

The Migration and Wellbeing of the Zero Generation: Transgenerational Care, Grandparenting and Loneliness amongst Albanian Older People

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the so-called ‘zero generation’: the parents of first-generation migrants who are initially left behind in the migrant country of origin and who may subsequently follow their children in migration or engage in transnational back-and-forth mobility. We challenge the prevailing optic on the left-behind older generation which sees them as dependent and in need of care, and stress instead their active participation both in migration and in the administration of care and support to their children and grandchildren. Drawing on interviews with mainly zero-generation Albanians, but also some first-generation migrants, in various geographical contexts – Albania, Italy, Greece and the UK – we trace their evolving patterns of mobility, intergenerational care, wellbeing and loneliness both in Albania and abroad. In telling the often-overlooked story of the zero generation, we highlight both their vulnerability and agency in different circumstances and at different times, shaped by family composition and the ageing process.

Keywords: zero generation, transnational migration, intergenerational care, wellbeing, loneliness, Albania.

[The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Population, Space and Place*; 29 October 2014; www.taylorandfrancis.com; DOI: 10.1002/psp.1895].

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INTRODUCTION AND KEY CONCEPTS

The starting point of this paper is the identification of the ‘zero generation’ as forgotten subjects within the overall phenomenon of migration. Following Nedelcu (2009), the zero generation is defined as the parents of first-generation migrants.¹ Most studies which look at migrants’ parents see them as ‘left behind’ by their migrating children who are faced with the challenge of managing transnational care at a distance (Baldassar, 2007; Baldassar et al., 2007; Congzhi and Jingzhong, 2014; Knodel and Saengtienchai, 2007; Xiang, 2007). This problematic of transnational care of migrants towards their elderly parents is usually articulated through the voices of the migrants and stresses their duties and obligations towards their ageing parents. In this paper we focus on the first-hand accounts of the zero-generation parents of migrants. We examine the case of recent (post-1990) Albanian migration as particularly suited to our purpose, because of the scale and intensity of this emigration and its strong cohort effect, it being mainly young adults aged 18-35 who emigrated.

Our research is located within the broader intellectual terrain of the geographies and socialities of ageing. In their review article, Hopkins and Pain (2007: 287) acknowledge that ‘old age’ has been seen as a ‘socially constructed... culturally variable category underpinned by a range of social and economic processes, lived experiences and spatial practices’; but they also note that, ‘beyond mapping ill-health and service provision, the critical literature on old age is miniscule’. Hopkins and Pain go on to argue for a *relational approach* to the study of ageing (2007: 288); this is especially salient in a context of migration and transnational familyhood wherein issues of (im)mobility, space and place gain special significance. *Intergenerationality* is the keystone of these relational structures of age and ageing, which often shift through the migration of different generational cohorts: interaction, dependency, isolation, conflict, support and cooperation all have material and psychological effects on the lives and experiences of older people, and younger generations too, in the diverse spatial settings produced by migration (Neysmith and Zhou, 2013; Treas, 2008; Treas and Mazumdar, 2002). As we shall see when we present our empirical material, the potentially many decades of the older-age life-stage involve transitions between what gerontologists call the ‘young’ or ‘active’ old and the ‘old old’.

Within the triple nexus ageing-migration-care, we mobilise a range of key concepts, justified and defined as follows. First, we highlight the way in which the nature of the

migration process ‘produces’ the need for *transgenerational care*, either at a distance (transnationally) or administered by the physical or emotional needs of co-presence. This transnational care is multidirectional and multigenerational; for instance the first-generation migrants have duties of care towards their elderly parents; the zero generation desires to lavish care on the grandchildren who are generally abroad (but who may also be ‘left behind’ in the origin country in the care of their grandparents); but the zero generation may also have caring responsibilities towards their own, very old parents, the ‘minus-one generation’. Most studies of transnational cross-generational care focus on the care duties of migrant parents (often lone migrant mothers) towards their left-behind children (see Baldassar and Merla, 2014 for a review). Where the cross-generation care is towards the migrants’ left-behind parents, this casts the migrants in the role of care-givers and the elderly parents as care-receivers (Baldassar et al., 2007). Our innovation in this paper is to put the spotlight on the older generation as *care-givers*.

Following on from this, we want to highlight the neglected role of *grandparenting* in transnational migration: both the way that first-generation migration and the birth of the second generation removes the possibility, which is highly desired by the zero generation, of active grandparenting, and the way that follow-the-children migration allows the zero generation to reclaim this role.

Finally, we focus on the *wellbeing* of the zero generation and on its multiple dimensions in a migration situation (IOM, 2013; Wright, 2012). Whereas Wright focuses on the wellbeing of the migrants (in her case Peruvian women in Madrid and London), in our case we study the neglected wellbeing of the zero generation. We examine their ongoing physical and emotional wellbeing, and the way they cope with these challenges in different translocal settings. By highlighting their active caring role, we gather evidence on their changing sense of self-worth and usefulness, as well as their *loneliness* (Treas and Mazumdar, 2002), either at ‘home’ in Albania, or with the migrant families abroad.

Studies of wellbeing reflect an increasing recognition of the need to find new ways of measuring ‘development’ and ‘progress’ beyond standard economic indicators. Key issues in the conceptualisation and measurement of wellbeing include health, community participation and social connections as well as personal finance. Wright (2012: 10) points out that meanings and understandings of wellbeing are culturally embedded. An important distinction exists between more-or-less objective wellbeing indicators (health, social networks, material conditions etc.) and subjective wellbeing – which can be accessed, as we do in this article, by asking people how they feel about different aspects of their lives.

For older Albanians, grandparenting is one of those elements which is considered vital to their sense of purpose and wellbeing. The ability to enjoy this role depends crucially on co-presence: hence wellbeing, and the sources to access it, ‘travels’ with the migrants (Wright 2012: 9).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The lack of attention paid to the fate and feelings of the zero generation leads to an initial general research question: What happens to the zero generation when the first generation migrates? This leads to several follow-on subquestions:

- What are their immediate reactions and coping mechanisms when their children migrate and live abroad?
- In what ways do they become active agents in the migration process and in the two-way process of intergenerational care?
- In what circumstances are they able to join their children abroad?
- What are the ongoing wellbeing consequences of the zero generation’s migration, stay abroad, and ageing?

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

In this paper we bring together selected insights and results from a number of research projects on Albanian migrants and left-behind households in Albania (Table 1). We have interviewed Albanian migrants in Greece, Italy and the UK, as well as the residual household members, including parents of migrants, in various parts of Albania – in and around the capital, Tirana, and in numerous villages and small towns in the north and in the south of the country. For further methodological details see the references cited in Table 1.

Here we mainly draw on qualitative, in-depth interviews with zero-generation individuals, both those who have followed their children and are currently living abroad, and those who have remained at home in Albania or who have returned there after a spell of time with their children abroad. The total number of zero-generation interviews we have collected is 133. We also introduce a few relevant quotes from first-generation migrants about their relationships with the zero generation.

These various research projects now span a period of twelve years so we can also introduce an element of chronology into our analysis relating to how the Albanian migratory phenomenon has evolved in stages with regard to the demographic composition of migrants' household units, and with reference to the shifting terrain of (il)legality and economic boom and crises. In addition, by interviewing mainly older-age zero-generation migrants, we can also draw on their own long experiences and memories of (non)migration, including possible return, thereby introducing an element of biographical longitudinality into our account.

THE SPECIFICITY OF ALBANIAN MIGRATION

In many ways Albania is typical of the post-socialist migration exodus from countries which lay behind the old Iron Curtain; from Estonia in the north to Albania in the south, there was significant, if not indeed mass, desire to 'see the West' and earn a better income after the apocalyptic events of 1989-90 (Black et al., 2010; Galgoczi et al., 2009; Glorius et al., 2013).

In other respects, however, the Albanian migratory experience has been unique (Barjaba and King, 2005). No other country in Europe has 'lost' such a large share of its population in such a short time: now there is a 'stock' of 1.4 million Albanians living abroad, compared to 2.8 million living in the country. Second, most Albanians have migrated to geographically adjacent Greece and Italy, thereby creating a compact transnational space for migration and travel. Third, most Albanians had no legal channels for migration, so initial border-crossings were irregular. However, by the late 1990s, regularisation schemes in Italy and Greece enabled more stable settlement and family reunion. Fourth, Albanians lack a coherent ethnic community identity, which has resulted in two outcomes: strong but socially isolated family structures; and rapid integration into host societies, despite residual stigmatisation. Finally, mass emigration has been accompanied by large-scale internal migration from rural, upland areas to the Tirana region.

In the rest of the article we trace the evolution of the triple nexus between migration, ageing and transnational care from the viewpoint of the zero generation. We document the evolution of this nexus across three stages: the condition of being 'left behind'; the decision of the zero generation (or imposed on them by their children) to participate in follow-the-children migration, and the transgenerational care implications

and intra-family social relations that are embedded within such moves; and finally, the subsequent decision (or constraint) of the zero generation to return-migrate to Albania or to engage in a transnational life by moving back and forth (to the extent that their health, financial resources and legal status allows).

OLDER PEOPLE LEFT BEHIND

Albanian society was unprepared for what was about to unfold in the 1990s – the widescale migration of such a large share of its younger-adult population. Especially unprepared were older people who in many cases ‘lost’ all their children to migration, either abroad or internally within Albania. This sudden fracturing of Albanian families across the generational lineage was abrupt because of the suddenness and intensity of the departures in the 1990s, and because of the migrants’ conditions of irregularity which meant that it was extremely difficult for the migrants either to visit their parents at ‘home’ or for their parents to visit them.

Hence we characterise this first stage as being the condition of ‘orphan pensioners’ (King and Vullnetari, 2006), who felt ‘abandoned’ by their children and who suddenly realised that the situation they had always envisioned for themselves in later life – surrounded by their adult children and grandchildren, the stable pattern of ageing and transgenerational care that has been in place for generations, facilitated by geographical proximity and physical co-presence – had suddenly been snatched away from them. They understood on the one hand the inevitability of their children’s migration, made necessary by the economic collapse of Albania in the immediate post-communist years, and they were grateful for the remittances which enabled their survival and the possibility of a better material quality of life, but they were sad, even traumatised, by the absence of their children. This sadness was greatly enhanced when they had grandchildren living abroad, who in many cases they had never seen or touched.

The emotional impact of this cross-generation separation is evident in all of the interviews with older parents who remain in Albania. Some found it impossible to discuss the emigration of their children without crying: ‘Please, I can’t talk about this [separation from her children] because I will cry... I can’t talk about it, I can’t cope with it’ (Mynefe, age 64, village in southern Albania). At the time of the interview in 2004, Mynefe and her husband had been living on their own for ten years, their three children having all moved away. One son had moved to Tirana to follow his studies and subsequently stayed on to live

and work there, the other son and the daughter both live in Thessaloniki with their respective families. The situation of Mynefe and her husband is typical of dozens of ‘left-alone’ zero-generationers whom we interviewed, with children scattered abroad and/or elsewhere in Albania. The couple survive on their tiny state pensions and a bit of subsistence farming, supplemented by remittances from the son in Greece. Although they have managed occasional visits to Greece, they are not planning to move abroad to join their son as he does not have the correct papers.

For zero-generation parents who are somewhat younger and whose migrant children (nearly always sons, as daughters are not ‘allowed’ to migrate on their own; King and Vullnetari, 2012) are as yet unmarried, the focus is on remittances and a temporary life-stage until the sons get married and either return to Albania or settle with their new family unit abroad. Unmarried sons working abroad have no nuclear family of their own to support, so a substantial share of their income is remitted to the parents to improve their wellbeing by extending the family dwelling or building a new one. Often this investment, especially if it involves the creation of a new dwelling, is in anticipation that the son will return home to get married and settle, but this may be a false expectation given the continuing poor economic prospects in rural and small-town Albania.²

Sooner or later, however, parents and their migrant children have to face up to the inevitable economic and existential dilemma of trading off the flow of remittances with family togetherness and long-term life prospects – in other words, how to balance the economic with the social and familial dimensions of wellbeing. Meantime, once the migrant children settle abroad with their own families, remittances to the zero generation are drastically reduced (King et al., 2011) and prospects for return to Albania fade. The following quote, from a father in northern Albania, is typical of those who have resigned themselves to the inevitability of their offspring staying abroad, yet who cannot hide the loneliness that this brings.

I have fourteen members of my [extended] family in the UK and I am happy for them, I cannot complain. Of course, if you asked me, I would like them to come and live here. But here, there is no place where you can eat, or work, and the house is not yet finished. Where is the father who doesn’t want his children close? But what do I want my children here for, if all they can do is wander around the streets, without a job and without a house. It’s best for them to stay where they are, in England (Fatos, 68, northern Albania, 2002).

What changes the situation from one of temporary migration, with the constant prospect of return, into one which shades into longer-term settlement abroad, is a combination of three factors, partly hinted at in the quote above. First, there is the continuing poor economic environment in Albania, which keeps migrants abroad and prevents them from seriously considering return. Second, there is the demographic ‘maturing’ of the Albanian migration to one increasingly composed of family-scale movement and new family formation abroad. This demographic evolution is closely related to a third key factor: the transition from an irregular status abroad into one which gives them a measure of legality and stability of residence. The regularisation of significant numbers of Albanian migrants in the late 1990s and early 2000s (regularisation schemes were implemented in Italy in 1995, 1998 and 2002, and in Greece in 1998 and 2001, plus a ‘mini-regularisation’ in the UK in 2003) created an entirely new situation for the migrants; almost two different lifeworlds. Before: a situation of precarity with insecure work and incomes (yet often enough to yield remittances) and the constant risk of repatriation by the authorities, plus an inability to legally visit elderly parents and other family members, or have them visit. After: with documents, back-and-forth visits become possible, provided the papers are kept up-to-date and renewed – not always easy, given the bureaucratic obstacles, which are especially severe in Greece. However, with family commitments becoming increasingly focused upon the second generation and their education, income streams get diverted away from remitting to parents in Albania. Economic support to these elderly parents is limited to smaller amounts of money sent ‘just for a coffee’, gifts brought on visits home, and essential medical help.

As first- and second-generation migrants put down roots in the host society, a more transnational multi-generation family life takes shape, with regular return visits ‘home’, usually during the school summer holidays (Vathi and King, 2011). The directionality of these visits can also be reversed, with the zero generation visiting and staying longer with their children and grandchildren.

THE ZERO GENERATION MIGRATES

The re-emergence of the zero generation as active participants in migration would, at first sight, seem to solve several issues, leading to a ‘multiple-win’ situation. Above all, they are reunited with their migrant children and grandchildren and thus able to finally fulfill their

otherwise-denied grandparenting functions, which they see as part of their very *raison d'être*. Besides helping to encourage a bilingual ability through preserving the Albanian language and culture within the migrant household, they enable both members of the first-generation couple to engage in full-time paid work by taking over household tasks. In the host-country contexts most Albanian families cannot rely on a wide social network for childcare, because of the lack of ethnic community identity and belonging. Hence, intergenerational support becomes the common practice of caregiving.

Living surrounded by children and grandchildren promotes greater self-esteem amongst the zero generation; it removes the feeling of uselessness generated by their condition of being 'left-behind', and enhances their wellbeing. 'We were alone at home and then the grandchildren were born in Italy and our children had to go to work so it was better to come and look after the kids and at the same time we were with them too', said Myfete (66, Italy, 2013). A further aspect of the multiple-win situation is related to the natural process of parents' ageing and health deterioration and the chance to access better health services in the host societies. Agetina (66, Italy, 2013) affirmed: 'Here it is better, there are medicines, doctors, check-ups, and our sons are able to keep an eye on us'.

A case which exemplifies the strategy of mutual support, is that of Drita and Stavri, an elderly couple from Tirana (73 and 84 years old), who moved to Italy in 2005 to join their two children (a son and a daughter) and their families. The youngest son first migrated to Greece and lived there for several years where his first daughter was born. Stavri and Drita, however, could never visit them, neither could their son go back to Albania, as he was irregular. In 1999, thanks to relatives in Italy, their son moved with his family to the Marche region and so did his sister's family, from Tirana. Stavri and Drita moved 'permanently' to Italy when the son had a second child. Until then, they had travelled a few times with a tourist visa, but when their presence became essential for their son, family reunification was the only solution to have unlimited access to Italy and to avoid the administrative bureaucracy, costs and uncertainty of getting a visa each time. Their daughter-in-law recognises that it was thanks to Stavri and Drita that she could continue working; otherwise her family would have suffered economic difficulties:

When the second daughter was born we decided to bring over our parents (husband's parents), because we would not make it financially with the income of my husband. The childcare services here are expensive; nearly 360 Euros per month, just for half a day and often the children get ill there. So we couldn't afford it.

Our parents were young at that time, free of duties and eager to see us, so we decided to apply for family reunification (Miranda, 38, Italy, 2013).

Stavri and Drita have finally found their role within the family, as Stavri affirmed: ‘The whole family was here, our son, daughter, relatives. It seemed like being in Tirana, like it used to be’. They help their children by taking care of their young grandchildren and performing domestic chores; at the same time they receive hands-on care every time they have health problems and they get regular check-ups. Last year Stavri suffered a stroke; he had immediate medical assistance and hospitalisation without serious consequences. His children, four grandchildren and other relatives were all supporting him and he recovered quite well, as his daughter-in-law said: ‘He was lucky to be here, to have good doctors and all of us around him. If he was in Albania he would have died, alone’.

However, migration of the zero generation through family reunification is not always part of a win-win situation. Sometimes the follow-on migration is triggered by the deterioration in health of the ageing parents. Especially when parents do not have (male) children in Albania and/or are widowed, it may be that the migration decision of the zero generation is encouraged and even imposed on them by their first-generation migrant children, particularly when the migrant is the youngest son, traditionally the family member responsible for aged parental care. Witness the following quote from Agetina who has two sons and three daughters all living in Italy:

Since 5 or 6 years we started to stay longer (in Italy), about 5 months, and then last year, in 2011, after my husband got sick, we stayed here for good. Our sons decided that it was better to stay here. If we were still healthy, we would not have to come (for good) to Italy, I would live in Albania, in my own house, with my little pension.

To have ageing parents left in a state of physical and mental distress in Albania would not only cause economic and psychological pain to the first generation (moving back and forth could risk losing their job if long leaves are taken to assist ailing parents in Albania), but it would also bring shame on the family. There is no tradition of either old people’s residential care homes or hiring a live-in carer in Albania.

Also in case of a joint family decision to reunite with children and grandchildren, the multiple-win situation may not last. While at the beginning of the settlement abroad, the zero generation regains their position within the enlarged family, after a certain period

of time more negative aspects of co-residing often become evident, like feeling a guest and not having their own house and privacy. Stavri recalled an Albanian saying that a guest starts to stink after a few days. For four years Stavri and Drita lived with their son's family, taking care of their new-born granddaughter. Now she is enrolled at school, they are free of caring duties and have changed their living arrangements; they alternate between their children's homes on a weekly basis. This solution, according to their children, is a coping strategy to escape boredom and reduce the financial burden on the children, especially during the financial crisis. The week they stay at the son's house, Stavri sleeps in the living room and Drita in the kitchen, because the house is quite small. During the day, they sometimes go downtown as their grandchildren go to school and the distance to the centre is not that far. At the daughter's house, instead, they can sleep together in the same room. But this house is in the countryside and not well connected with public transport.

Another negative impact on the wellbeing of the zero generation is related to poverty; they receive no pension abroad, or at best, a very small social allowance after several years of legal residence. The result is that they are highly financially dependent on their children who are usually not well-off. As a consequence, some of the zero generation who are still relatively young and in good health conditions, once released from caring duties, pick up some casual paid work themselves (e.g. in cleaning houses, child or elderly care of local people, light construction or repair work, etc.). Financial independence has a positive impact on their self-esteem and allows them to be 'close-residing' instead of 'co-residing'. Agetina affirmed: 'Now it's better, we're on our own, we get up and eat whenever we want, it's not like being a guest in your children's home'.

Moving to another country automatically leads to having less contact with people left behind. The extent to which this deterioration of social relationships causes loneliness depends on how much they are able to compensate with new contacts in the host society. Our interview data, however, identify several reasons why it is not easy for the zero generation to build new social networks. Lack of time (too busy with the grandparenting role) and not speaking the native language are two oft-cited factors that prevent the zero generation from socialising outside the family circle. Additionally, in Albania they were used to do practically everything by walking. In the host countries, especially when the Albanian families live in a village or peri-urban settlement where no specific ethnic facilities are available and few other Albanians live close by, having no car and/or driving license traps the zero generation at home and makes them totally dependent on their often busy children for their social life. Agetina again:

Here I cannot exchange two words with anybody, only good morning and good evening. In Albania I always met someone, even when I went to buy bread, always had a chat. In Albania so many people came to visit me, or I would go to them. I miss the friendships, people who come to see me, to take a coffee together. I don't have people of my age to spend time with... This is why we need our children to introduce us to other people, but our children don't care, they're busy, have little time for this.

Moreover, there are few common spaces for them to socialise with other older-age migrant Albanians – to talk, have a coffee, play cards, go for a walk etc. As Stavri points out in the interview excerpt below, some of these activities entail a cost (albeit modest – bus fares, coffees etc.), which they are reluctant to ask their children to support out of pride or embarrassment, and the overall need to save as much as possible for the good of the family:

Here, up to now, we don't have a pension so we have to ask our children [for money]. They would give us whatever we want but we don't ask. They're already making a lot of sacrifices for us and they have their own financial problems. We cannot ask them money for a bus ticket to go downtown. Having friends means to going to a bar, taking a coffee, one time you pay for them and next time they pay for you. But without money what can we do?

In some cases the children even prohibit their parents from social interaction with same-ethnic peers due to their distrust towards other Albanian migrants. Having few contacts with other Albanians has been a coping strategy of many first-generation migrants against discrimination. By playing down their Albanian identity – not socialising much with co-ethnics, not forming ethnic associations, not speaking Albanian in public places – they try hard to integrate as a defence strategy against the anti-Albanian sentiments which have been pervasive in Greek and Italian society since the early 1990s (King and Mai, 2004; 2009).

Migration of the zero generation changes the family configuration into a three-generation setting; the new living arrangement challenges intra-family relations and may engender intergenerational conflicts. For example, although according to the Albanian

tradition the daughter-in-law takes care of elderly parents, migrant women's participation in the labour market has strengthened their empowerment within the family. As a consequence, the elderly, especially if they are care-receivers, lose the pivotal role they had in the patriarchal families before migration. During our interviews, it often happened that the zero-generation women, living-in with one of their sons, initially refused to be interviewed, but afterwards asked (usually through one of the grandchildren) to make the interview. The reason of refusal was to avoid talking in the presence of their daughter-in-law, because of a bad relationship with her, although they were reluctant to talk openly about this during the interview.

My youngest son and his wife will take care of me, this is the rule in Albania. But women have changed here, they behave more like Italians. I can see that by the way they react when arguing with their husbands. In my village a man's word is law, here it's not (Milika, 83, Italy, 2013).

Although one function of the zero-generation grandparents can be to preserve elements of Albanian language and culture within the migrant household, there may be tensions and barriers involved. Grandchildren may not be keen to learn Albanian, given the stigmatisation of the language within the school and playground setting (Zinn, 2005). This tension is exacerbated when the migrant has 'married out' – the case of Nazmije's son:

My son's wife is Italian. Now I have learned to know and appreciate her, but it will never be the same for me as she is not Albanian. It is not in terms of affection, but in terms of understanding... With our grandson we speak Albanian, but he always answers in Italian and sometimes asks for the meaning of (Albanian) words. At home he always speaks Italian, but so also does my son when he comes back home from work tired and because he doesn't want to exclude his wife from communication.

In Nazmije's case there was a linguistic and cultural barrier between her and her Italian daughter in-law. But such relational tensions are often endemic to the Albanian multi-generation family (Backer 1983). Kadrie (78) was interviewed in a village in southern Albania where she now lives alone as a widow – both her sons have migrated to Greece where they live with their respective nuclear families. A few years ago she went to live with

the youngest son, but she returned to the village after two years because of constant quarrelling and even physical exchanges with her (Albanian) daughter-in-law.

All things said, the zero generation often suffers from loneliness, with all its significant psychological and even physical manifestations. Extending our earlier analogy, they move from being ‘orphan pensioners’ in Albania to being ‘lonely pensioners’ in the host country of their children.

BACK AND FORTH, OR RETURN TO ALBANIA?

The negative wellbeing scenarios outlined in the previous section may impel the zero generation to return-migrate to Albania. Other circumstances and changes may also make them think seriously about whether to stay longer in the host society or return to Albania: nostalgia about their place of origin where their ‘roots’ remain indelible or where they may have a strong network of similar-age neighbours and friends; their legal status may be only that of a ‘visitor’ and they may be wary of overstaying and hence becoming ‘illegal’; or their grandchildren reach an age when they no longer need to be looked after by grandparents whilst their parents are at work. A recurring element in the interviews with zero generation was ‘missing home’, as Milika (83, Italy, 2013) remarked several times during her interview:

There are good doctors here, but are there medicines against the sadness of being far away from home? We [older folk] talk about how lucky we are to live so close to our family and at the same time so unlucky to live so far away from our homeland. I miss communism: we were poor but we were all close and lived together. This migration first took our hearts away from us, then our souls. I miss everything from Albania: my home, my old furniture, my neighbours, my church, chatting and gossiping with friends. I miss going to my husband’s grave. Of course, when I was in Albania I missed my sons and grandchildren, I have more family members here in Italy, but this is not my house; when you get older, you are comfortable only in your own house.

We also have evidence that the return decision is often gendered, led by the greater inability of the older man to settle abroad. Typical of this was the interview with Bedri (68) and Nexhi (63), who now live on their own in a village in Albania. Their three sons are all

married and have settled in Athens, each with his own family; the various grandchildren, aged between 2 and 12 years, were all born in Greece. The zero-generation couple went to live in Athens for two years but Bedri, especially, found life difficult there without knowing Greek. He became bored and unhappy, whereas Nexhi was more content and fulfilled because she was looking after their grandchildren and taking care of household chores.

Other circumstances may also impinge on the decision to return. The zero generation, especially those who are the ‘younger old’ (typically in their 50s or 60s), may have their own parents (the ‘older old’, typically in their 70s and 80s) to care for; indeed these care obligations may, to go back to the beginning of the migration cycle, have prevented the zero-generation migration in the first place. Secondly, the economic crisis, which has been especially severe in Greece, and which has destabilised the Albanian migrants’ economic settlement there through resulting unemployment, falling incomes and possible lapses back in to irregularity, also creates pressure for the zero generation to return.³

The other adaptive option is a more transnational lifestyle achieved by back-and-forth movement of the zero generation – ‘flying grandmothers’, as Baldassar and Wilding (2014: 241-242) call them. Although it is often assumed that older migrants travel back and forth to take advantage of the benefits of both societies, pendular migration does not necessarily mean a relaxing time; it can be purely care-driven. Majlinda (58) cares for her disabled son and her little grandson in Italy and three times per year visits to care for her 85-year-old mother in Albania, who lives alone. Majlinda is a ‘sandwich generation’ overwhelmed by caring responsibilities both in Italy and in Albania, but she will not return to Albania as her nuclear family is settled in Italy; she is just going back and forth for as long as she can support her mother. The cross-border commuting of older migrants is only possible once certain conditions are met: legal status and documents (though there has theoretically been visa-free travel for Albanians to and within the EU since 2011); the financial ability to bear the cost (greater for travel to the UK and Italy than to Greece); and the continuation of the zero generation’s robust health.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the neglected, active role of the zero generation, the parents of first-generation migrants, both in migration and in the administration of transgenerational transnational care. We have drawn on Wright’s (2012) framework of human wellbeing to

explore the impact of migration on the material, affective and relational domains of their daily lives. Drawing on a large corpus of interview material, we have told the stories of several zero-generation Albanians, but also of some first-generation migrants, located within and moving between the transnational social spaces of Albania, Greece, Italy and the UK.

In terms of responding to the four detailed research questions set out earlier in the paper, our key findings, and their wider implications, are as follows. First, the mass migration of young adults deprived the zero generation of the cornerstone of their life, to engage in ‘hands-on’ parenting and grandparenting, transforming them into ‘orphan pensioners’. Second, the zero generation, especially the ‘young old’, can become active migration agents by moving to join their children and grandchildren. By doing so, they regain their grandparenting role, which is crucial to their emotional wellbeing, and they both give and receive care within the reunified family setting. In other respects, however, their agency in decision-making may be limited: the first generation may insist that they migrate to join them, either in order to benefit from the older generation’s domestic and emotional labour, or to ensure better care for them as they transition to the health-related problems of the ‘old old’. Against the ‘win-win’ model of mutual benefit, our study reveals that several negative factors that were not appreciated before migration, may counter-balance these benefits, making the elderly migrants vulnerable and undermining their wellbeing.

Family reunification, which usually occurs after a long period of separation, does not recompose the family puzzle in the same configuration as before migration. While expectations in relation to wellbeing and family relations for the zero generation remain culturally embedded (Treas and Mazumdar, 2002), the migration and acculturation process of the younger generations in the host countries creates a new framework of power relations within the family that may alter the parameters of intergenerational relationships (e.g. De Haas and Fokkema, 2010). Our study of the zero generation shows that, although regaining the status of grandparents, they usually become highly dependent on their children in the host society in terms of finance (they have no or only a minimal pension), housing (they co-reside in their children’s house with their own rules), social life (they do not drive and have few co-ethnic peers close by), and prospects to return (children decide the location of their future settlement). As King et al. (2011) have shown in their research on gender and generational aspects of Albanian migration to Greece, changes in the power structure within the family probably already start from the moment of the migration of the

first generation, when migrant children decide whether and how much to remit back home and whether or not to bring their parents to the host society.

Moreover, migration of the older generation does not necessarily lead to less loneliness. In many cases it seems to be a difficult trade-off between, on the one hand, being close to and taking care of their (grand)children, or, in case of illness, getting access to good health services; whilst on the other hand, they risk losing power and independence, missing out on social relationships and pining for their homeland. They change their status of ‘orphan pensioners’ in Albania to ‘lonely pensioners’ in the host country of their children.

Each of the three stages discussed in our paper has its own advantages and disadvantages. There is a continuous trade-off between material wealth, family solidarity, access to health and social interaction. In phase one – zero generation left behind – older parents miss their (grand)children and they have no access to good healthcare services, but these factors are counterbalanced by remittances and social contacts with others in Albania. In phase two – after reuniting with their (grand)children – living with or close to their offspring and having access to better healthcare are counterbalanced by loss of independence and social contacts. In the last stage – after return or spending part of the year in their home country – they are missing their (grand)children again, but regaining contact with others at home. Further research is needed, however, for a fuller understanding of the factors that play a key role in this trade-off. This leaves open the final question which is all-too-rarely considered in migration studies: what happens when the migrants, in this case the zero generation, reach a stage of chronic infirmity and terminal decline?

NOTES

¹ As far as we know, it was Nedelcu (2009) who introduced the term ‘zero generation’, deriving from her study of the parents of Romanian high-skilled migrants in Canada. We define the first generation as migrants who leave their country to live and work abroad as adults, and the second generation as their offspring, either born abroad or taken there at an early age.

² Most new dwellings are not built in ‘home’ villages but around the outskirts of Tirana. In this way, emigration is used to finance an internal transfer of the family base (Caro et al. 2014).

³ In recent visits to Albania we have come across many nuclear families – first-generation migrants and their children – who have returned to their home villages and towns in Albania, thereby recomposing the multigeneration family back ‘home’. According to the 2011 Albanian census, there were 121,000 returnees during the 2001-11 period, 71 per cent of them from Greece.

Table 1 Four Projects on Albanian Migration

Project 1	Albanian migration to the UK and its impact on communities of origin in Albania. Interviews with first-generation migrants in London area (n=26) and with parents of migrants and with other older village and town residents in northern and central Albania (n=46). Fieldwork carried out in 2002-03. See King et al. (2003).
Project 2	Research on the transnational care of the parents of migrants. Interviews with older residents (n=38) in four villages in southern Albania and with first-generation migrants in Thessaloniki, Greece (n=23). Fieldwork in 2004-06. See King and Vullnetari (2006).
Project 3	Research on remittances sent from Greece to Albania. Interviews with recipients of remittances in three villages in southern Albania (different from those in Project 2) including many zero-generation parents of migrants (n=25) and with migrant remittance senders in Thessaloniki (n=20). Fieldwork in 2009-10. See Vullnetari and King (2011).
Project 4	Research on first-generation migrants (n=30) and zero-generation older migrants (n=24) who had followed their migrant children to Italy. Main focus on social relations and feelings of loneliness. Fieldwork carried out in the Italian region of Marche in 2013. See Cela and Fokkema (2014).

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