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Beyond 'choice or force':

Roma mobility in Albania and the mixed migration paradigm

Julie Vullnetari

Abstract

One of the dichotomies which has affected migration studies for some time is that between 'forced' and 'voluntary' movements. Yet, there is growing realisation of the importance of understanding how the two overlap. Focusing on the Albanian Roma this paper seeks to add weight to the argument that a 'mixed migration' approach is necessary to understand a number of migratory situations which do not neatly fit the forced/voluntary categorisation. The paper draws on empirical material collected through household questionnaires, in-depth interviews, group discussions and ethnographic observation during 2007–2008 within the framework of a broader study on gender, remittances and development in Albania.

Key words: Mixed migration, forced migration, Roma mobility, Albania, Greece

Biographical note

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Introduction

The field of migration studies has for long grappled with dichotomies and compartmentalisation: internal vs. international, temporary vs. permanent, forced (refugee) vs. voluntary (labour) migration, to name but a few. The voices arguing for more attention to the overlapping of such categories have been on the increase in recent years. The complexity of migratory situations around the globe as affected by globalisation has been considered a strong influencing factor in these debates. Furthermore, as a recent conference of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) highlighted, 'the very nature of forced migration is shifting' (Betts 2010). This brings two key issues onto the agenda. On the one hand, to bridge the fields of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration studies in order to acquire a better understanding of the complex migratory situations and realities, especially of those living in the Global South. On the other hand, this understanding is bound to be fractured unless a range of groups, which have hitherto been neglected, are included into such research agendas (Betts 2010). One of these groups, I argue, is also the Roma or 'Gypsies' of Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Balkans.

Focusing on the Albanian Roma this paper aims to demonstrate how the migration of this ethnic group from one of the poorest countries at the margins of Europe, challenges the forced/voluntary migration dichotomy. Discrimination as ethnic others (in Albania) and as Roma, Albanian and non-EU citizens (in Greece) shapes their migratory trajectories and strategies of survival and resistance. Theoretically, the study draws on the analysis of reactive/proactive and voluntary/forced migration paradigms advanced by Richmond (1994) and Van Hear (1998) respectively. At the same time, my empirical approach attempts to critically investigate what is happening on the ground, by working 'outside of the prevailing concepts, categories and labels' (Betts 2010). The latter is all the more important for the study of vulnerable groups like the Roma who have received scant attention in academic scholarship so far, including in Albanian migration studies.

The paper continues as follows. First, I discuss the theoretical concepts around which I construct my analysis. This is then followed by a background section on the

socio-economic position of the Albanian Roma from a historical perspective. A brief methodological explanation is presented before moving on to the findings. These run along three themes: socio-economic living conditions which act as motivators for migration; mobility patterns and trajectories; and their outcomes for families by focusing on remittances. The final section concludes.

Beyond choice or force: the 'mixed migration' paradigm

It is generally understood in migration studies that individual agency is closely connected in a mutually-influencing relationship with structure, as advanced by Giddens' (1984) famous 'structuration' theory. Whether an individual can freely exercise her agency to emigrate, or is forced to do so, is at the heart of the distinction between voluntary and forced migration. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has defined the difference between the two as follows: '[M]igrants, especially economic migrants, choose to move in order to improve their lives. Refugees are forced to flee to save their lives or preserve their freedom' (UNHCR n.d.). While at first sight this is a very clear distinction, reality is much messier than that. In the last two decades calls for closer attention to how these categories blur and overlap have intensified, culminating in the background paper for the 2009 Human Development Report (HDR) which talks of 'mixed migration' (Castles 2003; Van Hear *et al.* 1999). This approach is based on two earlier theorisations: the 'voluntary/involuntary' paradigm by Van Hear (1998) which is itself informed by Richmond's (1994) 'proactive/reactive' model.

Very briefly, such an approach places force and choice at the opposite ends of a continuum: at one extreme are those who, for example, are expelled by war and individual persecution, while at the other end are people such as tourists or high-flying professionals. Both scholars argue that most migration types fall somewhere along this continuum, reflecting varying degrees of compulsion and choice (cf. Van Hear *et al.* 1999: 4). What is often implied in definitions of forced migration is the total lack of agency of forced migrants. Yet, it is important to recognise that even in the most extreme situations of violence, conflict and persecution, individuals are not

completely void of agency (Turton 2003). The very decision to move – or even stay – demonstrates agency. In order to understand such decision-making researchers need to listen to the perspectives of the individuals making these decisions, while embedding this understanding in the specific political, economic, social, cultural and historical contexts in which they take place.

Such embeddedness is important particularly in a globalised world, where, as Zetter (2007: 188) points out, 'increasingly complex social transformations have generated more complex forms of persecution and means of exile'. This complexity presents greater challenges to neat distinctions between forced and voluntary migrants. Thus, a mixed migration approach would be pertinent in relation to a number of issues. First, motivations and decision-making: a complex variety of economic, political and social factors are often behind many forced/voluntary migrations. Unemployment and poor economic prospects often co-exist with weak governance, breaches of human rights, ethnic discrimination, political regimes of dubious legitimacy and ultimately conflict. Second, once the decision to move is made, overlapping occurs also in relation to migration trajectories which include shared routes, smuggling networks, or means of transport. This has become ever more necessary since options for regular migration to developed countries have narrowed concurrent with a tightening of access channels to places of refuge and asylum. Finally, an individual migrant may move from one category to another during her life-course or even in one single migration episode – someone who initially may have left as a 'labour migrant' may become a 'refugee' (or vice-versa) if circumstances in her community of origin change (Castles 2003; Turton 2003).

Post-communist Albanian migration, especially in the early to mid-1990s, is quite illustrative here. During nearly half a century of communist rule (1945–1990) emigration from Albania was banned and anyone trying to leave the country without authorisation was either shot on sight when crossing the border, or punished by lengthy imprisonment; their family was internally exiled in labour camps. Meanwhile, autarchy and isolation were taking their toll. By the late 1980s Albania was the poorest country in Europe, with a third of its population under 15 years of age, chronic food shortages and rising (yet hidden) under-employment. By 1990

starvation threatened as strikes brought the already collapsing economy to a standstill. In fact, the political situation was volatile throughout most of the first post-communist decade. As the regime collapsed in the early 1990s, so too did the borders – at least on the Albanian side. The emigration that followed was of true epic proportions. As thousands of Albanians boarded impossibly overcrowded ships to reach southern Italy, or formed almost endless queues walking over the mountains to Greece, economic motivations were inextricably linked to political turmoil. Migration was thus both an act of political resistance *and* a crucial survival strategy (cf. King 2005). The word *refugjat* (Albanian for refugee), which Albanians used to refer to themselves as migrants/refugees in the 1990s, illustrates the sense of displacement and flight characterising their migration at the time, much more than a sense of a perfectly informed and calmly calculated decision to move. Yet, most researchers analyse Albanian migration as an exclusively economic one. Barjaba and King (2005: 9), who are among the few to have articulated this dual essence, argue in favour of the term *economic refugees*, which better captures the complexity of migratory situations, not only in Albania but in many other places around the world.

The case of the Roma is even more pertinently illustrative of this approach, since their existence in Albania continues to be one at the margins of society, their migration broadly a strategy of survival, in turn affected by their ethnic discrimination, as the next sections show.

Roma and Egyptians in Albania

A brief historical background

The Roma are thought to have lived in what is today Albania for more than 600 years. Statistics on the size of their community vary depending on the source, from 30,000 to 150,000 (UNDP-Albania 2006). They live in various parts of the country, with some concentration in and around the capital Tirana, the northern town of Shkodër, and in the central and southern districts of Durrës, Fushë Krujë, Elbasan, Fier, Berat, Korçë and Gjirokastër. They are clustered into four sub-groupings: the Čergàrã or

Škodràrã (*Cergar*), the Kurtòfã (*Bamill*), the Mečkàrã (*Meçkar*), and the Kabuzie (*Karbuxhinj*) (ERRC 1997: 7). Another ethnic community whose situation resembles that of the Roma are the Evgjit, also known as '(Balkan) Egyptians'. There is some debate over their origin and whether they are a separate ethnic minority or whether they are simply Roma who have been partially assimilated over the centuries by losing their language and customs and by becoming sedentary (ERRC 1997: 8).¹ However, both groups have been treated with almost equal contempt in everyday life by Albanians through the centuries. Hasluck, writing in 1938 about her stay in the country, provides testimonies of how Albanians despised 'all Gypsies', illustrated by references to 'ill-kept' Gypsy villages and warnings about 'the Gypsies are coming' (1938: 110).

Nonetheless, the Roma in Albania did not suffer similar fates to their ethnic counterparts in other CEE countries during the Second World War, in that they were not deported to death camps (Kolsti 1991). During communist rule, too, they were spared the levels of segregation and discrimination that befell their co-ethnics in other CEE countries, such as forced sterilisation of Roma women and the enrolment of Roma children in special schools for children with severe learning difficulties, as was the case in the former Czechoslovakia (Guy 1998a). According to independent accounts collected in the 1990s, the Roma themselves also considered their situation as being better during the socialist years (ERRC 1997: 9). True, they were poor like the rest of the Albanian population, but at least they had guaranteed jobs, housing, healthcare, education and other social provisions.

Yet, education was at the very basic level with little access to skills training, while their jobs were generally those which ethnic Albanians deemed too low to perform – street sweeping and refuse collection in towns, and brick kiln work in villages. Roma women were mainly agricultural workers, street sweepers and handicrafts makers and sellers. Although many Roma were employed in agriculture, some managed to defy the socialist work ethic of 'physically exhausting, sweat-expelling, earth-shifting effort' (Stewart 1999: 94) by pursuing more commercial-type activities. These generally included selling wicker baskets and clothes, fortune-telling or playing music

at weddings. Roma were thus an exception to the general abolition of private trade, and became important intermediaries between the urban and rural economies. Meanwhile, some Egyptians managed to become doctors, lawyers and army generals (De Soto *et al.* 2005: 65).

The post-communist decades

The post-1990 transition of the country to a neoliberal market economy was accompanied by a loss of these guarantees and of personal security, as well as a degradation of their living conditions. While these changes affected most ethnic Albanians as well, the negative impact on the Roma was disproportionate. The degradation of their living conditions and marginalisation within home societies seem to be the picture pretty much across all CEE countries, where, according to Crowe (2008), 'the strong societal prejudices of the dominant ethnic populations vis-à-vis their Roma populations' run like a common thread. According to Sigona and Trehan (2009), Roma communities in the CEE have been the biggest losers of this post-communist transition.

In its first report on the situation of Roma in Albania the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC 1997) documented their dismal living conditions; their arbitrary abuse by the police; their marginalisation by the Albanians, including expulsions from their homes when ownership was contested; and discrimination by both Albanian and foreign authorities – the latter when they applied for visas to travel (for work) abroad. On the other hand, a minority of Roma capitalised on their trading skills and pre-1990 small-scale local mobility, in order to set up successful businesses. Especially in the early 1990s, the main wealth was accumulated through trading horses, livestock, and second-hand clothes.

At another level, contempt by non-Roma towards these communities increased in the post-communist years – or at least manifested itself more openly – and often took extreme forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Post-communist Albanian governments have adopted a range of measures to improve this situation, starting with the first 'Strategy to Improve the Living Conditions of the Roma Minority' in 2003, and up to 2008 when Albania joined the 'Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–

2015', as well as various other legislative and administrative instruments in the interim (see Salamun 2009 for an analysis of these instruments, and ECRI 2010 for an update). However, as in most other fields, there is a low level of adequate implementation due to a lack of funds and the general corrupt practices and high staff turnover which have plagued Albanian public administration for the best part of the last two decades. As a result, most activities are funded by international donor organisations, and often carried out by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as 'pilots' or otherwise have a very short-lived presence. Regrettably, negative stereotypes have found their way even into official documents which are meant to help improve the situation. For example, the progress report on the Roma national strategy written on behalf of the Albanian government states that '[T]rafficking [of Roma women and children] was encouraged by several factors such as the *low* economic, educational, *cultural* and social *level* of this minority' and that '[V]iolence is a phenomenon that has *always* been present in the Roma families' (Duka 2007: 62, 64; my emphasis).

Thus, despite some positive developments, the Roma continue to experience 'extreme poverty and social and economic marginalisation' (ECRI 2010). Indicators from a recent survey carried out on behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) confirm findings from an earlier survey by the World Bank (see De Soto *et al.* 2005) with respect to the community's socio-economic living situation and marginality.² Table 1 presents a selection of these findings, where 450 Roma households were compared with their non-Roma counterparts living in the same neighbourhood. Looking at the indicators in this table it is not surprising that the Roma feel 'forced' to emigrate, as one of my interviewees put it.

Table 1. Selected indicators on living conditions for Roma and non-Roma neighbouring populations

| Indicators | Roma | non-Roma |
|---|-------------|-----------------|
| Share of population living below the poverty line (expenditure-based) | 80% | 20% |
| Household income per month | €68 | €175 |
| Housing: living in slums, huts or ruined houses | 20% | 1% |
| Access to potable water | 28% | 97% |
| Health: immunisation polio, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough | 76% | 93% |
| Education: illiteracy for children 6-15 years | 55% | 2% |
| Political participation: family members involved in politics | 0.5% | 3% |
| Unemployment rate | 24% | 8% |

Source: UNDP Albania (2006).

Data and methodology

This paper draws on data collected in the framework of a larger project on gender, remittances and development in Albania.³ Following Marcus (1995) who theorised on multi-sited ethnography, I ‘followed the people’ on their migration trajectories from three origin villages in the Korçë district, south-east Albania to the Greek city of Thessaloniki. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed in this wider project: 350 household questionnaires administered face-to-face as mini-interviews with remittance-receiving households in Albania; 45 in-depth interviews and group discussions with migrants’ family members, returnees from Greece, seasonal migrants to Greece and longer-term migrants living in Thessaloniki; in-depth interviews and roundtable discussions with key stakeholders in Albania and Greece; and ethnographic observation in both locations. Care was taken to include similar proportions of male and female participants.

A sizeable community of Roma and Egyptians live in the study villages, identified also by De Soto *et al.* (2005: 231) whose earlier research included these sites. The project involved 38 Roma and Egyptian households through the interview

questionnaire (23 of the respondents were women), and others through recorded and more informal in-depth interviews and group discussions. In addition, these were supplemented by views of formal and informal community leaders.

The language used was Albanian and I acknowledge my positionality as an ethnic outsider. I am an Albanian who was born and grew up in a neighbouring village, just outside the study area. However, information was gathered only with participants' informed consent, while at the same time ensuring their privacy and confidentiality. Where recording of interviews was not possible in order to respect their wishes, detailed notes were kept during and always after the discussions. All names of participants here are pseudonyms, in order to safeguard their anonymity. The paper now continues with an analysis of the research findings.

Life in the village is an everyday struggle

There are no precise figures on the numbers of Roma living in the three villages. Key informants estimate these to be around 500 (including migrants), comprising about 7 per cent of the villages' total population of around 7,000. The Egyptian community is almost double that of Roma. The latter are part of the Karbuxhinj group and refer to themselves as 'Erlinj', which in Turkish means 'non-nomadic'. Indeed, contrary to popular imagination, most Roma in Korçë, and in Albania more widely, are not nomadic, a feature shared with their co-ethnics in other Balkan and CEE countries (Guy 1998b).

Socio-spatial marginalisation

Most Roma families are located in neighbourhoods in the outskirts of the villages, which are by far the poorest. This is a pattern which can be found pretty much across the country. For instance, the ERRC (1997: 46) reported that where Roma had lived dispersed throughout towns and had inter-mingled with the Albanian population, in the last two decades they were forcefully displaced to the outskirts. Here, poverty-ridden shanty neighbourhoods sprang up, lacking running water and other basic amenities. The peripheral neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the study villages were

also poor. One area in particular is considered a sort of ghetto: besides a handful of non-Roma families living there, very few if any non-Roma ever visit.

While there is a certain degree of inter-ethnic relations within the villages, stereotypes of the Roma impede interactions beyond the street-level friendship that men have forged. The most typical stereotyping refers to Roma as 'lazy, mean, they don't like school and all they do all day long is eat, drink and dance and never save for a rainy day', in the words of a non-Roma interviewee. If a robbery or other such crime takes place, it is inevitably presumed in the first instance that the perpetrator was a Roma. While non-Roma men may have Roma friends, such relations do not extend to families through mutual visits. Inter-ethnic marriage is also avoided, and is thus quite low. During conversations with the Roma in the villages I was given various examples of how parents of ethnic-Albanians responded upon learning that their son or daughter was involved with a Roma woman or man, respectively. Often such relations are not honoured with a wedding, which is the act that publicly legitimises the union in the Albanian culture; the couple elopes without the consent of the Albanian parents who do not speak to their daughter long after she has moved in with her husband. An extreme example was that of a young ethnic Albanian woman eloping with an Egyptian young man, without the consent of her parents. The latter accused the Egyptian man of kidnapping their daughter and after mobilising the anti-trafficking police they collected her against her will and brought her home. As the young woman was now considered to have shamed her family, something which worsened her prospects of a good marriage locally, she was sent abroad to relatives for a foreign marriage. Although protesting his innocence, the Egyptian man had little chance of escaping a good beating by the Albanian police and serving time in prison.

Education and health

While the respondents were quite diverse in terms of age, their educational level was very low, and much lower than the non-Roma population (see Vullnetari and King 2011). Four had no education at all, while the rest had not attended school beyond the compulsory level of eight years (up to the age of 14). In fact, most of them had barely

continued beyond the four years of primary school. The situation was even worse amongst younger members of the family, exacerbated by the fact that some children were not even registered at birth. On the other hand, the remitting family members, who were all in the working-age cohort, mostly between 26 and 45 years of age, had a somewhat higher education level. However, here again very few had attended school beyond the compulsory years and no one had a tertiary degree.

A number of factors have affected this outcome. First, there is the severe poverty of most families. Although (primary and secondary) education itself is free of charge, there is the cost of books and other school materials, clothes and pocket money. Second, because of poverty or emigration older children leave school early to look after the households and their younger siblings, while parents and older siblings go to work (De Soto *et al.* 2005). Third, discrimination and stereotyping at times affect the way the teachers and other pupils treat Roma children at school, resulting in the latter dropping out early (ERRC 1997). And finally, as I mentioned earlier, some children have not even been registered at birth, which then leads to exclusion from all forms of education, as well as healthcare and other social welfare programmes. Mira, who is 22 and living in one of the villages, explains:

I have two children but they are not registered [do not have a birth certificate]. If I had birth certificates for them I could take them to the kindergarten, or to the doctor's... When I take my children to the doctor's... sometimes I have to pay some extra money or they are so ill that he [the doctor] has no choice but to treat them... [Because the children are not registered] I don't get *asistencë* [economic aid, i.e. means-tested welfare benefits].

Employment

Low levels of education and ethnic discrimination translate into poor employment prospects. Local livelihood was generally secured through subsistence agriculture – for 16 of the 38 survey respondents this was the only means of survival, while for another six it was combined with social welfare from the state in the form of old-age pensions and economic aid. A handful of other families earned some money by selling

scrap metal and empty cans, while in other households the men of the family earned as musicians, or by selling wood which they cut from the nearby forest; a few women traded clothes. Several households had no land of their own, which made their survival in the village an everyday struggle, as one of them put it. Some had sold the land they had been allocated in the early 1990s, while others were in-migrants from other villages (see also De Soto *et al.* 2005: 231). In such cases, work as a day labourer was common, usually in local farms which cultivated larger areas of land (similar to De Soto *et al.* 2005: 70). However, this work was seasonal, precarious and poorly paid: a worker earned 500–600 lek [€3–€4] a day and some described working conditions as 'exploitative'. Interviews with some of the local employers revealed a gendered preference, in that women were perceived as better (and more docile) workers than men. It was often the remittances sent by emigrant family members abroad which paid for the daily wages of this local labour (Vullnetari and King 2011).

International remittances were important to the Roma also in a more direct way; five remittance-recipient Roma families surveyed had no local source of income at all. I come back to remittances in a short while.

Caught between 'ethnically-pure' nations: agency and choice at the margins of Europe

The socio-economic marginalisation of the Roma in the research villages was both obvious and subtle, as is the case in other parts of Albania. Although historically the Roma in Albania have been fairly accepted as part of society, compared to other CEE countries as mentioned earlier, they have always been regarded as 'others' by ethnic Albanians. Post-communist manifestations of such othering are reflected in various ways, not least forced evictions and violence, especially in the politically turbulent years of the 1990s. In the power vacuum which accompanied the withdrawal of the omnipotent and omnipresent communist state, the clan became the most important anchor of social and political life. The emerging leaders ruled and distributed power, and hence resources, through extended family and clan-based lines (Vickers and Pettifer 1997: 244). Of all groups in Albania, the Roma were the most disadvantaged

as they lacked these clan ties to power, resources and more crucially, protection by the law (ERRC 1997: 44).

Yet even in such circumstances the Roma exercise varying degrees of agency, which together with their family and individual background, affects the decisions they make, including those to migrate or not (Turton 2003; Van Hear *et al.* 2009). The poorest decide to make the best of their 'forced immobility'; others who have more skills and contacts decide to move around Albania – often engaging in selling clothes or wicker artifacts, fortune-telling, begging or working casually in construction (De Soto *et al.* 2005); yet, others decide to move away as their lives become unbearable due to discrimination (as in Van Hear 1998). Indeed, ERRC's missions in Albania during 1996–1997 found that entire communities of Roma had moved from one part of Albania to another to avoid constant racially motivated attacks by their Albanian neighbours (ERRC 1997: 51). Finally, emigration abroad – primarily to Greece – is also undertaken.⁴

Migration is thus as much an act of resistance, as it is a crucial survival strategy; the motivations behind it reflect a need to escape harsh economic conditions, as well as ethnic discrimination. Yet similar, if not worse, treatment awaits them as they try to enter Greece and once they arrive there. First, as non-EU citizens, the Albanian Roma can access only a limited number of regular migration channels, which have been narrowing, especially during the last decade. Second, as Roma, these 'access' doors close even faster in their face as ethnic discrimination and racism against them permeates various layers of the host country authorities. Greece's record in relation to the treatment of its own Roma citizens, let alone those immigrating from Albania, has been abysmal (see for example the harsh critique in ERRC 2003; also ECRI 2009). Government actions – where these exist – are further eroded by what the ERRC and ECRI call 'intense anti-Romani racism' amongst the Greek mass media and many sections of the Greek population.⁵ The outcome: appalling living conditions for this community in Greece. And finally, Greece has a less than flattering record when it comes to its treatment of immigrants, particularly from Albania (see e.g. Lazaridis and Wickens 1999; Triandafyllidou and Veikou 2002).

Forced to emigrate and forced to stay

Only three hours away but millions of years apart

In this part of Albania, as elsewhere in the country, the Roma were amongst the first to emigrate to Greece following the collapse of the communist regime. For 70 per cent of survey respondents, migrant family members had worked in Greece longer than four years; several of them had settled there for as long as 10 years. They are part of a sizeable community of immigrant Roma from Albania, for whom obtaining social rights, let alone citizenship, is nearly impossible (MRGI 2005: 6). Yet, a process of family reunification – often of the wife and/or children – and family creation continued to take place. Generally, moving irregularly is the most – if not the only – accessible option for the Roma, with serious consequences of further marginalisation and not least family separation. Although the 'Cold War' borders have disappeared, the 'invisible borders' of papers and visas continue to isolate Albanians in the Balkan ghetto, while tearing migrant families apart (cf. Kapllani 2009). As one mother of migrant sons who live in Thessaloniki put it, 'we are only three hours away, but we might as well be millions of years apart'.⁶

Dane's story is illustrative here. Dane (53 years) lives in one of the study villages with his wife. Both of his sons have been living in Thessaloniki for more than a decade, but only the eldest daughter-in-law was able to join them in December 2007, not having seen her husband for almost five years; she herself was still undocumented at the time of the interview (2008). The other daughter-in-law had tried four times to get there, through various irregular routes, but had been apprehended by the Greek police and returned to Albania each time. All the grandchildren are looked after by their grandparents in the village, which in this case separates them from their migrant parents. Dane laments particularly the separation of his sons from their wives, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

Even though I have sons, none of them live here, and this is difficult for me. But the worst thing is that the sons are over there, and the daughters-in-law are here alone [with us]. Me and my old lady [his wife], we accept that times are such that we now live

on our own. But it is very hard for their wives... Why did she [daughter-in-law] marry him and come here, she might just as well have stayed at her father's [meaning in her parents' house – this very much reflects the Albanian patriarchal norms that a daughter is transferred from the authority of her father to that of her husband upon marriage]. But what can you do about poverty and destitution? So the husband is *compelled/forced* to emigrate and leave his wife alone. It's a consolation that we are not the only ones in this situation, but it still hurts.

As in this quote, many other interviewees described their decisions to migrate – or stay – as 'compelled' (*të detyruar*) by the complexity of the conditions discussed so far.

Short-term seasonal migration

Considering that avenues for longer-term legal migration are practically closed to these Albanian Roma, the only other option is to emigrate for short spells of time, primarily for agricultural work (see also De Soto *et al.* 2005: 14). The study findings show that twice as many Roma migrants worked in agriculture (24) as in construction (12) in Greece. Amongst the non-Roma respondents this occupational ratio was the opposite in favour of construction, which is relatively well-paid as a manual activity (Vullnetari and King 2011). Previous studies have also reported that Albanian Roma in Greece generally engage in low-income activities: women mostly in begging – as do children up to 12 years of age – or fortune-telling, while men work mostly as porters and sometimes in construction (De Soto *et al.* 2005; UNDP-Albania 2006).

The varying degrees of choice and compulsion play an important role even when deciding which type of short-term seasonal migration to take: via the undocumented route or by means of a seasonal work visa. The undocumented route is usually taken by those who cannot afford the higher cost of visas. The journey involves a fee of 2,000 Albanian lek [€17] for a taxi ride to an Albanian border village – a distance of about 20 km from their home. From here, they walk over the mountain for about five hours until they reach the Greek villages. Small farmers there, often older people, hire them by the day to work in agriculture. They sleep in barns and other disused farm buildings. The migrants may work one or two months before being caught by

the Greek border police and deported to Albania. When they are not caught by the police, they will stay for as long as there is work – probably two months at a time – and then return with their savings.⁷ They may go back and forth twice or more during the year. Although this to-and-fro movement was characteristic of Albanian migration in the 1990s (Barjaba and King 2005), in recent years comparatively few non-Roma from this area of Albania find themselves 'compelled' to undertake such journeys. In addition, in contrast to most ethnic Albanians, Roma couples migrate for seasonal work together, at times leaving only their teenage children to care for younger siblings.

The second route of going on a work visa is more expensive, but it gives them the opportunity to be safer and earn a better wage. Once in Greece the visas can be extended to six months and made multiple entry. Work is usually in peach and apple orchards in rural Veria, north-western Greece, which have been planted on a commercial scale. However, others may be employed to pick tobacco, tomatoes, cotton etc. Though poor, those who apply for such visas usually have some social networks and can afford to take informal loans in order to pay for the visa as well as the middlemen. Often it is only men who emigrate this way, as the cost of getting visas for both the husband and wife is difficult to afford. Future remittances may enable this, but the money earned is just enough to keep the family afloat, as the following extract from Adelina's (29) quote illustrates:

So when our husbands go to Greece we [i.e. the family] get into debt... For example my husband is going to Greece now, for six months, and he had to borrow 30,000 lek [around €250] to pay for his paperwork, visas, etc... He will send me money each month, like wages... so that I can pay back the debt and cover our daily expenses.

Remittances as a lifeline

Remittances for the Roma in the study villages are a vital lifeline, a condition reflected in various ways. First, for more than 80 per cent of respondents, remittances constituted more than half of their household income. Second, compared to the ethnic Albanian households, Roma families

received smaller sums each time, but at higher frequencies – in a third of cases once a month and in 15 per cent of cases every two months. This suggests that other local income sources are very limited (as we saw earlier), thus making such households dependent on transfers from abroad. This in turn affected transfer channels and made the Roma more disadvantaged by the high cost of the remittance transfer industry. Although most often short-term migrants sent their money through family and friends, many others, as well as many longer-term migrants used two main channels: Money Transfer Operators such as Western Union, and taxi drivers. The fees amounted from €5 per sum sent via a taxi driver, to between 15 and 20 per cent of the sums remitted via Western Union. In particular, undocumented migrants or those who were living far away from Albania and did not have many co-ethnics around, paid the highest prices.

Yet, because most Roma worked in agriculture and for short spells of time, sums remitted were also rather low. Besides covering their most immediate needs, a large number of recipient households used these to pay off debts – whether incurred because of migration, or related to their everyday living expenses. An example. Ilda (17) lives in the village with her father who is a musician, and her older brother. In an unusual migrating pattern, her mother has emigrated to Greece and remits regularly to her family in Albania. Ilda says:

My mother sends clothes for me ... and money. Most of this goes to pay our loan in the bank which we took to buy her the visa. It cost €2,000 and so now she sends around €130 each month to pay this.

The most common debt type, however, is the 'list', i.e. purchasing food and other basics on interest-free credit from the local shop (see also De Soto *et al.* 2005). Indebtedness was prevalent throughout the community with few exceptions, and was spread through the year with the most severe period being after the winter. Thus, remittances were labelled as 'wages' as they simply enabled families to survive on a day-to-day basis covering basic daily needs for food and clothing. Aims beyond that were only sporadically achieved. For instance, many respondents were saving to build a decent house, since existing accommodation was very poor in the villages. 'There

are five of us sleeping in this one room' said Samira, whose husband works in rural Veria. When I visited her, she was cooking lunch in the 'kitchen', which was actually the floor of her small corridor separating the outside patio from the one room. Even less was left over for investment in income-generating activities that might enable families to break the dependency cycle. For instance, many other non-Roma migrant households invest remittances in apple orchards, which provide good revenues locally. None of the Roma in the survey research had an orchard, or realistically planned to start one. There was generally very little use of remittances in livestock, non-farming businesses, to purchase urban land, or buy urban property; all of which were destinations for remittances by the wider, non-Roma, survey respondents (Vullnetari and King 2011). Thus the dependency cycle continued, compelling existing and potential migrants to repeat the cycle of migration over the border each year.

Conclusion

Albania's chaotic emergence from nearly half a century of communist rule was accompanied by large-scale emigration and internal relocation. The Roma were amongst the first to participate in such moves, motivated by complex factors, especially their severe levels of poverty and social exclusion, as well as ethnic discrimination and marginalisation. Most of them have emigrated to Greece, where they are faced with triple discrimination as Roma, as Albanians and as non-EU migrants. Caught between these two countries whose states have been strongly built on principles of 'ethnic purity', the Roma seek ways to survive and thrive, through resistance and resilience. This paper has illustrated some of these issues through the perspectives and experiences of a group of Roma women and men from rural south-east Albania, many of whom emigrate to Greece. Their testimonies highlight that elements of both choice and compulsion are interwoven into their decision-making to migrate (or stay), placing them somewhere along the forced/voluntary migration continuum (Van Hear *et al.* 1999). Yet, as this paper demonstrates, even within oppressive and disadvantageous structures, the Roma continue to exercise their agency in their everyday life. It is this everyday life that we should be encouraged to

research, in order to understand the situation of these and other vulnerable groups at the local level, as purposive actors, embedded in particular historical and social circumstances (Turton 2003). Yet, we should be careful to do this without losing sight of global processes which (re)produce social inclusion and exclusion of regions and social groups, and maintain or exacerbate insecurity and inequality at a local level (Castles 2003).

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End Notes

¹ For an analysis of the (Balkan) Egyptian – referred to in this paper as Egyptian – community, see Dujzings (1997) and for an alternative perspective see Marushiakova and Popov (2001). I use the word Roma in this paper to refer to both groups, unless I discuss specific features of their separate ethnic community.

² It is important to note here that there is a dearth of independent academic studies on the situation of Roma in Albania, particularly on their migration patterns and experiences. Most of the reports and studies published to date on the issue are produced by local Roma community organisations and other NGOs within project frameworks generally pre-decided (and funded) by international agencies such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Other reports such as those produced by the ERRC or ECRI also reflect – to some extent – the position of these respective organisations.

Notwithstanding their significant importance in documenting the various aspects of Roma life in Albania, their findings need to be considered in this light.

³ The title of the project was 'Gender and Remittances: Building Gender-Responsive Local Development', carried out by Russell King and Julie Vullnetari from October 2007 to June 2009. Thanks to UN-INSTRAW (United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women) and UNDP for commissioning and financing the Albanian study. For the findings of this research see Vullnetari and King (2011). I particularly acknowledge the contribution of Prof. Russell King as the principal investigator in the project, and I am grateful for his encouragement and agreement that I prepare this paper as single-authored.

⁴ Emigration and settlement in other EU countries – beyond Greece and to some extent Italy – where the wages are higher and the standard of living is better, is almost non-existent amongst this group; at least according to extant research.

⁵ Yet, it is important to emphasise that such attitudes are not unique to Greece. For instance, several EU governments such as those of Italy, the UK and France have at times restricted the free movement of EU citizens from countries with substantial Roma populations such as Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, precisely in order to stop Roma migration originating there (Cahn and Guild 2008). The expulsion of hundreds of Romanian and Bulgarian Roma from France in the summer of 2010 is the latest such example.

⁶ From December 2010 citizens of Albania who hold a biometric passport are in principle allowed to travel to the Schengen area and stay there for up to three months at a time, without the right to engage in paid employment. While this development has facilitated the mobility of affluent Albanians, especially the professional class, it is not clear what difference it has made to the lives of Roma. Informal conversations I had in April 2011 with a group of nomadic Roma in the town of Shkodër, in northern Albania – within the framework of a separate project from that presented in this paper – suggest that this development has meant little to the average Roma in real terms.

⁷ Generally, irregular Albanians, including the Roma, are tolerated by the Greek police if they are found to be working in agriculture during peaks of seasonal activity

such as planting or harvesting. Labour demand in this sector of the economy is quite high, since many rural Greek areas have suffered severe depopulation as a result of intensive rural–urban migration dating back to the 1950s and 1960s (see e.g. Kasimis 2008).

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