals, as a growing number aspire to leave Albania for work and study, with many intending permanent relocations. Extracted from the "Youth in Albania 2020" National Report, a noticeable percentage of respondents, approximately 30%, express their intent to pursue education abroad, thus pointing towards the concerning "brain drain" phenomenon (CRCA/ECPAT Albania, 2020: pages 5 - 6). Additionally, the trend of seeking international education experiences is most pronounced among individuals in their twenties, particularly among the highly educated and skilled cohort (Gedeshi, 2021: 5). The departure of the youth, particularly those possessing advanced education, inflicts a notable wound upon Albanian society, intensifying the challenges further.

The survey conducted by King and Gedeshi (2020) supports this evolving immigration trajectory, with an increased inclination among both young people and the highly educated to contemplate emigration from Albania. The number of students studying abroad has observed consistent growth, with 69.9% of the students surveyed stating that their studies serve as the initial step towards residing overseas. Of those currently enrolled in Albanian institutions, 79% expressed their intention to emigrate (p. 23-72).

Albania has maintained a prolonged history of emigration, with consecutive waves of migration, primarily driven by the pursuit of improved economic prospects and opportunities abroad, particularly among the youth. The evolving societal, political, and economic landscape of Albania has significantly impacted its youth population. As they strive for a more promising future, enhanced living conditions, and quality education, among other aspirations, many young Albanians are compelled to seek opportunities beyond their national borders. This article explores the multifaceted aspects of youth emigration, separating contemporary trends among turbulent times while studying the drivers behind their decision to leave or their desire for departure. A particular concern explored within this article is the "brain drain" phenomenon and its consequences for society. The study focuses on university students, whose migration adds depth to the "brain drain" scenario.

2 Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both primary and secondary data collection to examine student experiences with emigration. The initial phase involved a comprehensive literature review, focusing on existing reports and studies concerning migration dynamics in Albania. This review provided essential contextual understanding of the prevailing situation and challenges, simultaneously refining the research questions guiding this investigation.

For the primary data collection, 150 semi-structured surveys were administered electronically via Google Forms, enhancing accessibility and reach for student participation. The questionnaire was structured into distinct sections, with a dedicated segment of 10 semi-structured questions specifically addressing youth emigration. These questions were designed to elicit detailed experiences and perspectives from participants, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the subject.

Survey administration occurred between November 2022 and January 2023. Participants were students enrolled in study programs at Aleksander Moisiu University - Durrës and the University of Tirana. The demographic breakdown of the 150 respondents included 90 women and 60 men, with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years. Of these, 95 participants were pursuing bachelor's studies, and 55 were enrolled in master's programs.

3 Results and discussions

3. 1 Evident Aspiration for Emigration

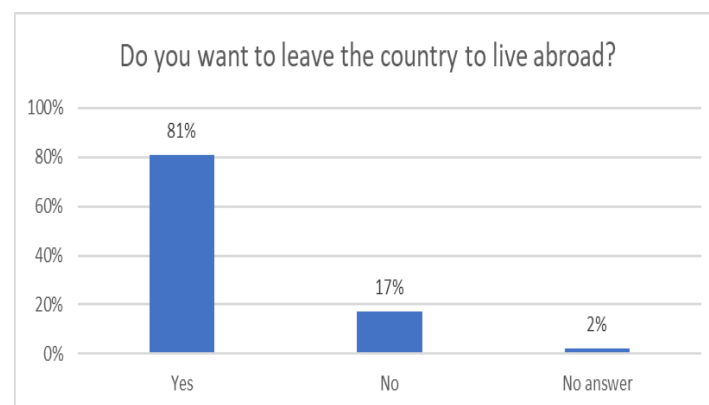


Figure 1. Do the students want to leave the country?

The literature explored in this study underlines a prominent trend: running parallel to the visible increase in migration rates, a resolute desire among young individuals residing in Albania to seek their fortunes beyond the nation's borders is apparent. As a result, one of the research questions of this study revolved around exploring the respondent's aspirations to emigrate. To the question: "Do you have the desire to leave the country to live abroad, a substantial percentage of the respondents, constituting approximately 81%, affirmed their predisposition to explore opportunities overseas. This result, while not entirely unforeseen, attains heightened significance when contextualized within the framework of recent events in Albania, including the November 2019 earthquake and the following consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic. These combined challenges have further intensified the preexisting societal issues within Albania, increasing the complexities that young individuals must navigate and augmenting their disappointment. Consequently, this has intensified the aspiration of young people to move abroad in search of better opportunities. The students who responded that they do not want to emigrate are mostly in their first bachelor year or their final master's year and are already employed. The first just started their studies and probably also living away from their parents for the first time and the seconds are near graduation and working, trying to build their future here.

3. 1. 2 Beyond economic concerns, the main issue is the lack of opportunities.

Furthermore, participants were asked to elaborate more on their answers regarding their emigration preferences and the factors that contribute to their plans. Students view the chance to address economic issues and create a better future as the primary reason they consider leaving Albania. More than just economic problems, the chances and options in Albanian society to address these issues are seen as limited. This has led to a negative and disheartening situation for young people, to the point where many believe it's a given that the future can't be built here and that leaving should be considered.

According to the data, young people are concerned about their future, emphasizing that their youth years are crucial for building a better life. They feel it's not practical to spend these years in a country that lacks opportunities or provides only a few. It's better to seek out opportunities and places that offer more chances.

"Youth years are the most vital part, the age where the foundations of life are laid, not the age to fight just to pay the rent and to end the month without debt."- student, master program,

21.

"While you are young, you can go through this situation with optimism because you think you will manage to change it, but spending all the years of your youth and finding yourself in the same situation is depressing. Undoubtedly, some young people have found an opportunity not to be in these difficulties, but I think that their number compared to the rest of young people is very small" – student, master program, 22.

According to the data, economic problems are an important factor that complicates but also conditions their opportunities to build their future.

Among the economic issues that concern youth are:

- a) Insufficient income (and at times its complete absence) is considered a very high issue for youth. According to them most of the Albanian youth lack income and their stage of life needs income to invest in their future.
- b) Elevated unemployment rates and the difficulties to find a job. The respondents share that finding a job it's a challenge and finding a job in their field of study is nearly a luxury. According to them, the ongoing students and also the ones already finished university studies have filled the "Call Centers". Call Centers opened in Albania for more than a decade, becoming one of the main job markets for youth. The respondents express that working in Call Centers is exhausting but plenty of youth are still involved in them as finding another job is difficult and other times the job they can find is with a very low payment.
- c) The high cost of living is highlighted as a key reason why young people are choosing to leave or considering leaving. Respondents have explained that the expenses for daily life have risen to a point where they can't manage them. What's more, many of them don't intend to return to their hometowns after finishing their studies, as living apart from family adds to the financial burden. The steep rental prices for housing, combined with other expenses, create even more challenges for students. "If you don't have a job, it's impossible to stay in Tirana. Even if you're living with your parents, it's still hard to afford life without a job." According to the students surveyed, many of them are sharing housing with multiple people to afford the rent, and a significant number live in rented spaces that they share with others.

As illustrated by the data, young individuals contend that striving for personal development is difficult when fundamental living conditions remain unmet.

"I don't have to live here to spend my life fighting to survive. I am young, I want to live somewhere where I fight for more, not for survival" – student, bachelor program, 20.

"We want to focus on our professional development, finding what we want to do, developing our talents, and going after our desires. How can you do this if you can't afford to pay for food or shelter?"- student, master program, 22.

They also mention that when these issues are combined with other factors like discrimination or unfair competition, the situation becomes even more serious. They express concern about the lack of meritocracy, which they believe is quite prevalent in our country, alongside economic troubles. They assert that young individuals might not progress based on their professional abilities, but rather due to their connections or family support.

"Furthermore, besides not getting fair economic recognition for our efforts, the lack of meritocracy can also impede our career growth. A young individual with financial advantages or political affiliations might have opportunities, even if their professional abilities aren't as strong" – student, master program, 22.

Collectively, these circumstances create an environment where personal development is challenging, and as a result, achieving their goals feels distant. On the other side, participants who express a hesitancy to emigrate express that they are too attached to their families and have a genuine desire to explore prospects for their future within Albania.

"Difficulties exist, but if we all depart, who will remain here? I aspire to create my future here. I do not know what will happen later but for now, this is what I plan to do." -student, master program, 21.

3. 2 Mere Desire or Actual Emigration Efforts?

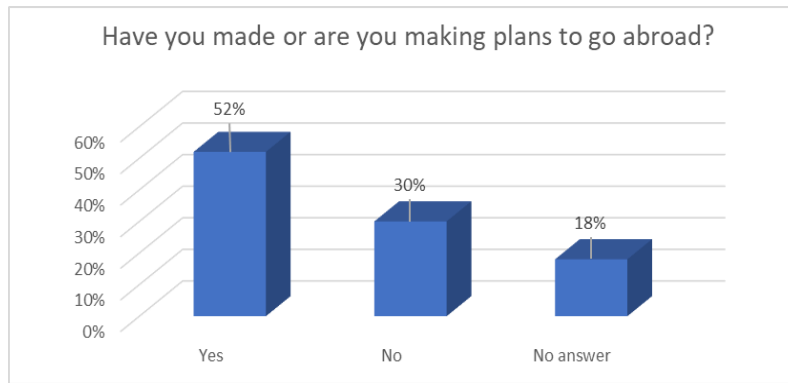


Figure 2: Implementation of Emigration Preparations among Students

Another aspect that becomes apparent when reviewing literature emphasizes the importance for researchers to be cautious and differentiate between expressing a wish and truly committing to making it happen. A high percentage of young people who express a desire to leave is concerning, but the question is, how many of them have taken steps or are taking steps to make their intention to migrate a reality? The data shows that 52% of respondents have affirmed that they are taking specific actions and making concrete plans to make their migration happen. This percentage is significant because it highlights that a considerable portion of the surveyed youth has progressed beyond mere wishes and is actively transforming their desire into practical plans. Another 30% of participants have indicated that they haven't made a definite plan yet, but they do intend to do so.

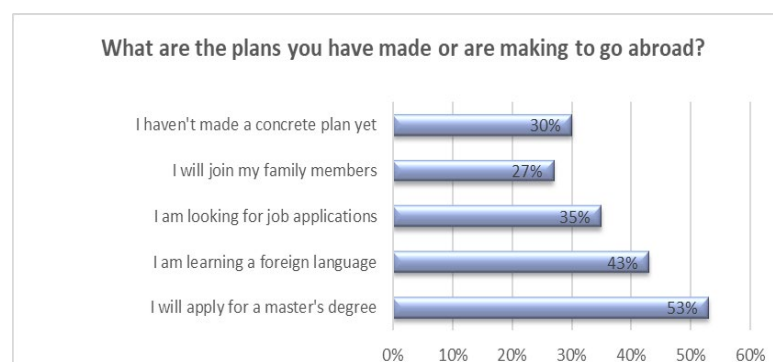


Figure 3: Approaches to Facilitate Emigration

Among the specific plans that students are pursuing refer to: the pursuit of enrolling in higher education levels overseas (53%), learning a foreign language (43%), applying for jobs abroad (35%), and reuniting with family members (27%). Increasingly, studies underline a prevailing

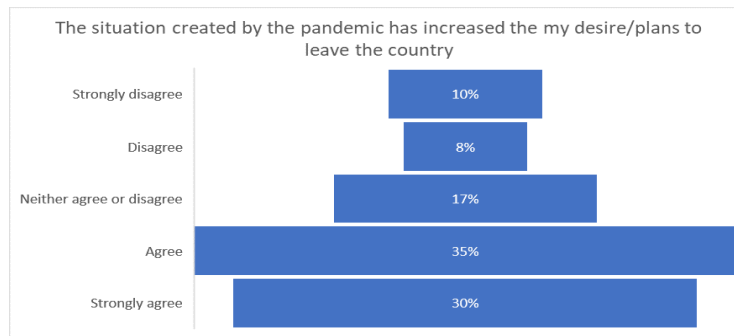
trend whereby aspirant emigrants invest time and effort in preparations, intended to facilitate their integration into their desired host countries. The migration predicament remains a pervasive concern within Albanian society, encompassing both historical waves and contemporary manifestations, marked by the historical prevalence of clandestine migration routes. Numerous Albanians have braved life-threatening peril, with some even succumbing to fatal accidents while navigating perilous routes and hazardous means of departure. Presently, a notable shift is discernible among most young individuals, as they contemplate legally sanctioned pathways to overseas living, coupled with diligent preliminary measures aimed at ensuring seamless integration into their chosen destination.

Furthermore, the data underlines that surveyed students consistently express their aspiration to migrate to countries perceived as offering fertile ground for personal and professional development. A significant proportion of students intend to further their advanced education within these countries, concurrently integrating into their labor markets. Notably, Germany is one of the countries where they aspire to emigrate, as according to them there has been a wide dissemination of information regarding study and employment prospects within this nation. Similarly, Italy and the United Kingdom resonate as attractive prospects, with some aspiring migrants casting their intent to go beyond the European continent. However, these destinations are seen as harder to reach because of the complex procedures and financial means needed. European countries are viewed as more achievable and appealing because traveling to them is easier and more cost-effective compared to farther places.

3. 3 Effects of the Pandemic on Intention/Plans to Emigrate

The implications of the pandemic have intensified existing social and economic challenges, particularly within societies struggling with high unemployment rates, widespread poverty, and vulnerable demographic segments, such as Albania. One of the focal points of inquiry in this study referred to whether the pandemic-induced circumstances have exerted an influence on the intentions and concrete plans of young individuals regarding emigration. The findings show that the difficulties created by the pandemic have significantly affected the aspirations and plans of young individuals to leave, as depicted in the graph above (figure 4).

Figure 4: Impact of the Pandemic on Intentions to Emigrate



Furthermore, participants were also asked to share their experiences about how the pandemic has affected their thoughts and plans regarding emigration. The information shows that the situation during the pandemic has served as a significant catalyst for taking concrete steps toward leaving, more than just increasing the desire to do so. The data indicates that a significant portion of the students who initially expressed the wish to leave have now turned that desire into action due to the pandemic's impact. The data highlights that although many young people had already wanted to leave before the pandemic, the months following its outbreak have seen a transition from mere desire to actual planning or active efforts toward emigration.

"Yes, the situation created by the pandemic made it more obvious that in our country the institutions mostly are not capable of responding even to basic needs, so what to expect more."- student, bachelor program, 19.

"The effect of the pandemic was not so much on the desire to leave because the situation in our country has been problematic for a long time, but much more on doing something, taking steps to leave". – student, bachelor program, 20.

In essence, the pandemic has acted as a potent catalyst, intensifying the readiness to migrate among those who had long considered the prospect and pushing many aspirants to transition from contemplation to concerted action.

3. 4 Considering the Possibility of Returning After Leaving

Exploring the students' attitudes toward leaving Albania, whether temporarily or permanently, a prevailing sentiment becomes evident. Faced with challenges and difficulties in their home country, they lean towards seeking opportunities abroad to achieve their life goals. However, this inclination is accompanied by a strong willingness to return if conditions transform

positively. Many students indicated that they would come back if circumstances change, and some mentioned that their decision to leave is a step towards empowering themselves and eventually returning to contribute to the progress of Albanian society. Most of the students that participated in the study state that they aspire to return after achieving personal success, and also most of them undoubtedly express that they would return if the circumstances change.

"If I can establish myself, I want to come back and use the knowledge and skills I've gained to contribute to progress here."- student, bachelor program, 21.

"Even though we often feel hopeless, we love our country, and I would definitely return if the situation gets better."- student, master program, 22.

According to the responses, residing in Albania under the current circumstances doesn't lead to significant change for them or society, or bring any benefit for both. The students believe that they can contribute more to Albanian society if they are successful, if they progress and achieve their goals, no matter where they do this. For sure it would be preferable that they had this chance in their country.

"It's more beneficial for young people to empower themselves and develop wherever they find opportunities rather than staying here struggling to find a job or working for low pay. I believe that young people can serve their country better by first being successful themselves."- student, bachelor program, 21.

4 Conclusions

The persistent desire and, more critically, the concrete efforts of young Albanians to emigrate represent a significant concern. This outflow, particularly of educated youth, substantially exacerbates the brain drain phenomenon, posing a considerable loss for Albanian society. This study confirms that students are moving beyond mere aspirations, actively undertaking specific steps toward departure. Economic problems and the perceived scarcity of opportunities to address them are identified as primary drivers, alongside other contributing factors such as unequal competition and a pervasive lack of meritocracy.

In contrast to historical migration patterns where perilous, often clandestine routes were

common and sometimes fatal, contemporary young Albanians are increasingly pursuing legal avenues for emigration. Many are proactively preparing by learning the language of their desired destination and seeking opportunities for higher education abroad, international employment, or family reunification. European countries are frequently preferred, largely due to their perceived accessibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated challenges have profoundly influenced young people's emigration intentions and plans. Rather than simply heightening the desire to leave, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, prompting many to transition from contemplation to concrete action. Despite the high numbers of those who have emigrated or aspire to, a notable finding is the expressed willingness of young people to return if conditions in Albania improve. They view emigration as a strategic step not only for their personal well-being but also as a means to ultimately contribute to Albania's progress. As participants articulated, a young person who achieves success abroad is seen as potentially benefiting the country more than one who remains and struggles financially.

In summary, the increasing number of young individuals taking tangible steps to emigrate, driven by a profound concern over the lack of opportunities for future building within Albania, presents a critical challenge. Young people are an indispensable demographic, and no society can afford their sustained loss. It is imperative for policymakers to understand and address the multifaceted challenges young Albanians face and to formulate policies that align with their aspirations, thereby fostering their growth and harnessing their potential within Albanian society.

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