**‘Can love be transferred’?**

**Tracing Albania’s history of migration and the meaning of remittances**

**Abstract**

Since the fall of the communist regime, Albania has experienced high levels of emigration with significant impact, especially in terms of remittances. Material and socio-cultural transformations in both rural and urban landscapes, such as renewal of housing stock and changes in agriculture, have been accompanied by transformed identities and sense of place. Yet neither this migration nor its associated remittances are without precedent, as Albanians had migrated far and wide in the pre-war years, despite a rupture in this tradition during the communist decades. This chapter traces (dis)continuities through these periods of Albania’s history, thus seeking to connect these strands of spatial and temporal movement to demonstrate the contribution of migration to restoration and rebuilding in Albania—not just materially through financial remittances, but also by building dreams for secure futures and through struggles to overcome the insecurities and precarities of the present and the past.

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**Introduction**

“Albania transforms into a transit country for *war* refugees”[[1]](#footnote-1) and “Albania, gateway for refugees: 11 Syrian and Afghan refugees detained in Korçë”,[[2]](#footnote-2) are the headlines of two recent articles among many published by Albanian mass media (my emphasis). In one of these articles, the journalist describes how he and colleagues are driving along one of the main motorways that connects Albania to Greece through the axis of Korçë at around 4 am, on the lookout for ‘interviewees’. They spot three men hiding in the apple plantations that occupy the land alongside a long stretch of this motorway. As the tires of the car driving the journalists screech to a stop, the refugees, exhausted, allow the journalists to approach them, perhaps in the hope that they can get a lift to the nearest town. The story reads like a hunt. The journalists get their material—stories and some photos—and drive on.

For those familiar with the context of Albanian migration the scene sounds as if it is picked out of a Greek newspaper of the 1990s depicting the clandestine migration of Albanians to Greece, who, exhausted like these Syrian and Afghan refugees in Albania, had left their families, homes and country in chaos and on the brink of war, looking for safety and a better life. Yet, although some similarity is apparent in the superficial description of this story, the parallel ends there. Although Albania was one of the poorest European countries to emerge from behind the Iron Curtain at the beginning of the 1990s, most Albanians, and the country as a whole, by no means experienced the horrors of the brutal wars that have devastated Syria and Afghanistan for the best part of two decades now. Similarly, while most Albanians experienced discrimination and Albanophobia in receiving countries such as Greece and Italy throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, a different level of racism and discrimination was meted out to non-white, non-European refugees who started arriving in large numbers in these same countries from around the mid-2000s (Hatziprokopiou 2005; Mai 2002; Vathi 2011; see also Karamanidou 2016; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018).

In Albania, these Syrian and Afghan (and other) refugees remind many Albanians of themselves when they too were (*economic*) refugees in Greece (and Italy); when they too were completely exhausted after having walked for days and nights with little sleep, carrying a small bag with some water and bread for the journey, while trying to evade arrest and deportation by the Greek police and immigration and army units along the border.[[3]](#footnote-3) Stories of Greek police brutality and torture were common amongst Albanian refugees who walked over the same mountains across the Greek-Albanian border as their Syrian and Afghan counterparts; many lost their lives in the middle of the heavy March snow, or were ravaged by hungry wolves as they lay in deep sleep by the burned-out fire (King et al. 1998; Kapllani 2009; Vullnetari 2012). These and other experiences of Albanians’ migration journeys, of everyday racism and discrimination in destination countries such as Greece and Italy, and of struggles for integration and belonging there, have been well documented in a now vast literature—both academic and artistic, including personal memoirs, documentary films and (lamentation) songs—produced by Albanian and other scholars and artists, as well as migrants themselves (for key collections, see Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003; King et al. 2005; Vullnetari and King 2011a; for key reviews, see Barjaba et al. 1992; Carletto et al. 2006; Vullnetari and King 2003; Vullnetari 2007; also Kapllani 2009; King and Mai 2008; Pistrick 2015).

This story of migration extends further in time and across space, as the Greeks and Italians also made similar journeys of sacrifice and endurance at the turn of the 20th century, when they sailed the Atlantic and the Pacific on ships that took these Southeast European migrants to the Americas and Australia. The Albanians were part of these voyages, settling together with their Greek and Italian fellow travelers in the neighborhoods of Boston or Australia’s Queensland and Victoria (Carne 1979; Kaser and Radice 1985, pp.86-87). Later on, many Greeks and Italians participated in the post-war intra-European migrations from Southern to Northern Europe, especially to France and Germany, sending remittances back to their country to rebuild homes, businesses, villages, and cities (see, e.g. Nikas and King 2005). This time, citizens of Albania were absent as the communist regime that came to power after the war banned international migration.

Such comparisons with neighboring Greece and Italy, which became key destinations for Albanian post-communist migrations, were often drawn on by writers in order to disrupt the ‘othering’ of Albanians that formed the basis for much of the discrimination there throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Campani 2000; Chiodi and Devole 2006; Kokkali 2008; Zinn 1996). Books such as *When we were the Albanians* (Stella 2003 – about the historical migration from Italy), reminded Italian (and Greek) hosts that, like these Albanian migrants, they too were once poor, desperate, and looking for a better life in foreign lands.

Back in Albania, and picking up the thread of one of the newspaper articles cited earlier, other connections are present: the very same apple plantations in the rural areas along the Korçë-Greece motorway where the Syrian and Afghan refugees were hiding have been developed over a period of many years by local Albanians, using financial remittances and technological know-how from their work as labor migrants in Greece. Many Albanian migrants provided the backbone of the labor force in Greek-owned fruit plantations across rural Southwestern Greece which, together with the nearby fruit processing plants, are part of the supply chain for supermarkets in Northern Europe (Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2005). Some of the plantations and processing plants had in turn been developed with the invested savings of Greek returnees from Germany following the global oil crisis and the end of the ‘guest worker’ scheme there, in the 1970s.

The Albanian migration story, then, is both unique (as we shall see later) and similar to others around the world, entangling and disentangling continuities and ruptures over time. Essentially, it is the story that migration is an essential part of the development processes and social transformations that all societies experience, albeit with some unique features taking different shapes and forms over time (Castles 2010; Bastia and Skeldon 2020). It is also a story of how mobility across (global) space shapes (local) places through migrants’ networks and connections, in turn developing a relational sense of place through attachments old and new (Massey 1994).

The rest of the chapter follows this Albanian migration story first through the communist years, then to the post-communist decades, while briefly diving in and out of historical (pre-war) migrations. The final section before I present my conclusions weaves together all three time periods within the theme of remittances. Here I go beyond the materiality of remittances, and discuss their meaning as part of intra-family transnational care, embedded within social networks of relations and imbued with cultural and emotional significance. The temporal-spatial nexus features throughout, reflecting the global-local interdependencies outlined in this introduction.

**The communist years**

Internal and international migration throughout these years were shaped by the ebbs and flows of geopolitical relations and power struggles, both local to Albania and globally (Mëhilli 2017). Most scholars and commentators writing in the post-communist years have painted a picture of an Albania somewhat frozen in time by immobility during these communist decades. True, the country had some of the most draconian legislation on migration that the world has known, and the militarization of its borders and the entire population had few global comparisons. Yet, underneath what appears as a monochrome picture of stasis and monotony, a more complex reality can be observed, consisting of various layers across time and space.

While Albanians had migrated far and wide throughout history, the coming to power of the communist regime brought dramatic changes to this aspect of life. From a common expression of aspirations, over the years international travel gradually became a luxury accessible only to a few. Most ordinary Albanians did not have a passport enabling travel abroad (although they had an internal passport, more on which shortly). This privilege was allowed only to carefully selected and screened individuals or groups of people such as diplomats, members of the Politburo, sailors, drivers of import-export trucks, students and specialists who went to study or train abroad, sportsmen (and some women), and a handful of folk and cultural groups. Their common denominator was often their ‘good biography’; in other words, either they were communists themselves, or their families were (for more on ‘biography’, see de Rapper 2006). In contrast to neighboring socialist Yugoslavia which allowed, indeed encouraged, labor migration abroad, Albania banned such moves (hence their absence in the post-war intra-European migrations mentioned earlier).

The ban on international migration had a twin economic and political/ ideological imperative. The ambitious reconstruction plan that the Albanian Party of Labor (APL) put in motion in the 1950s through to the 1970s needed all the labor it could muster. Labor shortages would have been particularly acute in the early post-war years, due to the population loss as a result of the war. This was also the time that most of the large-scale infrastructural projects such as building roads, railways, and industrial complexes, and draining marshland were carried out. A huge amount of the labor contributing to such reconstruction projects was mobilized through a combination of forced and unpaid labor (of prisoners and army recruits) and voluntary campaigns (especially youth), with only a small fraction of paid labour.

This economic imperative of labor retention was combined with a political/ ideological narrative constructed by drawing on a mash of folklore, history, and ‘modern’ Marxist-Leninist doctrine which was, in turn, given its own nationalist twist (see contributions to Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2005). Labor migration was thus constructed as a ‘wound’ of the past, stemming from the unemployment, inequality, and poverty associated with capitalism. In contrast, the modern, socialist Albania that was being rebuilt on the ruins of the war offered its people a vision of equality, dignity, and happiness, a place where social ills had been eradicated and where one took pride in the love for the motherland. Yes, emigration had existed in the past, the story continued, but this was evoked as a clear example of capitalism’s failings. This historical labor migration was thus taught through the lens of suffering: separation of families, immigrant exploitation in receiving societies, and very few, if any, returns.

Instrumental in this manipulation of history was the notion of *kurbet*, formulated in Albanian collective memory and folklore to describe the act of emigration (mainly during the Ottoman Empire) to distant and foreign lands for long periods of time, principally for work (Tirta 1999). Originating from the Turkish *gurbet*, the word means‘out in the world’, but is powered by notions of suffering, sacrifice, loss, and despair (Papailias 2003). The invocation and reloading of this word with negative connotations by the communist regime were facilitated through the resurrection of old *kurbet* folksongs, proverbs, narratives, and place names, which helped build the narrative, in turn spreading it widely through popular films and the school curriculum.

Any deviation from this ideological line in the shape of a desire for labor mobility, was made synonymous with irredentism and therefore suspect and associated with political risk. Those who tried to escape Albania, whether by clandestinely crossing a land or maritime border, or by seeking asylum abroad if permitted to travel, were treated as traitors. If not shot on sight while crossing the border, they were imprisoned and their families exiled internally to remote mountainous villages.[[4]](#footnote-4) An especially effective deterrent to escape was the punishment of families left behind, who could be imprisoned, exiled, and further stigmatized and denied access to social goods for generations (Vullnetari 2019; de Rapper 2005). It is not surprising, therefore, that the number of people leaving Albania without authorization was small—some sources estimate around 20,000 between the 1950s and 1989 (de Zwageret al*.* 2005, p.8).

Consequently, by the end of the regime’s existence in the early 1990s, entire generations had been born and had grown up in Albania without ever having set foot abroad, which gives the post-1990 migration its unique character. Many had travelled in their imaginations, especially as the clandestine watching of foreign TV and listening to foreign radio stations became more widespread throughout the country over the years (Kapllani 2009; Mai 2002). The scene for the mass migration that followed was set.

Similarly, controls over internal labor migration and other movements had a strong economic imperative, particularly as related to centrally planned labor needs for the post-war reconstruction efforts and early industrialization. In addition, they were used as a tool to control the population, therefore ultimate political control. Internally, however, there was a lot more mobility than meets the eye, especially during the early post-war decades. Population census data suggest a predominance of *rural-rural migration* in the first five years. This could arguably be an effect of restructuring the economy, key to which would have been the first agrarian reform (1945-46), combined with labor movements to power the large infrastructural projects—many of which were in rural areas—such as draining the marshes (e.g. in Maliq) or bringing land under irrigation (Sjöberg 1992a, p.52). As the country’s economy was gradually oriented towards industrialization, significant *rural-urban migration* took place in the following decade. According to Hall (1994, p.68) around 130,000 rural-urban migrants moved between 1950-60, representing 40 per cent of the rural areas’ natural population increase for this period. The vast majority of them would have been labor migrants, finding jobs in urban areas in expanding industries, such as textiles and manufacturing.

However, from the 1960s onwards, a set of administrative regulations and other social policy instruments contributed to what appeared as a policy of rural retention and minimal urbanization. Sjöberg (1994) calls these administrative restrictions an ‘anti-migratory system’, consisting of laws, decrees, and rules which simply constituted a ‘legal prohibition on migration’ and included the requirement of permission from local authorities to change one’s domicile (to leave one’s domicile), or *leje e shpërnguljes*;urban residence permits or *leje banimi*;the system of awarding dwelling permissionor *pasaportizim*;as well as labor force planning such as the availability of a job, hiring approval, and housing, and food rationing.[[5]](#footnote-5) Key to this population control was the internal passport system, a form of population registration that recorded the domicile of each individual in their rural or urban place of birth, and required such citizens to carry an internal passport for identification purposes (see also Sjöberg 1994).

Tirana in particular was strictly regulated. As a major industrial, administrative, educational and cultural center, which most Albanians, especially youth, aspired to as a dream destination, its periphery attracted what Sjöberg (1992b) calls *diverted migration*. This is when migratory flows heading for a particular destination experience a diversion to somewhere nearby, in this case the rural cooperatives or state farms in Tirana’s vicinity. These *diverted in-migrants* in turn contributed to the formation of densely populated *extra-urban settlements* (Sjöberg 1992b, p.13). The post-1990 exponential population increase of Tirana and its surroundings was now set in motion.

The result of these measures was an almost complete halt to rural-urban migration by the early 1960s. Urban growth for the 30 years that followed was slow and insignificant, despite the creation of urban areas—‘new towns’—serving the mining and petro-chemical industry. The policy approach up until the late 1980s was one of retaining an artificially high labor force in the countryside serving agriculture, whilst keeping an artificially low urban growth, mainly through effectively prohibiting most forms of rural-urban migration. Unofficial migration took place, and some evidence suggests that marriage in particular was used as a way to circumvent such restrictions and secure a future away from the conservative atmosphere of rural life, and the backbreaking drudgery that rural areas had to offer (Bërxholi 2000).[[6]](#footnote-6) Some labor migration did, however, continue throughout these later decades, albeit strictly planned and controlled, including the movement of young graduate teachers and doctors required to serve in remote rural areas, and army personnel posted close to military sites.

In contrast to international migration which was seen as a feature of capitalist unemployment and exploitation, the official discourse concerning internal labor migration was one of duty to serve the country wherever needed. This propaganda was diffused through popular art, such as songs and films depicting the challenges of building the ‘new Albania’ through the bravery and determination of emancipated men and women, always under the leadership of the Party.[[7]](#footnote-7) In academic parlance, labor migration was considered artificial, reflected in the use of the term ‘mechanical movement’ (*lëvizje mekanike)*, thus legitimizing its planning and control.

While such systems of internal population control were implemented across the socialist world with varying degrees of freedom, Albania’s system most resembled the Chinese *hukou* household registration (Zhang 2014), although such population controls were not specifically communist in nature. For example, Anderson (2011) has shown how some of the earliest forms of population control implemented in feudal England by landlords sought to control mobility—of the poor in particular—through bans during times of labor scarcity that would have required them to raise the wages paid out for work on their land.

**Post-communist migrations**

Such is the uniqueness of Albania’s context that scholars such as Russell King (2005) have considered the country a laboratory for studying migration and development. This unique position stems primarily from the sudden and large-scale surge in migration in the early 1990s from a base of next to zero for the best part of 50 years of communist rule, as noted earlier. The opening up of this closed society and its accompanying large-scale migration presented migration researchers with a unique opportunity to test theories of drivers, motivations, and how movements are perpetuated once in motion, as well as the ways in which they link to broader processes of development. Migration drivers, or ‘causes’, are at the heart of much migration literature and theory (e.g. van Hear et al. 2018). Nevertheless, most research, including that undertaken historically, has taken place in contexts where migration was already a strong feature of society, at least at a country level. Other literature on how migration is perpetuated through social networks has similarly relied on such contexts (de Haas 2010).

Yet to argue that Albania provided a clean slate for such research would be to erase the migratory past. Despite its closure during the communist years and the associated ruptures in migratory channels and social networks, there were continuities due both to the memories of historical migrations and the actual networks that survived. Together, they helped shape the specific features of post-communist migration: the speed and concentration over time on the one hand, and to some degree, the geographies of migration, especially for destinations beyond Europe, on the other.

Albania has had one of the highest volumes of emigration as a ratio of total population living in the country, not only in Europe, but across the world. It is comparable only to small island economies—most of which have a long history of colonial and post-colonial migration—or places of significant refugee displacements (King et al. 2011). Within just two decades the country ‘lost’ over half of its resident population of 1989 to international migration (World Bank 2011, p.54). The accompanying financial remittances recorded as received by migrant families similarly put Albania in the top twenty remittance-receiving countries globally, as a percentage of their GDP; other countries in this group have either longer histories of migration, and therefore remitting, or are generally economically poorer (King et al. 2011).

Migration was concentrated in space as well as in time. Neighboring Greece and Italy together host nearly 90 per cent of all Albanian migrants (INSTAT 2014, pp.35-36). North America and the UK increased in importance in the following decades, while smaller migrant communities have been established across Europe and in Australia. Geographical proximity (to neighboring countries) and cultural affinity clearly play a role in these geographies of migration, but so do family networks and ties. The family ties that survived communism channeled the migration of most ethnic Greek Albanians to Greece, while those established in North America and Australia during historical migrations and communist-time defections there facilitated the arrival of their ethnic Albanian families (Sintès 2003).

The communist regime was careful to construct the pre-war labor migrations to the Americas and Australia as benign (to the regime), and offered the migrants of the time either a chance to return in retirement to Albania or permission to continue links with their relatives. Where links were retained, these included sporadic visits to Albania, but mostly comprised remittances in the form of gifts—typically clothes, which were at a premium in the shortage economy of Albania—or small amounts of money. Returnees were also attractive as they brought with them cash in foreign currency, much needed for the country’s depleted coffers.

In contrast, opposition figures, political dissidents, and those who escaped the country clandestinely during the communist years, were branded as ‘enemies of the people’ and members of their families remaining in Albania were persecuted; any contact between them was regarded as irredentist and potentially aimed at overthrowing the regime and heavily surveilled and suppressed. Nevertheless, these networks survived against all the odds, and became anchors of some post-communist migrations, as noted earlier.

Such simultaneous continuities and ruptures existing side by side in the recent past are crucial elements of the process of building and constructing materialities and imaginaries in the present and future. This is illustrated more concretely through the example of remittances in the next section.

**Remitting: sending more than just money**

Referring to remittances globally, Kapur (2004, p.18) suggested that their importance to migrants’ countries of origin was “one of the most visible—and beneficial—aspects of how international migration is reshaping [these countries]”. Numerous studies in Albania confirm this global picture of the importance of remittances for individual families, migrant sending areas, and indeed the country more broadly (de Zwager et al. 2005; Vullnetari and King 2011b). Reports from the Central Bank of Albania indicate that between 1992 and 2009, Albanian migrants remitted from $200 million to more than $1 billion annually (De Zwager et al. 2005: 21; Uruçi 2008, p.4 in King et al. 2011). Despite a steep fall after the 2008 financial crisis, the latest data from the World Bank (2020) indicate significant sums of over $1.5 billion in 2018.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the early 1990s, these flows covered up to around 90 per cent of the trade deficit, and consistently at least a third of it each year over the two post-communist decades. Up to the mid-2000s, remittances also consistently surpassed by several times FDI flows and foreign development aid (King et al. 2011).

At a micro-level, reflecting other studies across the world, remittances in Albania have been a lifeline for many families, helping reduce the incidence and impact of poverty and broadly providing a safety net so people do not easily fall (back) into poverty (see, among others, de Zwager et al. 2005; Vullnetari and King 2011b). Approaching poverty from a multidimensional perspective means that the significance of financial remittances goes beyond simply having enough money, to encompass being able to afford enough (and nutritious) food, clothes, a good shelter, (high quality) education, good healthcare, or, indeed, to access to justice and rights (Cosgrove and Curtis 2018).

Despite the seeming novelty of remittances from contemporary migration, and their undisputed importance in rebuilding the Albanian economy from the 1990s onwards, here too the more careful observer is able to note connections to historical migrations. Work on historical migrations published in Albania during the communist years considered labor migration a ‘wound’ in Albanian society, as noted earlier in the chapter, emphasizing its negative demographic, but particularly its emotional, impacts on the families and communities left behind. However, recent surveys of other historical materials reveal a more complex picture, emphasizing in particular the importance of financial remittances for the country and individual families. For instance, in his survey of Albanian migration the renown Albanian scholar of migration, Mark Tirta (1999, p.164), writes that in 1928 an estimated 10 million golden francs in remittances were sent to Albania. Remittances from the USA are relatively better documented than from other destinations. Thus, Tirta (1999, p.141) notes that in 1910 Fan Noli, an Albanian political émigré of Kolonjë origin (Southeast Albania) and a Harvard graduate, estimated that around 30,000 Albanians living in the USA were sending home about 3 million dollars a year; according to Noli, “almost all Toskëria [another name for southern Albania] lives off remittances sent from the USA”.

Financial remittances enabled migrant families to have a level of living above that which could be sustained locally, and they played a considerable role in the national income structure of the country as a whole (Carne 1979, p.12; Federal Writers' Project 1939, pp.82-84; Myres et al*.* 1945, p.140; Rouçek 1939, p.86). Beyond remitting individually, migrants also mobilized resources in Home Town Associations (HTAs) as vehicles for the development of their villages and cities of origin. Contributions varied in range from investing in the education of individual children (often orphans) to building schools, bridges, roads, town halls, communal water taps, and cemeteries, printing and distributing books, and helping the poor (Barjabaet al*.* 1992; Federal Writers' Project 1939, pp.82-84; Ragaru 2002; Rouçek 1945, p.238; Tirta 1999). In a more recent study, again in southern Albania (Lunxhëri in Gjirokastër), de Rapper (2005) demonstrates that many inhabitants of this area—especially the Vllah community—remember the pre-war period as a ‘golden age’ of prosperity and opportunities.

Financial remittances were only part of this historical picture. Many migrants, whether individually or collectively, also contributed socially, culturally, and politically to their areas of origin. Many brought back skills and knowledge which they applied in Albania, such as methods of cultivation of agricultural produce including vineyards and orchards; the rebuilding and construction of houses; hygiene; the organization of villages, family and social relations. Much of the country’s modernization during the reign of King Zog is attributed to return migrants, particularly from the USA (Rouçek 1946, p.532). At the turn of the 20th century, Albanian migrant associations in Bucharest, Sofia, Istanbul, Cairo, and Boston, to name but a few, became important political vehicles in the struggle for independence and territorial unity of Albanian-inhabited territories (Barjaba et al. 1992; Tirta 1999).

Fast forward to post-communist migration, an abundant literature has shown how international remittances have modernized the material conditions of many migrant households across the country, and contributed hugely towards local transformations of agriculture and the housing stock (Miluka et al. 2007; Vullnetari 2012). A prominent example of this are the large-scale apple plantations that sprawl along the Korçë-Greece motorway, where the Syrian and Afghan refugees—mentioned at the start of this chapter—were hiding. Particularly of note have been investments in housing, especially in urban areas, with Tirana and its surroundings attracting the vast majority of such investments (Dalakoglou 2010). In rural areas old houses were repaired and refurbished and some new ones built; in urban areas remittances enabled families to purchase apartments or land on which to build new houses. International remittances have thus fueled the massive rural-urban and coastal-oriented internal migration in Albania (Vullnetari 2012). Here parallels can again be drawn with international literature, as investing in houses in migrants’ countries of origin is one of the most common remittance uses from Ghana to Ecuador, Pakistan to Colombia (see e.g. Erdal 2012; Smith and Mazzucato 2009; Zapata 2018). Interestingly, collective remittances have not been such a strong part of the contemporary Albanian migration landscape, which is especially striking when compared both to Albanian migration historically, as noted earlier, and contemporary migrations in other countries (e.g. Mexico).

While most of the literature on contemporary Albanian migration and remittances has focused on their instrumental uses (how they are spent), especially as part of migration-development debates, much less has been written about the more subjective experiences of remittance sending and receiving, including their meaning (but see Smith 2008; Dalakoglou 2010; Gregorič-Bon 2017a; Vullnetari and King 2011b). This is partly due to the dominant financial and material take on remittances—both in their focus on money remitted and its economic impacts—which neglects the socio-cultural impact of these monetary flows, as well as non-material (i.e. ‘social’) remittances (cf. Levitt 1998). Here too, the pattern is very similar to such literature worldwide (Piper 2009; Carling 2020).

Subjective experiences of, and meanings that migrants and their families attribute to, remittances are clearly linked to how they refer to such transnational flows. Ethnographic research that has taken an emic approach and engaged in depth with these meanings shows that Albanian migrants and their families invariably refer to remittances as ‘wages’ (when sent regularly) or ‘pensions’ (when sent regularly to elderly parents), as a ‘gift’ (when transgressing patrilineal lines, i.e., women sending to their own parents and siblings), as ‘for a coffee’ (*na dërgon nga një kafe*—a euphemism for small amounts), or generally as ‘help’ (King et al. 2013; Vullnetari and King 2011b; see also Smith 2008). A common feature underpinning this range of typologies are the ways in which social and cultural meanings wrap around the materiality of these transfers, thus going beyond their economic value. Few, if any, research participants in the above studies used the term ‘remittances’ (*remitanca* in anglicised Albanian), and arguably many would not know what it meant (see also Musaraj 2020).[[9]](#footnote-9) In contrast, *remitanca* is the ‘official’ term used across the top-level discourse landscape from academic research (in Albanian), to policy documents, speeches of politicians, and mass media more broadly. Unlike the range of terms in the local vocabulary, *remitanca* is a purely financial term, sanitized for economic purposes by being stripped of any social, cultural, and certainly emotional meaning. Yet it is precisely these social ties, cultural meanings, and emotional layers that give rise to financial remittances in the first place, and ensure their continuation, even when so-called ‘economic rational behavior’ would have us believe that it would be irrational to remit—such as in times of personal and country-wide economic crisis.

Whether motivated by altruism or self-interest, the sending of remittances reflects intimate relationships between individuals and within families: a husband sending money to his wife and children, a son or daughter to his/her parents, and so on. As such, Carling (2014, p.S2019) calls for a more concerted effort to put remittances within a wider social context, recognizing them as a ‘compound transaction’. This means seeing their (instrumental) material aspect as nested within emotional and relational dimensions. They need to be understood as deeply embedded in the social relations and social networks that give rise to them in the first place, but also as symbols of emotions such as love and pride, in turn expressed as acts of (transnational) caregiving. The biggest global MTC, Western Union, captured this effectively back in the early 2000s in a series of posters advertising its services with captions such as “Can love be transferred?” (featuring a young daughter/ sister) and “Can I make her proud?” (featuring an elderly mother). These relations and feelings are often what motivates many migrants to remit, often sacrificing their own comfort, health, further education and training, and, yes, pride, as they often work in low-paid, dangerous, and demanding jobs so that their family members can access better healthcare and education, live comfortable lives, and feel happiness and pride in their achievements.

These sacrifices are all too alive in the minds of parents left behind, who describe their migrant children’s remittances as ‘money of blood’ (Papailias, 2003). Resurrecting painful notions of historical *kurbet* to describe their adult children’s migration, these parents and other family members emotionally relay how this ‘help’ is not simply ‘money’. It is drenched in the sweat and blood of their loved ones, as the latter take perilous journeys over the mountains to reach Greece, and cross the Adriatic Sea in unsafe dinghies to work in harsh and exploitative conditions upon arrival, suffering injuries and even death in the course of low-paid work, while both sides of the family experience painful separation. The quote below from my interview with a couple in their seventies in rural southeast Albania, whose son had been living and working in Greece for ten years at the time of the interview, illustrates this meaning of remittances very well. As Lume, the migrant’s mother, recounts:[[10]](#footnote-10)

He [her son] says, ‘Don’t worry mum, you have the pensions and we will *help* you, so please don’t do manual work there’ (my emphasis). But we feel sorry to get that money from him, because he gets that money by shedding blood.

Any subsequent investment of such remittances in the home in Albania is in turn guarded religiously by ‘left-behind’ parents who continue to live in the older buildings in the compounds, so as not to ‘ruin’ their son’s things in the main house through ‘over-use’ (Vullnetari 2016).

For these older parents, all this materiality simultaneously means both a lot and nothing. It means a lot as an expression of the love and care on the part of the son for his parents, in whose achievements they take great pride. The transnational practice of remitting, or hands-on care where possible, are also symbolic acts of caregiving which contribute to enhanced social prestige in the local community (see also Silverstein et al. 2006 for a similar context in China). For the avoidance of doubt, these are strongly gendered social relations. As such, prestige is gained through care from the *son*, whose symbolic duty it is to look after his parents in older age. Culturally, then, sons’ remittances are a key pillar of a duty of care, while daughters’ (where these are sent) are labeled a ‘gift’. Further prestige and subsequent pride flow from interpretations of such transnational care practices as being the result of successful parenting, as well as demonstrating the success of migrants abroad. An interview excerpt speaks clearly to this last point. After describing the material success of his son who lives in the USA, and how he has cared for his parents in Albania, Avni, a father in his early 70s, speaks with pride about successful parenting:

This is what makes us free and we feel that we have done a good job. Because this was what was up to us to do. … Our children have been well behaved, they have understood what we have taught them.

On the other hand, this materiality of remittances means nothing so long as the children and grandchildren are not around, as the dwelling feels empty and loneliness abounds (see also Vullnetari 2016). In a final interview quote that brings these feelings to light, Dafina, the 58-year-old mother of a migrant son working in Greece lamented:

Our eyes are full of tears and our hearts ache every day and night… If your children are not here, there is no point to any of this [the house]. Nothing matters anymore [*asgjë s’të hyn në sy*]. For example, here is my house large and beautiful up there and here [the main house and a separate one-room building that is meant to serve as a summer kitchen/ living room]. What do I want them for? Look, I live here [in the old building]. Who lives there [in the big house refurbished with remittances]? As long as the children are not here, nothing matters really.

The prospects of bringing the family together, whether in the host country or in Albania, remain bleak, as return is not an option for most migrants, unless forced. The young generation growing up abroad feels especially out of place in Albania, not least as many of them may not even speak the language (Vathi 2011). Meanwhile, the migration of older parents to join their offspring abroad appears remote, as they too feel out of place there for similar reasons (Vullnetari and King 2008). Constructing a relational sense of place through physical presence, material and emotional flows, memories of the past, and dreams for the future is thus an ongoing, unfinished project for all generations concerned.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has demonstrated the *longue durée* of migration and remittances in Albanian society by bringing together continuities and ruptures over three historical periods broadly grouped as pre-war, communist, and post-communist. Despite the different forms and shapes that Albanian migration took during these times, it was, and continues to be, a very important part of the transformation of Albanian society. The chapter has highlighted the role of financial and social remittances from international migration in these transformations, particularly in the last three post-communist decades, but which had a precedence during the reign of King Zog too. Despite the rupture through the ban on international migration during the communist years, some social networks survived and became key nodes for welcoming post-1990s migrants to geographically distant places such as Boston (USA) and Shepparton, Victoria (Australia). In addition, the rupture becomes less prominent when considering internal migration, as the centrally planned economy relied heavily on internal labor relocation, making it a strong pillar of post-war socialist reconstruction and industrialization.

It is the combination of these factors that shapes post-communist Albanian migration’s unique features: namely, a sudden, large-scale movement of people concentrated in time (a few years during the early 1990s) and space (with nearly 90 per cent of all migrants moving to Greece and Italy) (INSTAT 2014, pp. 35-36), the vast majority of whom had never previously set foot abroad, growing up in a society where international migration was banned and unauthorized migration punished as an act of treason. This large-scale migration was also for the most part clandestine, and in this context, at the very least an act of disobedience if not resistance, as much as an act of economic and political desperation.

Three key conclusions emerge as a result. The first is that, notwithstanding these unique features, Albanian migration is in many ways also similar (and connected) to contemporary migrations in other low-income countries around the world and, indeed, historically, to countries that experienced large-scale outmigration in the past. The second, and connected to the first, is that this migration and its accompanying remittances, therefore, should be understood in this broader historical, social, geo-political, and cultural context. Finally, it should be remembered that remittances are imbued with symbolic and cultural meaning, which is crucial for understanding why they happen in the first place, and what impact they have on society. Financial remittances in particular are not simply bundles of ‘cash’, that ‘ease budget restraints for households’, or which can be ‘channeled into investment’ and ‘harnessed to bring about development’, as a myriad of policy reports and economically focused publications often proclaim. They are situated within (often pre-existing) social relations which, in turn, give rise to and enable the transfer of material and non-material flows—such as meanings, feelings, and care—in both directions, albeit in asymmetrical ways. Remittances, when sent, are often expressions of care, pride, love, power, social status, symbolic presence (and lacking in these when they are missing or even sporadic). They thus connect and shape, in asymmetrical ways, transnational families and communities, as well as local and global economies and polities, and give rise to, and sustain, unbounded dreams and imaginaries.

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1. ‘Reportazh i DW/ Si është kthyer Shqipëria në vend transit, për refugjatët e luftës’, 17 October 2019, Syri.net, available at: <https://www.syri.net/sociale/287698/reportazh-i-dw-si-eshte-kthyer-shqiperia-ne-vend-transit-per-refugjatet-e-luftes/>; [last accessed 15 June 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Shqipëria portë hyrëse për refugjatët, kapen 11 sirianë dhe afganë në Korçë’, 6 February 2020, Gazeta MAPO, available at: <https://gazetamapo.al/shqiperia-porte-hyrese-per-refugjatet-kapen-11-siriane-dhe-afgane-ne-korce/> [last accessed 15 June 2020]. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term ‘*economic* refugee’ was coined by Barjaba and King (2005) to highlight the complexity of political and economic factors shaping migration in Albania in these early post-communist years. This is in contrast to the term ‘*war* refugees’ used in the newspaper, noted in Footnote 1, which emphasizes that these are ‘war’ refugees (as opposed to ‘just’ refugees), arguably to underline that they come from a war-torn country such as Syria or Afghanistan. It seems this added emphasis on the war is also to distinguish them from the category of refugee (*refugjat*) as widely used in Albanian society throughout the 1990s to refer to Albanian migrants of those years, although Albania was not at war. This early-1990s Albanian context informs Barjaba and King’s (2005) term above, with the underpinning argument that in many circumstances there is significant overlap between ‘economic migrants’ and ‘refugees’. Subsequent migration scholarship develops this overlap further; see Van Hear (2009) who calls for a ‘mixed migration’ approach, or Crawley and Skleparis (2018) in the context of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in the summer of 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Article 47, gj). of the Penal Code of the Socialist People’s Republic of Albania, 1977, Law nr. 5591 (Kuvendi Popullor i RPSSH 15.6.1977). This article dealt with matters of high treason against the homeland, and point gj). dealt with defection in particular. This was to confirm that which was stipulated by the Constitution of the Socialist People’s Republic of Albania of 1976 (Kuvendi Popullor i RPSSH 26.6.1979). Article 2 of Decree 5912. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Pasaportizim* derives its name from the use of domestic passport/ identity cards or *letërnjoftim* as the main pillar in the process of internal movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A popular rhyme in the Albanian parlance of the south at the time was: “*burrin sa një këndes/ shtëpinë sa një qymes/ vetëm në qytet të vdes*” (small like a cockerel my husband may be/ small like a hen-house my house may be/ as long as I can live and die in the city). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The 1974 classic song by Mjaftoni Bejko, originally performed at the 13th RTV Festival but made popular by Liljana Kondakçi, titled “From South to North” (‘*Nga Jugu ne Veri*’), paid tribute to labor migrants (euphemistically called migratory birds—*zogj shtegtarë*) moving with their families from one construction site (*kantjer)* to another; available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gZEod4f3wQ> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtmimWdp9Mo> [last accessed 15 December 2020]. My thanks to Dr Musaraj for drawing the original version of the song to my attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Some of this is due to improvements in measuring these financial flows, as well as an increase in such transfers flowing through the formal—and thus recorded—channels, such as banks or Money Transfer Companies (MTCs), vs. the informal, non-recorded ones, such as through friends or cash in hand on return visits. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gregorič Bon (2017b) uses the term ‘material flows’ instead of remittances, in the context of her research in Dhërmi/Drymades. Besides the money, these flows also include food, care, and emotions. Additional features are their non-linearity—they flow in both directions—cyclical character, and reciprocity (i.e. often following the principle of gift exchange). Thank you to the author for drawing this work, and these points, to my attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. These interviews were conducted as part of my doctoral research at the University of Sussex (see Vullnetari 2012). I use pseudonyms here to protect the identity of my research participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)