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# Readdressing Urbanization and Migration in Albania circa 1990: a novel approach.

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## Abstract

*The phenomenon of illegal construction has attracted a considerable volume of research, in the fields of theory, policy making, practice and implementations. The dysfunctionality of laws, corruption and clientelism of the administration, the impunity of the law breakers, and the inability of the planning system to provide adequate housing and land uses suitable for development, were considered as the main reasons for illegal construction. Consequently, there was a general assumption that illegal construction was mainly met in developing countries. This was proved inaccurate in recent years, where research has shown that developed (or Global North) countries were also experiencing this phenomenon -and in fact, they always had. An interesting approach to this, was the investigation of cases where legal and constitutional frameworks were also imperfect, and enforcement mechanisms were not serving social justice. This was a diversion of the axiomatic rule that laws should always be obeyed, while, at the same time, there was an assertion that in some cases noncompliance should be regarded as justifiable. The proposed presentation will refer to cases of noncompliance, as described above, but will focus on another dimension of the phenomenon, frequently met in real life situations, but seldom considered as an issue worth scientific research. This aspect deals with the innovation element frequently employed by actors trying to circumvent the existing laws and rules in planning implementations. The degree of innovation invested in the illegal operations, usually transforms the particular action from “breaking the law” to “bending the law”. Researching the innovation element in cases of illegal construction is particularly useful for lawmakers, law enforcers and theoreticians. By analysing these innovative actions, lawmakers can identify the loopholes and deadlocks of legislation which appear in specific cases and under specific conditions and correct them before they provoke generalized judicial complications. Law enforcers can detect weak points in grossly under-researched enforcement functions and improve the related organization processes. Finally, innovation in illegality in the sector of planning implementations can enlighten the researchers in exploring the weak points of planning systems, identify cultural elements in social behaviours -for which the type of innovations described above has encapsulated a high exploratory value- and inject a very much needed sense of humour in the scientific research.*

**Keywords:** Migration, urbanization, demographic indicators, population census

## Introduction

Migration<sup>1</sup> has been characterized as Albania's most popular livelihood strategy, and a way out to deal with unemployment and other income challenges related to the shift to a market economy, after the fall of the command economy, in the early 1990s. The study of Albanian migrations is well-couched in the 'privileged' relationship between migration and poverty (Kokkali, 2024: 272). However, as it has been argued elsewhere (op. cit.), the prevalence of this perspective in a large strand of research, which is also very influential, seems to allow only for a partial understanding of the Albanian migrations, providing inadequate explanation about the persistence and massive-

ness of the outflows for the last thirty years (op. cit.). Meanwhile, it is well known that the internal migration movements during this period have been a major factor of extensive urbanization, while bringing in a drastic reduction of population in many places and/or regions in Albania. The research activity dealing with urbanization in Albania after the 2000s is growing rapidly, seeking to assess this intensive phenomenon, in particular as regards the urbanisation and sub-urbanisation of the greater area of Tirana, and the axis Tirana-Durres. Yet, it is interesting that, to date, this research body has paid limited attention to the study of the country's urban development before 1990: there seems to be a dominant perception which 'inaudibly' equates the fall of the regime with a rural exodus, thus considering that zero point of urbanization in Albania is situated circa 1990. Against this background, in the present paper, we wish to look more carefully into the territorial development of Albania before 1990, while questioning whether this development might present any correlation with the directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations, internal and international. Starting our reflection by this question, we point to that the doctrine of the universal control of the movements of Albanian citizens from 1960 to 1990, signaled the control of the urbanization processes in socialist Albania; yet, at the same time, this fact – combined with other policies of spatial and economic development that have been implemented by the communist regime – nourished a peculiar type of urban/territorial organization, which was apparently not trivial and it might have also been underestimated in the statistics of the time (possibly for ideological reasons). It is not without relevance that, according to research conducted in the 1980s, this socio-spatial organization was not portrayed in the statistics of the time (Carrière & Sivignon 1982). This is key to our understanding of the 'urban' situation in Albania circa 1990. And, we believe that it is also key afterwards, during the transition period, that is a period of tremendous socio-political, population/demographic, economic and other changes. In this line, our purpose here is double: (i) to shed light on the urban/territorial development of Albania earlier to 1990, which remains relatively unknown and an underestimated phenomenon in current research; and (ii) to provide some insight on the relation (if any) of that territorial development to the patterns of internal migration before 1990. We are highly interested in investigating this potential correlation, which will provide a new perspective on the study of the Albanian migrations post-1990. To date, these latter have been mainly considered through the scheme poverty-rurality. This is why, in the following section, we briefly summarize the main findings of this seminal body of research.

## **The Nexus Poverty -Migration in the Albanian Context<sup>2</sup>**

According to an absolute poverty line calculated by the Albanian Institute for Statistics (IN-STAT), in 2002, the 'poor' made up one quarter of the Albanian population (World Bank & INSTAT, 2003), with 30% of the rural population to live below the poverty line, while the respective ratio for the urban population was about 20%. There is a common view among researchers (see Zezza et al., 2005: 176–177) that poverty in Albania, during the 2000s, was higher and deeper in rural areas when compared with urban areas. It was also found to be disproportionately concentrated in the mountainous areas of the north-east: 46% of the country's poor were concentrated there, while the population of these regions accounted only for 12% of the country's total population. Correspondingly, only 8% of the country's poor resided in Tirana. When measuring the Headcount poverty ratio, that is the number of poor people to the total population (in %), the mountainous north-eastern region registered a headcount of about 45%,

<sup>1</sup> It has been estimated that, by the end of the decade 1990, approximately 800,000 Albanian citizens were living abroad. In the early 2000s, approximately 25% of the total population (or over 35% of the workforce) had emigrated abroad. In 2017, about half of the country's population was missing due to international migration. Compared to 1990, the current size of the resident population stock at the national level has been decreased by about 12% due to emigration, followed by a decrease in the birth rate for about 65% and an increase in the death rate for about 20%. See also, summary table in the Annex.

<sup>2</sup> This section relies heavily on Kokkali (2024: 273-286).

against 26% for the Central and 21% for the Coastal regions. In Tirana, the ratio was of 18%. Kotzamanis, Duquenne, Pappas and Kaklamani (2003) found a correlation of poverty with rurality: they showed that the most favoured group in terms of non-income poverty profile was located in the two regions with the highest urban population rate, Tirana and Durres. On the contrary, the highest degree of non-income poverty was mainly found in the mountainous areas, such as the eastern regions of Albania (Kukes Diber, Bulqize, Librazhda), which also had a high degree of rurality. Similarly, the north of Albania overall presented a relatively negative situation in terms of non-income poverty (very negative profile), with the exception of the counties of Shkoder and Tropoje, which were found to be in a more favourable position. According to the authors (op. cit.), the mountainous character of these two counties has not been decisive for the level of poverty. This has been associated to that most villages and settlements were concentrated mainly around their administrative centre, and, also, to the fact that Shkodër was the 4th largest urban centre in Albania. The high degree of urbanity of the county of Shkodër – due to the city of Shkodër – was, therefore, associated with a better picture of non-income poverty across the whole county. This is probably not irrelevant to the fact that Shkoder was historically one of the most important urban centers of Albania. More precisely, Shkoder was the most important Albanian city at the beginning of the 20th century and until the making of the Albanian capital – Tirana – in the 1930s. Shkoder was the most populated city and presented the highest degree of urbanity (100%) within the Albanian territory until 1926, when started its tremendous decline in the urban hierarchy. In 2011, it only presented  $\frac{1}{4}$  (25%) of the population of the most populated Albanian city, i.e. Tirana (Jarne, 2020: 321-322). Strong regional disparities in terms of income and non-income poverty have been observed in connection to internal and international migration as well (see Carletto et al. 2004; Zezza et al., 2005). In a perspective that associates the patterns of migration with those of poverty in the Albanian context, it is widely admitted that, in the first decade of the transition to the market economy, two main trends were traced. A first move from the poorer, mountainous areas, located far from the gates of international migration: these areas, in the north-east of the country, tended to specialize in internal migration, thus creating a continuous flow of migrants to Tirana and other urban regional hubs. The second major move corresponds to the gates of international migration, namely the more dynamic—in terms of economy— coastal areas facing Italy (such as Shkodër, Durres, Tirana, and Vlor), or those on the border with Greece (such as Korçë); these areas were massively attracting internal migrants, some of whom would probably end up feeding the large international flows heading to Greece and Italy. In summary, the mountainous districts of the north-east produced a steady flow of poor migrants to Tirana and other regional urban centers, while the least rural and poor districts of Tirana and Durrës were the main receptors of internal migration. Internal movements were also generated in some less poor—but very rural—districts in southern Albania (Berat, Korçë), toward nearby urban centers (Kokkali, 2024: 292). There has been, therefore, an obvious spatial differentiation of coastal areas from the hinterland, and an indisputable dominance of international destinations in the south of the country (towards Greece), as well as in the coastal regions (towards Italy, after crossing the Adriatic).

### **Focusing on the urban development of pre-capitalist Albania: A first approach**

In the previous section, we have presented briefly the main findings of a very influential body of research on Albanian migration that related the degrees of rurality to internal and international migratory moves via the intermediate of poverty. As maintained elsewhere (Kokkali, 2023 & 2024), it is reductive to approach the critical developments to human mobility that took place in Albania over the last three decades only under the perspective offered by the – undeniable – linkages between poverty and migration. Other processes are also at work within the migratory process, and one of these concerns undeniably urbanization. However, while the study of urbanization

and sub-urbanization of Albania in the last three decades excites the interest of researchers, thus producing a considerable body of work, less attention is paid to the state of Albania's urban/territorial development before the end of the imposed ban on mobility, either internal or international. The image of the urban/territorial development in Albania is quite complex, and not at all linear. In summary, the development of Tirana before 1960, the "imposed" stagnation of the communist period (with growth lower than that of the country), and finally the recovery – after 1990 – of the post-war trend of urban growth, are spectacular. New cities were developed during the period of industrialization, especially the 1950s. Then they developed at the expense of the development of Tirana, but their growth was only slightly higher than the growth of the Albanian population in general. In 1960, there is a major shift in the urbanization of Albania. The "cultural revolution" of the country triggered inter alia a set of anti-urban policies that sought to abolish urban-upon-rural domination. This mainly meant to maintain a numerical balance between the "urban" and the "rural" populations. In this context, although urban growth rates remained high, they were only associated with a very high birth rate, while only small new towns ("exemplary" cities) continued to benefit from some migratory influx (Jarne, 2018). In all the others in-migration was prohibited. Since 1991, Tirana and its suburbs have been growing in a spectacular way. On the contrary, the network of the so-called "exemplary" cities gradually collapsed after 1991, as lifting the travel ban worked mainly to the benefit of the Tirana-Durres metropolitan area. It is to note that some cities initially resisted the decline, since emigration to Tirana and abroad was offset by intra-regional influxes of rural population; still, since the 2000s, all these cities have lost population, with the exception of Saranda, a coastal city, which was the only one to develop outside the Tirana-Durres metropolitan axis (Jarne, 2018). In summary, we can distinguish five major periods regarding the urbanization of modern Albania:

1. In the interwar period, Tirana, as the capital of the new Albanian state, acquired centrality and developed rapidly.
2. During the first 15 post-war years, we testimony a general –yet delayed– take-off of urbanization in Albania. Urban development in this period, associated with massive industrialisation, is particularly high in Tirana, and in the cities of the central plain (Elbasan, Durres, Fier and Vlorë).
3. The period from 1960 to 1991 is marked by the creation of new cities, but also by the severe restriction of the development of existing cities, in particular Tirana;
4. With the fall of the regime and the consequent liberalization of migration, there is a recovery of urbanization processes with the contribution of rural populations; these latter, through self-housing practices, settle in new "arbitrary" settlements in the suburbs (mainly of Tirana).
5. Since the mid-2000s, there has been the creation of large complexes in the suburbs, mainly in and around Tirana ("Tirana-Durres metropolitan area"), while other cities begin to decline (Szeleenyi, 1996; Hirt, 2013; Jarne, 2018).

At this point, it is worth looking closer at the territorial/ urban development of Albania during the period of "stagnation", and more precisely in the 1970s and 1980s. Geographer Michel Sivignon (1970; 1975; 1977; 1983) described an urban-residential network, which, apart from Tirana, consisted of:

1. medium-sized cities of the eastern valley,
2. two fast-growing ports (Durres and Vlorë),
3. old commercial cities, some of which were developing mildly (Korçë, Shkodër) and others were developing rapidly (Elbasan);
4. as well as (new) small settlements created for the concentration of farms or as mining and industrial centres (Sivignon 1975, Daniel 1978).
5. In 1983, Sivignon (1983: 41) observed that, thanks to this network of settlements, Albania was spreading non-agricultural work and employment, throughout its territory. Sivignon was wonder-

ing, besides, whether, in this way, Albania would manage to keep its population “immobilized” indefinitely even in the most isolated areas.

The network of settlements described by Michel Sivignon is, thus, about different population sizes, yet also about different economic-productive functions of the different settlements, villages, towns, cities, etc. that formed the network. To paraphrase Sivignon, while the Albanian population was kept in the countryside, classified in all probability as “rural”, we know that they were employed in non-agricultural work, performing economic activities related to the functions “assigned” to the city/ settlement, etc. of stay (mining industry, textile industry, etc.). This diffusion of non-agricultural work throughout the Albanian countryside before 1990, as described by Michel Sivignon and other researchers (Carrière & Sivignon, 1982; Borchert, 1975), is crucial for understanding the dynamics of urbanization in pre-capitalist Albania, as well as of the territorial development of the country. It is also crucial for understanding contemporary migration phenomena. Because, this image of the Albanian territory, as described by Sivignon and others, seems to challenge the division between urban/rural, contesting the respective boundaries, at least as we know them through the relevant statistical categories of population (“urban”, “rural”, etc.). Building upon these ideas, it is slightly disturbing to think that the explosive proportions of internal migration towards cities, and especially towards Tirana, after 1990, constitute the “thaw” of a rural exodus that was prevented until then. This mass exodus to the cities may resemble a rural exodus (Jarne, 2020), but, due to the lifestyle – including employment – of Albanian citizens around 1990 it cannot be characterized as such. Let us recall that, as early as the 1980s, Carrière & Sivignon (1982: 149, 153) referred to the urbanization of Albania as a phenomenon that was not statistically captured. That is, the characterizations/definitions of the population as “urban” or “rural” were far from what was observed in situ. These authors also wondered whether it was possible to industrialize the economy and urbanize society while keeping the population in the countryside, avoiding, therefore, its increasing concentration in the cities – a trend that had already begun to emerge after the war. This, in turn, sets some questions about the lifestyles performed in the settlements of this network, which seem to have been far from a purely rural/peasant way of life (op. cit.). In any case, both the retention of the population in the countryside (with the simultaneous urbanization of society), and the incomplete statistical depiction of Albania’s urban/territorial development (mainly through urban/rural population percentages), seem to obscure the image we have made so far of the state of urbanization in pre-capitalist Albania. There is, therefore, a need for further investigation of this issue, beyond the idea of an incomplete rural exodus. In this line, it is worth noting that Örjan Sjöberg (1992) pointed that Albania did not account for an example of “zero urban development”. Studying the case of Tirana, he suggested that the peri-urban settlements around the capital have experienced substantial growth due to unplanned in-migration. There was a significant urbanization pressure around Tirana, which was not merely on hold, as we normally assume when reporting the ban on movement in communist Albania. Sjöberg (1992: 14) pointed this by way of referring to the high numbers of commuters reported to set out daily for town from the surrounding countryside. To the concepts of “zero urban development” or “pseudo-urbanization” (Murray & Szelényi, 1984), Sjöberg contrasted, therefore, the concept of “diverted migration”, stressing that these in-migrants were primarily vying for an opportunity to settle in Tirana itself, with their current residence in the nearby rural settlements being a second-best alternative. In fact, via the concept of “diverted migration”, Sjöberg interpreted the development of a kind of suburbs around Tirana: migration between rural areas, which resulted in settling in agricultural cooperatives closer to the big cities of Albania (and in particular closer to Tirana), was subject to less control by the state, and this is why it took place. Said alternatively, the detour of urban in-migrants was based on rural–urban commuting, and the growth of peri-

urban settlements of substantial densities in the immediate vicinity of Tirana (Kokkali, 2024: 281). In spite all the above, and contrary to this line of reflexion, in the most recent literature, the control of migratory movements and of urban growth since 1960 has often been equated with the “freezing” of urbanization processes in favour of –implicitly or explicitly– an assumption of “zero” or, at least, negligible urban development. This assumption, reasonably, leads to a second: the explosive internal migration post-1990 is part of the process of a rapid rural exodus (see, for instance, inter alia, Lerch (2016), who examines the relationship between urbanization and international migration, observing, in the recent years, a partial redirection of the rural exodus abroad). All in all, research activity focusing on the recent – and admittedly explosive – dimensions of urbanization in Albania (which are apparently linked to the explosive dimensions of migration since 1990) seems to have bypassed the study of the country’s peculiar urban development under the Hoxha regime, often implying that the rural exodus of Albania was marked by the fall of the regime.

### **Discussion: Insights for the study of the Albanian migration in the light of pre-1990 urbanization in Albania**

In this last section, let us redirect our attention to the study of the directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations, making a brief comment.

1. Taking for granted the nexus poverty-rurality, there has been a taxonomy of Albanian prefectures and regions according to their “specialization” in internal and/or international migration; but also, regarding their direction (from rural to other rural or urban areas, from mountainous to coastal regions, etc.).

2. This specialization concerns specific migration patterns (in terms of directionality).

3. Yet, this directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations has not been studied together with the patterns of previous internal movements, i.e. those that have been recorded after the war and until the fall of the regime. For instance, for the period 1965-1971, Borchert (1975), based on the calculation of natural balances per region for each year (given the zero international migration during the period under review), showed the existence of movements from peripheral areas to coastal plains, particularly at the expense of the south and eastern regions of the country. He made a map of internal movements and showed out-migration from the southern regions such as Gjirokastrë, Përmet, Vlorë, but also from the eastern regions (Librazhd, Dibër).

4. In recent research activity, our conclusions on the directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations were mainly determined by –and correlated with– the level of poverty/rurality of an area of out-migration, as recorded after 1990 (see previous sections), rather than with the inter-regional mobility of the Albanian citizens that has been recorded post-war and until 1990.

5. It is worth studying, however, whether similar migratory patterns emerge between previous and contemporary Albanian migratory movements. Because, after all, the systematic correlation of the directionality of Albanian migrations with the degree of rurality-and-poverty of an area of out-migration (be it internal or international) seems to focus on the obvious: namely, a predominantly rural population that migrates when and where it can.

As an alternative to this line of reasoning, our purpose here has been to bring in the foreground the study of the urbanization processes of the Albanian territory before 1990; and, also, to formulate some meaningful questions on the correlation of these processes (if any) with the directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations, so as to propose an alternative approach to the dominant for the study of these remarkable migrations (Kokkali, 2023). Building upon these ideas, we set some questions that will hopefully trigger a new approach to the study of the Albanian migration.

i) Is there any correlation between the directionality of contemporary Albanian migrations and the urban development of Albania before 1990, as shaped by the policies for spa-



tial and socioeconomic organization implemented under the communist regime? Considering that the doctrine of the universal control on movement in Albania, combined with other policies of spatial and economic development implemented by the regime, resulted in the control of urbanization processes, yet, while creating a peculiar type of urban/territorial organization, which was not statistically depicted; and, which, for this reason, deserves to be studied anew, in correlation both with current urbanization and migratory trends. ii) To what extent do migrations after 1990 show similarities in directionality with any internal movements tolerated by the regime in previous decades? Do common patterns emerge and, if so, what are the causes?

In conclusion, in this short paper, we have tried to provide some insight for a closer study of urbanization processes in pre-capitalist Albania, contesting inter alia an implicit –yet prevailing– assumption of “zero” or trivial urban development earlier to 1990. Stemming from the doctrine of the universal control of movements and the consequent control of urbanization processes in pre-capitalist Albania, this assumption usually sets the issue of post-1990 explosive migrations in terms of a “rural exodus”. This is not accurate, as we briefly discussed herein. We suggested that these issues, which remain largely unknown, need further and more systematic investigation, in order to lead to the formulation of new working hypotheses for the study of the migratory phenomena in Albania. This would enable the study of Albanian migrations to move away from the triptych rurality-poverty-migration, shedding light on the peculiar urban development of the country after WWII and until the fall of the regime in 1990, as well as on the consequences that – we expect – that this development had both on further urbanization patterns and on contemporary migratory patterns.

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