

# Politicising safety and racialised and gendered criminalisation: Political agenda-setting and the case of Albanian asylum-seekers in the UK

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## Abstract

How the UK government has politicised asylum by categorising Albanian asylum-seekers as ‘criminals’ and Albania as a ‘safe’ country to advance an immigration deterrence agenda remains unresearched. We use agenda-setting and policy framing analytical insights to explain how and why UK government’s successful agenda-setting was underpinned by the racialised and gendered criminalisation of Albanian males and the politicisation of the safety conditions in Albania. Our findings draw on qualitative empirical data, alongside triangulation with official and stakeholder data and documents. We argue that the racialised and gendered criminalisation of Albanian males – as evidenced by political rhetoric and the media – was integral to the targeted legal and political measures making Albania a ‘safe’ country. Nonetheless, we show that these framings misrepresent the reality in Albania and the challenges that vulnerable Albanians face when seeking protection in the United Kingdom.

## Keywords

agenda-setting, Albanian asylum-seekers, criminalisation, policy framing, politicisation

## Introduction

The surge in anti-immigration and deterrence policies across Europe, including the United Kingdom (e.g. the ‘Hostile Environment’) have shaped not only who is entitled to claim asylum but also who is perceived as deserving protection versus who is not. While those who are entitled to claim asylum are clearly set out in international and human rights law, governments advance their own interpretation of this to advance their political agenda, framing who is acceptable as a refugee, and who is not. The politics of refugee categorisation (Burns et al., 2022) covers both asylum seekers’ protection entitlements

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and their supposed ‘fit’ with receiving states’ security, economic and cultural norms, that eventually shape their ‘deserving’ status (Welfens, 2022). This generates the ‘hierarchies of deservingness of hospitality’ (Kyriakidou, 2021) among migrant groups in Europe, which causes governments to compile lists of so-called ‘safe countries’ that are used to expedite decision-making regarding the credibility of applicants’ asylum claims. Nevertheless, these lists are anything but objective. Indeed, not only do these lists contravene the Geneva Refugee Convention collectivising experiences, but there are also numerous examples of these lists facilitating persecuted people’s experiences to be ignored (House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2022; Yeo, 2023). Governments are thus able to manufacture their approaches to asylum and specific groups to suit their political agenda, which leads to the politicisation of asylum across Europe (Pasetti and Garcés-Mascareñas, 2018) as asylum serves political and immigration deterrence targets. In the United Kingdom, for example, the government has used the refugee resettlement<sup>1</sup> schemes to facilitate the entry of persecuted people who bypass the formal asylum regime due to the way these groups’ *safety* has been politicised and legitimised, while other nationalities claiming asylum were deemed undeserving. The UK government’s approach to specific groups is not static and changes according to political factors and agendas, and therefore it is vital to examine *how, when and why* its approaches to certain groups of people seeking international protection shift over time.

The case of Albanian asylum-seekers in the United Kingdom provides an instructive case study to examine the politicisation of ‘safety’ – of country of origin – and the racialised and gendered ‘criminalisation’ of vulnerability among a specific group, which served the UK government’s political agenda to make this nationality an example of successful immigration deterrence. Not only are Albanians European and racially white, but they also come from a country in the Balkans, which, like many others in the region, has emerged from communism in the past 30 years. Henceforth, we show that the spike in Albanian arrivals in 2022 provided a ‘focusing event’, allowing the government to seize this window of opportunity to adopt an anti-Albanian policy whereby Albanian males are described as ‘criminals’, fleeing from a ‘safe’ country. These framings allowed the UK government to simplify a complex situation and capitalise on the political gains generated from deterring these arrivals. Since 2022 onwards, there has been a concerted political effort – both at the government and Home Office levels – to promote narratives associated with Albanians over their suspected involvement in crime and disingenuous intentions to claim asylum. Nevertheless, we know very little about the *government’s political agenda* and its connection to the treatment of Albanians: *why, and how they have politicised safety and criminalised asylum-seekers* in specific ways.

This article, therefore, examines the politicisation of Albanian asylum-seekers – in the United Kingdom – and their safety in Albania, and the racialised and gendered criminalisation of their right to seek protection. Drawing on qualitative semi-structured interviews with Albanian experts triangulated with the accounts from young Albanians, official policy and legal documents, the original contribution of this paper is to show how the political misrepresentation of Albanians – via the *politicisation of safety* conditions in Albania and the depiction of Albanian males via a *racialised and gendered criminalisation* lens – allowed the government to adopt an anti-Albanian policy and legal agenda from 2022 onwards. The paper is organised thus: we first set out the context and then briefly discuss how the UK government has categorised

asylum-seekers as ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ based on whether they are perceived to be engaged in criminality and the safety of their country of origin. We then outline our case study, theoretical framework and methodology, while the last two sections focus on our analysis.

## **Context: Hostile asylum regimes and politicising asylum**

Recently UK immigration policy has progressively criminalised certain asylum-seekers and blurred the distinction between *them* and other migrants. Once viewed with sympathy, people seeking asylum are now often portrayed as exploiting the country’s generosity for personal gain (Aradau and Canzutti, 2022). Indeed, the ‘criminal creep’ of punitive measures, labelled the crimmigration system (Bowling and Westenra, 2020), has led to severe policies aimed at deterring asylum-seekers, as governments, including the British government, adopt more deterrent approaches. This is driven by a political agenda that treats border security as a form of political capital (Bosworth, 2016; Mountz, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, this politics of deterrence is central to the so-called ‘Hostile Environment’,<sup>2</sup> which extends to asylum and is infused with the categorisation of asylum-seekers in negative terms. There is a belief that overly generous asylum policies may act as a pull factor, encouraging people to seek asylum. As such, a broad range of measures has been employed against those seeking protection (Miaz, 2018; Mulvey, 2010). The UK government advanced this agenda by weaponizing ‘safety’ and ‘deservingness’, constructing those fleeing war as deserving of protection, while those claiming protection for other reasons being ‘undeserving’ (Anderson et al., 2011; Malloch and Stanley, 2005). Whether the policy is publicly supported hinges on ‘affective publicness’ whereby politicians rely on the public’s compassion for those threatened to justify admitting them (Armbruster, 2019). Therefore, how and why governments frame certain national groups with respect to safety and criminality is central to furthering their political agenda and its alignment with public’s perceptions of asylum-seekers.

The conflation of *safety* – of the country of origin – and *undeservingness* shapes how asylum decision-making is undertaken by immigration officials and is therefore critical to who gets refugee status and who does not. This is clear in governments’ designating certain countries as ‘safe’ (a whitelist), whose citizens are presumed not to be at risk of persecution and thus undeserving of asylum (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2014). However, governments’ manipulation of the concept of safety to suit their agenda (Boswell et al., 2011) undermines the logic and purpose of international conventions in the first place. In the United Kingdom, several landmark cases (e.g. *Brown v. Supreme Court*) have demonstrated that persecution still occurs in countries deemed ‘safe’, challenging the use of aggregated notions of safety as a basis for deciding asylum claims (Costello, 2016). These cases have found that minorities face persecution even in so-called ‘safe’ countries, providing support for the central tenet of Geneva Refugee Convention (1951) that asylum claims should be considered on an individual basis (Gill, 2016). Accordingly, as we show below, undeservingness is equated with criminality, which further legitimises government’s agenda of criminalising unwanted asylum-seekers, such as Albanians, and labelling their country as ‘safe’. In brief, the politicisation of asylum is used as a political tool to not only delineate who is deserving of protection but also to shape the government’s broader political agenda.

## **The British state and wielding safety and racialised criminality to suit the political agenda**

The British government frequently reduces complex asylum events into simplified ones to suit its political agenda by how it manipulates ‘safety’, and thus deservingness, for example, in the differing treatment of Syrians, Ukrainians, and Nigerians. These claims, though starkly different, exemplify how ‘safety’ is manipulated and managed to further the government’s contingent political agenda. The government’s logic regarding this is that undeserving asylum-seekers, coming from safe countries, are ‘criminals’ who are exploiting the system.

In various cases, the UK government wields notions of ‘safety’ intertwined with ‘undeservingness’ to sustain its distinct treatment of certain groups whereby only certain kinds of suffering—such as that caused by war or genocide—are deemed legitimate grounds for asylum (e.g. Syria and Ukraine). Extensive media coverage and widespread recognition of the conflicts and atrocities committed against these populations led to their being categorised as unsafe and, therefore, deserving of protection. The government not only recognised their claims but created bespoke asylum pathways for their entry into the United Kingdom—namely, the Syrian Resettlement Scheme (Armbuster, 2019) and the Homes for Ukraine scheme (Crossley, 2023). These schemes ultimately do not contravene the government’s broader asylum logics rooted in the hostile environment and wider politics of deterrence. In contrast, in contexts where conflict or war is not present, the UK government can frame other forms of suffering (e.g. gender-based violence, poverty, or trafficking) as not widespread or reaching the threshold for protection and thus criminalised or dismissed. This is the case of Nigerian women seeking asylum protection based on gender-based violence and trafficking. The Home Office routinely disbelieves and criminalises these women’s accounts, largely because Nigeria is officially designated as a ‘safe’ country not experiencing an ongoing conflict. This is despite ample evidence of Nigerian women fleeing forced marriage, trafficking, and sexual violence, particularly from extremist groups such as Boko Haram (Ajayi, 2023). By criminalising these applicants and devaluing their experiences, the government fails to recognise these harms as structural or systemic. The designation of countries as ‘safe’ enables the use of accelerated asylum procedures that are quicker, cheaper, and offer fewer rights to appeal.

These examples illustrate how the government has manipulated concepts of safety, and therefore deservingness, to further its political agenda, constructing narratives or frames of ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving’ for different nationals claiming asylum. Importantly, the ‘othering’ of asylum-seekers via undeservingness is often reinforced by narratives centred on racialised criminality, whereby criminal behaviour is associated with certain ethnic and racial groups. Recent evidence shows how the ‘othering’ of specific asylum groups via racial criminalisation framings occurs in accommodation settings (Guma et al., 2024). There remains a lack of comprehensive research on Albanian nationals and the British government’s approach to them, especially in light of the latest surge in Albanian arrivals and the accompanying legal and political immigration deterrence measures. It is therefore important to consider how the government frames the ‘deservingness’ of Albanian asylum claims and how these framings are employed to reinforce the anti-immigration political agenda.

## Case study: The safety and lack of credibility of Albanian asylum applicants

Although the United Kingdom has encountered an increase in Albanians seeking asylum in the past 5 years, these patterns of migration cannot be read in isolation but against a broader tapestry of changes Albania has gone through as it transitioned to democracy (Carletto et al., 2006). After receiving significant numbers of Albanians between the 1990s and 2000s, Greece and Italy witnessed rising anti-Albanian sentiment, swaying political opinions and leading to restrictive migration policies (Cena and Heim, 2021). This, coupled with economic instability following 2008/2009 financial crisis, led to labour shortages in both countries which reconfigured their migration policies, leading to Albanians migration pathways moving westwards, to countries, such as the United Kingdom. Again, as more Albanians began moving to the United Kingdom for work, others have sought asylum, with the United Kingdom becoming increasingly hostile towards them (Dimitriadis, 2020), which has, in turn, influenced discussions around the *credibility* and *deservingness* of those seeking international protection.

Anxieties have grown over the past 5 years regarding the number of Albanian nationals applying for asylum protection in the United Kingdom, with Home Office statistics showing that in 2022, the United Kingdom received 15,070 asylum applications from Albanian nationals, with 3,705 in 2023 of which 2,716 of these applicants (84%) being adult males (Home Office, 2024). However, Home Office asylum statistics up to June 2024 show that 2,648 Albanians have applied for asylum, which shows a significant decrease in numbers compared to 2022/2023 (Home Office, 2024). In the United Kingdom, the number of Albanians whose asylum claims are refused far exceeds the percentage from other countries deemed as unsafe, which highlights that the Home Office assesses their claims as ‘undeserving’. For example, in 2022, Albanian applicants’ grant rate was 49%, compared with Syrians (99%) and Eritreans (98%) (Home Office, 2023a) however, the gender breakdown reveals that for the year ending March 2023 the overall grant rate for Albanians was 34%: for Albanian adult men the grant rate was 5%. For Albanian adult women and children it was 83% and 46% respectively (Home Office, 2023b); thus, the politicisation of safety and the gendered dimension of ‘undeservingness’, as will be discussed below, has tangible impacts on Albanian people’s asylum outcomes.

Frontline organisations have sounded the alarm, finding that Albanians commonly experience prolonged delays and are more likely to be refused than other nationalities applying for asylum (Beddoe 2021). According to Madill (2020), Albanians face hostility from the Home Office, which includes children, and this seems to stem from doubt and disbelief over the credibility of Albanians’ protection claims. These attitudes have imbued asylum decision-making, whereby Neale and Khanba (2019) suggest that the Home Office has implemented specific practices of certification under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, a legal provision retained in Section 28 of the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) 2022, which refers to claims they believe are unfounded and remove the right of appeal. Neale and Khanba (2019) found that Albanians experience difficulties challenging their certifications via judicial review due to applicants’ lack of access to specialist legal representatives knowledgeable in Albanian cases. This situation renders these applicants even more vulnerable and likely to face further precarity and thus end up going underground or face removal.

Despite high refusal rates at the initial decision stage, evidence suggests that on appeal, many Albanian cases likely receive a positive outcome. However, this is primarily driven by women whose cases are subsequently approved 88% of the time compared to only 11% of men (Migration Observatory, 2023). Furthermore, the difficulties Albanians face in obtaining asylum may rest in the complexity of their cases, which are entwined in significant precarity that in many cases stretches back to the country's transition out of authoritarian rule in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, this transition also opened the country up to porous borders, corruption, and related illicit and illegal activities, which in some cases created the conditions in which human rights violations, such as gender-based violence and honour practices (e.g. blood feuds),<sup>3</sup> have gone unchecked and without the state apparatus to protect victims from persecution (Beddoe, 2021).

The UK government's tendency to disbelieve their claims, discredit their accounts and certify their claims, rendering them non-contestable and subject to detention and deportation, is clear (Katwala et al., 2023). Albanian claims fail to fit the typical asylum-seeker profile, as Albania is an EU candidate country, and the perception of the UK government is that Albanians come to the United Kingdom due to socio-economic reasons, rather than fleeing persecution. However, in 2022 Albanian arrivals got onto the government's agenda, framed in terms of Albania's *safety* – as a country of origin – and the *criminal actions* of those (Albanian males in particular) arriving here. As such, we draw on agenda-setting and policy framing as critical frameworks to examine the stakeholder accounts working closely with Albanian people seeking protection to deconstruct this complex situation. We show that the racialised (focus on Albanians, perceived through peripheral whiteness) and gendered (through the lens of male Albanians) criminalisation of Albanian migrants was underscored by Albania being described as a safe country of origin: these two interlinked narratives helped the anti-Albanian agenda setting at the government level, which has been pushed by the government since 2022.

## **Theoretical framework: Agenda-setting and policy framing**

The recent political visibility attached to Albanian arrivals, as covered by the media and the UK government, can be explained by examining *why* Albanians' claims got onto the political agenda and *how* they were framed. In this case, agenda-setting and issue-framing aspects can explain the politicisation of the Albanian arrivals to the United Kingdom depicted via the 'criminalisation' lens and the 'undeservingness' of Albanian claims due to Albania's portrayal as a 'safe country'.

The agenda-setting literature covers a set of theoretical approaches that explain when issues get placed on the decision-making agenda and how they are framed. For instance, Kingdon's (1984: 191) model analyses agenda-setting as a function of three streams providing contextual factors, namely, *problems*, *policies* and *politics*, which are joined together by agents or policy entrepreneurs to forge policy change via a window of opportunity. Therefore, the policy window provides 'an opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions or to push attention to their special problems' (Kingdon, 1984: 173). Windows of opportunity can open in the problems or politics streams, however, they do not stay open long (Kingdon, 1984: 213) and hence, the convergence of the three streams to advance a new policy issue is largely dependent on 'the appearance of the right entrepreneur at the right time' (Kingdon, 1984: 214), or as our evidence shows, seizing the window of opportunity to advance policy framings that justify government's course of action. Agenda-setting literature highlights the importance of a favourable context,

such as a certain focusing event or window of opportunity, and the availability of a policy entrepreneur to seize this opportunity by providing a preferred solution, underpinned by certain framings of the issue that would gain them political capital. Attaching the most compelling framing to a given political problem can influence *whether* and *how* the political agenda is successfully set.

How issues are framed is a function of their likelihood of getting onto the political agenda and thus, providing a solution to a burning policy issue. Framing is usually defined as a way of selecting and organising aspects of complex issues to provide guidelines for analysing, interpreting and acting (Rein and Schön, 1996). However, policy frames are at the centre of political conflict because frames ‘empower certain actors over others’ (Harcourt, 1998: 370). Rein and Schön (2002) discussed policy framing as the ‘complementary process of naming and framing’. Some authors (Van Bommel et al. 2014: 92) distinguish between the analytical significance of ‘frames’, understood as more definitional, static and ‘framing’, deemed a more dynamic and politically oriented concept, by providing ‘a more process-oriented and politically sensitive understanding’ of processes. In essence, frames and policy framing have the role of sense-making and meaning ascription to complex issues and processes by simplifying them via selection, naming, and categorising (Van Bommel et al., 2014).

Agenda-setting and policy framing provide useful analytical lens for understanding *how* and *why* the treatment of certain asylum-seekers is described by a specific approach or framing, and how that framing serves specific political goals. As shown in the sections below, the Albanian asylum-seekers got onto the political agenda via two framings: the country-of-origin *safety* frame – enshrined in law and via political agreements – and the *racialised* and *gendered criminalisation* of Albanian arrivals, endorsed by political rhetoric and compounded by the media coverage. This portrayal of Albanian migrants in 2022–2023 obscured those whose claims may be deserving and who may, therefore, find themselves in a vulnerable situation, as the young people we interviewed did.

## Methodology and data

The empirical data for this article emerged from the findings of the ESRC-funded project ‘Lives on Hold, Our Stories Told’ (LOHST) (2021-23), a collaborative effort between the University of Liverpool, University College London, University of Southampton, and the Shpresa Programme (a charity supporting Albanians in the United Kingdom).<sup>4</sup> The LOHST project examined how Covid-19 impacted the lives of young people (aged 16-25) seeking asylum in England, including their access to legal representation, welfare, and its impact on their mental health and wellbeing. We collected data using a peer research methodology, which is a form of participatory methodology that amplifies the voices of those being researched and is considered more democratic. Consequently, our project gathered data from 69 young people seeking asylum (45 of whom were Albanian, 26 men and 18 women), as well as 53 practitioners (including lawyers, mental health experts, social workers, foster carers, civil society representatives, and legal experts) and UK civil servants (e.g. Home Office officials).

We used thematic analysis to analyse the data we collected and interpret significant themes from across our interview data. Thematic analysis is a common analytic technique used to interpret qualitative interview data, whereby the researcher closely reads the data to identify whether there are common themes from within the data that indicate patterns or mechanisms that underpin the phenomenon under investigation (Terry et al.,

2017). This iterative process is undertaken until the researchers have examined the data thoroughly and built super themes that form the spine of their analysis and offer a sense of what is going on in relation to their research questions. It became apparent as we collected our data that there was a surge in media coverage and the politicisation of Albanian arrivals. This was clear when we interpreted our data that a key finding was that, despite the additional challenges that Covid-19 brought to those seeking asylum protection, there was nevertheless a clear indication that the government singled out Albanian people seeking asylum protection and politicised their asylum claims despite evidence we found of credible claims for asylum protection among the young people we interviewed. These findings prompted us to scrutinise in greater depth *whether and to what extent* the treatment of Albanian claims by the UK immigration system may differ from other nationalities. As such, the main thrust of our article focuses on the findings from 13 qualitative semi-structured interviews with Albanian country experts engaged with Albanian cases, including immigration solicitors, legal experts, EU Commission representatives, Albanian civil society actors, child protection experts, trafficking experts, and law enforcement officials. In addition, we drew from the accounts of 46 young people from Albania who claimed asylum protection to highlight the protection concerns they experienced and how this was mismatched with the political discourse and agenda.

## Analysis

### *Political agenda: Politicising safety and racialised and gendered criminalisation*

In 2022 there was an increase in Albanians crossing the Channel in small boats: 12,000 in total (Neal, 2023a). While many other nationalities sought to reach the United Kingdom by small boats, the government overwhelmingly focused on Albanian nationals, with PM Sunak claiming that a third of people coming over on small boats were Albanian and Home Secretary Suella Braverman claimed erroneously: ‘a majority of people coming here from Albania – some 80 % – of the people coming across on small boats are claiming to be victims of modern slavery’,<sup>5</sup> as the figure was in fact 12% in 2022 (Open Democracy, 2023). The spike in Albanian arrivals in 2022 was followed by hostile media coverage<sup>6</sup> of the issue and most importantly, opened a propitious policy window for the government to make their pledge of ‘stopping the boats’ a political success, by using the case of Albanian migrants. Indeed, having generated significant political momentum with the pledge to ‘clamp down’ on illegal migration by stopping the Channel crossings the public visibility gained by the Albanian arrivals meant that the government had to act, by coupling the three streams together: the spike in Albanian arrivals (*problems*), the pledge to tackle the Channel crossings (*politics*) and the solution adopted: the politicisation of ‘safety’ in relation to Albanian asylum-seekers (*policies*), coupled with the racialised and gendered issue framing via the lens of ‘criminality’. As we show below, the ‘safety’ of Albania as a country of origin for asylum-seekers underpinned the treatment of Albanians, according to the policy solution adopted by the government. However, we found that the prejudiced treatment of Albanian migrants by the United Kingdom asylum system predicated 2022, as their low asylum grant rates and the perception that their claims were undeserving describe how the Home Office treated them.

*Albania as a safe country (policy stream).* The UK government's policy which established, legally and politically, that Albania is a 'safe' country for its citizens, was premised on two interlinked arguments: that it is an EU candidate country, and second, that the Albanian government is willing to uphold this label and accept the returned Albanians. In light of the focusing event – the increase of Albanian arrivals – the UK government negotiated a political agreement with the Albanian government – *UK-Albania Joint Communiqué: Enhancing Bilateral Cooperation in Areas of Common Interest*<sup>7</sup> – which would support the implementation of the UK-Albania readmissions agreement, namely, it would 'increase returns to Albania of those of victims of modern slavery (as defined in the UK legislation) and as victims of human trafficking (as defined in the Albanian legislation)'. This was based on the premise that Albania is an EU candidate country and therefore, 'a safe country of origin under UK law' (p. 1). This diminished Albanians' claims of danger or unsafety and is predicated on the belief that Albania has the infrastructure and institutions that can protect Albanians who face blood feud and other human rights violations. Since the adoption of the communiqué, over 2,500 Albanian nationals, including failed asylum seekers, foreign national offenders and voluntary returnees, were returned to Albania between December 2022 and March 2025.<sup>8</sup> This was a confirmation by the UK government that Albania is a safe place for the return of Albanians whose asylum claims had been refused. At the same time, the Albanian government was complicit in helping the promotion of its 'safety' for its citizens, via the agreement with the United Kingdom. If it is accepted that there was a significant number of cases of blood feuds, trafficking and domestic violence<sup>9</sup> – some of the main reasons why Albanians seek international protection, as our interviewees told us – then it would have undermined its case for EU accession, because a country described as a sender of asylum-seekers cannot be deemed compatible with EU membership.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the political measures, the safety argument was further reinforced legally when the Parliament adopted new legislation which designated Albania as a 'safe country'. For instance, the NABA 2022 in Section 94 (3) retains Albanian on the list of 'designated states', namely, states deemed to be safe, where asylum-seekers, including children, can be safely returned to; thus, NABA retains the certification clause from the previous legislation, that is, Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, but removes the out of country right of appeal that was available under the previous law. In the same vein, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 lists Albania, alongside the EU and EEA states, that is, among the 'white list' of safe states, in the Section 59 (3) on the '*Inadmissibility of certain asylum and human rights*'. This means that Albanians, including Albanian unaccompanied migrant children, with valid asylum and human rights claims, will be returned to Albania, with no right to have their claims heard in the United Kingdom. The overall thrust of the policy solution to address the Albanian 'invasion on our southern coast'<sup>11</sup> – as the Home Secretary put it – was that Albanian asylum-seekers were not welcome, and their claims were undeserving due to Albania being a *safe* country – the framing attached to the Albanian arrivals.

*Albanian asylum claims as 'undeserving' (politics stream).* The government's pledge to 'stop the boats' by reducing the number of arrivals materialised in the case of Albanian migrants via the direct ministerial instructions to the civil service to refuse the majority of Albanian asylum claims as 'undeserving'. This is evidenced by reports by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI), which revealed the Home Office's

targeting of Albanian claims – under political instructions – to reject them. Operation BRIDORA, established in the aftermath of the 2022 arrivals' spike, shows how the Home Office subjected Albanian cases to differential treatment due to the politicisation of Albania's safety. This amounted to reduced scrutiny, with specific instructions not to allow any grants and an arbitrary Ministerial decision that no more than 2% of Albanian grants should be successful (Neal, 2023a: 60). Operation BRIDORA was established at ministerial level in response to then PM's statement on illegal migration, where he said that a third of small boats arrivals in 2022 had been Albanian and yet Albania was a 'safe, prosperous European country' (Neal, 2023a). The political imperative driving BRIDORA was to clear the cohort of 12,000 Albanian claims considering the latest political developments regarding Albania's safety with the overarching purpose to declare most Albanian claims as 'clearly unfounded' (Neal, 2023a: 56). Moreover, Home Office officials received instructions, as part of BRIDORA, that they were no longer authorised to implement any grants for Albanians, even where the decision had already been written (Neal, 2023a). The outcome of BRIDORA was that, indeed, between 9 January and 12 November 2023, a total of 15,955 outcomes had been made on claims from Albanians, 9,863 (61.82%) of which were withdrawals, 4,549 (28.51%) were refusals and 498 (3.12%) were grants of asylum or another type of leave (Neal, 2023a: 56). The arbitrary refusal of Albanian claims was justified by their 'undeservingness', which was underscored by Albania being deemed a 'safe country'.

The politicisation of Albanian arrivals trumped how their claims should have been assessed by the Home Office caseworkers. According to the ICIBI's reports, updated versions of the Home Office's Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) on blood feuds and trafficking in Albania were published in early 2023. The CPINs are the main country information documents used by Home Office caseworkers to guide their evaluation of asylum claims. Under political pressure, the Home Office had to amend its depiction of safety for returned Albanian trafficked women, making a Home Office official to conclude that 'suddenly it looked like trafficked women can go back after all and there is sufficiency of protection; suddenly we are sending trafficked women back' (Neal, 2023a: 59). Most significantly, the politicisation of the Albanian claims also meant that these were aggregated instead of treating them on an individual case basis.

*Racialised and gendered criminalisation (issue framing in the problems stream).* The policy solution adopted by the UK government, namely, treating Albania as a 'safe' country of origin, is intimately linked to how the latest Albanian arrivals were depicted both by key governmental officials and parts of the media through the *criminalisation* lens. The problems stream captured not only the surge in Albanian arrivals, but the security impact – viewed as *criminality* – this entailed. 'Framing' is the dynamic process of advocating or applying a frame to an issue (Nelson, 2011: 191). Issue framing shapes how an issue is defined and understood, influencing the way people perceive it. In this case, the government applied a racialised and *gendered criminality* framing to the issue of Albanian arrivals: they were defined and discussed through this lens, which constituted the problem stream. Albanians were constructed through a gendered lens as overwhelmingly men who were subsequently described as being part of 'criminal gangs' responsible for 'very harmful, serious and organised criminality in the UK' (Holloway, 2022). Framing the arrivals of Albanians as predominantly male and criminalising the underlying reasons for their migration to the United Kingdom, draws on entrenched tropes linking masculinity and criminality. According to Tomsen (2024), men are often criminalised because crime is

closely tied to how masculinity is constructed and policed in the United Kingdom—particularly in relation to marginalised men. Yet they were also framed through a racial lens as other white, whereby, despite their phenotypic whiteness, they accrued limited privilege relative to other white groups. Like other Eastern European populations and the white working class in Britain, they are positioned in a subordinate place within hierarchies of whiteness (Webster, 2008). Consequently, they are more closely aligned with criminality and are read through tropes of dangerous, hypermasculine men (Webster, 2008), intertwined with wider representations of Eastern Europe and the Balkans as backward, uncivilised and inherently linked to organised crime (Ohueri, 2025). The framework of peripheral whiteness captures this mutability of whiteness and has been applied to Eastern European migrants in Britain (Narkowicz, 2023). It highlights how, for those from the Balkans, whiteness affords provisional inclusion and some distance from criminality, yet once it is disclosed that they are Albanian, they are pushed to the margins of whiteness and more firmly associated with criminality. Hence, when men positioned on the margins—such as those from Albania—are framed as criminal, this framing directly shapes policy responses. Indeed, despite being white, ‘race’ played a key role in compounding the *criminalisation* framing of Albanian men. By deploying inflammatory and racialised terms such as ‘gangs’, the government generates public anxiety around a racialised and gendered criminal threat in need of urgent intervention (Williams, 2015a, 2015b).

Indeed, Albanians were described as ‘criminals’ who were ‘deliberately gaming the system’ (Dimitriadis, 2023), which was linked to the public safety argument in the United Kingdom. Despite other nationalities crossing the Channel in 2022–2023, the then Home Secretary, Suella Braverman, singled out Albanians by calling them ‘criminals’ in the Commons, going as far as to claim that Albanians ‘claim to be trafficked as modern slaves. That’s despite them having paid thousands of pounds to come here or having willingly taken a dangerous journey across the Channel’.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Robert Jenrick, then Immigration Minister, stated that Albanians are ‘abusing’ the Modern Slavery Act, while Braverman concluded that all Albanian young, single men coming to the United Kingdom were ‘either part of organised criminal gangs and procuring their journey through. . . nefarious means, or they are coming here and partaking in criminal activity, particularly related to drugs’.<sup>13</sup> Even the Albanian PM reacted to the racialised and gendered criminalisation of Albanians by accusing the UK government of falsely targeting and discriminating against Albanians ‘as the cause of Britain’s crime and border problems’ (Guardian, 2022). The ‘criminalisation’ framing justified the political urgency for the government action to address it: namely, Albania as a ‘safe country’ with Albanian claims as ‘undeserving’.

The criminalisation framing was further reinforced by the mainstream media, as shown above. The Sun and the Mirror, for example, used narratives that portrayed Albanian forced migrants as a threat to Britain by using frames to ‘securitise’ and ‘criminalise’ them. These portrayals further stressed the threat to Britain’s society, resulting in what MiCLU described as ‘a racist rhetoric following a temporary spike in the numbers of Albanians arriving by boat in 2022 has translated into measures increasingly scapegoating Albanians or disproportionately affecting Albanian asylum seekers that impact their ability to secure protection’ (MiCLU, 2023).

The agenda-setting process entails the definition of the problem, or in this case, how the problem is framed, particularly ‘if and why it matters, how it works, and what should be done about it’ (Stone, 2002). The issue framing, therefore, can elevate one view over

another by driving policy in a particular direction (Stone, 2002). The UK government politicised the safety of Albania to render the Albanian asylum claims undeserving, accompanied by the racialised and gendered criminalisation of the latest Albanian arrivals, particularly via the use of loaded terms such as ‘invasion’ and the blanket description of all Albanians as undeserving. The *safety-undeservingness-criminality* nexus allowed the government to set an anti-Albanian agenda, which had knock-on effects for all Albanians seeking sanctuary.

### **It's all politics: *Protecting the vulnerable and the deserving ones***

The figures released by the UK Home Office indicate a decrease by 93% of the number of Albanians who entered the United Kingdom illegally in 2023 as opposed to 2022 (Migration Observatory, 2024). The PM Sunak hailed this drop in Albanian arrivals as an example of successful illegal immigration deterrence achieved due to the deal sealed with Albania.<sup>14</sup> However, legal experts have been quick to refute Sunak’s explanation for the fall in numbers, as they had gone down before the political deal between the United Kingdom and Albania (Yeo, 2024). Based on the asylum grant rates for Albanian asylum seekers alone, the assertion that Albania is a ‘safe state’ for all its nationals is at best fundamentally flawed and it would be inaccurate to claim that there is no risk of persecution for nationals in that state.

In this section, we show that the politicisation of safety of Albania and the racialised and gendered criminalisation of the Albanian arrivals underscored the government’s anti-immigration agenda setting, however, both the safety argument and the criminality lens are based on fundamental misrepresentations of the conditions in Albania and the situation of those vulnerable Albanian asylum-seekers, whose claims may be deserving. Below we provide evidence deconstructing the government’s two main framings of the Albanian asylum claimants, showing that the government’s anti-Albanian measures were ultimately justified by sheer political goals.

*How ‘safe’ is Albania.* Our data question this political framing of Albania as being a *safe* country and the reasons why Albanians sought protection in the United Kingdom even before 2022. Our interviewees refute Albania’s ‘safety’ argument, highlighting the weakness of laws and of state institutions to protect Albanian nationals on the ground due to the endemic corruption, which includes the world of politics and organised crime, as an Albanian country expert told us:

I think the Narco mafia, Albanian local mafia [...] is quite involved and I would consider the politicians are involved directly or indirectly [...] Abuse of women, macho culture which is linked to abuse of women. [...] every single day there’s an assassination, and no one wants to assist people but I think this is related to drugs and conflicts. [...] So, the abuse of human rights is on all levels and really [...] Albania is run by political mafia and Narco mafia and that’s generally, what is happening in Albania’. (SWP35)

All Albanian experts stressed the stark discrepancy between the way Albania, and the UK government in that matter, is presented on paper and the reality on the ground regarding how state institutions protect vulnerable groups. The main contention is that there is no political will to invest in institutional capacity to protect Albanians against human rights violations, as an Albanian trafficking expert put it. In practice, this has

damaging effects for those Albanians who are returned from abroad, as an Albanian expert told us:

‘Albania is considered a safe country – does have whatever . . . police and blah blah blah . . . – all the measures in place to protect its citizens. And then they said, ‘OK, based on these papers and guarantees provided by the Albanian government, you are safe to go back’.[. . .] one or two weeks, the guy was back in Albania, he was murdered. And then you do understand that there is a huge difference between what my government is saying (pretending actually) to what Western governments are trusting in the information and intelligence that is given to them’. (LP14)

The Albanian state lacks services targeting those who are in the most vulnerable situations when they are returned. As Albanian country experts explained, Albania lacks family supporting services – which would be needed to prevent re-trafficking or to help with the reintegration of victims of trafficking – protection mechanisms for active blood feuds, and with respect to trafficking: there are shelters available for trafficked women, but not for trafficked men. Moreover, the lack of institutional infrastructure for vulnerable Albanians is further compounded by Albanians’ lack of trust in law enforcement agencies and the prevalent honour-based culture, as one Albanian country expert told us (SWP36).

From the perspectives of Albanian legal experts, Albania is deemed unsafe for vulnerable Albanians, and human rights risks are often concealed by the Albanian government (MiCLU, 2023) in order to not undermine its EU accession prospects. The UK government adopts a similar stance for political reasons, as one Albanian country expert put it:

Albania . . . is run by political mafia and the Narco mafia. . .that political mafia works with the Home Office (UK Government). (SWP35)

A 2024 report by Asylos on trafficking in Albania, drawing on a range of expert evidence, highlights the prevalence of trafficking within Albania. The report points to the experiences of the Albanian anti-trafficking network United Response Against Trafficking (URAT) which concludes that: ‘The trafficking of men and boys is very widespread, despite being less considered or discussed [. . .] Men and boys are exploited for forced labour, sexual exploitation, the use and involvement in low-level criminal activities (theft and distribution of narcotics), and for forced begging’ (Asylos, 2024: 17). This is in sharp contrast to the way the UK government framed Albanian males, as criminals or members of criminal gangs. Indeed, the CPIN on Human Trafficking from 2023 recognises the issue of trafficking, particularly with respect to women and girls, but the problem is not of significant concern as it is deemed that the ‘state has made good, ongoing progress in implementing reforms and measures to tackle trafficking generally’ (*CPIN on Human Trafficking*, 2023b: 4). The main contention is that there is ‘sufficient protection’ provided by the state for women and girls who are victims of trafficking, which therefore questions their reasons for seeking asylum in the United Kingdom. Moreover, the CPIN on trafficking further delegitimises the grounds used by Albanian males – who are victims of trafficking – by considering that they ‘are not at real risk of serious harm or persecution’ (*CPIN on Human Trafficking*, 2023b: 10). In essence, the harm that returned victims of trafficking can experience is dismissed by the Home Office considering the latest UK-Albania political agreement, aimed at enhancing the level of support and protection that returned asylum-seekers can expect in Albania. However, Albanian country experts who reviewed the latest CPINs and shared their assessment with the ICBI, strongly reject

the portrayal of legal and institutional infrastructures to protect trafficked Albanians if they are returned (Neal, 2023b).

Linked to the ‘safe country’ framing of Albania, the Home Office is suspicious regarding the prevalence and the severity of *blood feuds* as valid grounds for asylum. Blood feuds are seen as an archaic practice, which exclusively impacts those from northern Albania. The practice of ‘blood feuds’ is rooted in the interpretation and application of the Kanun law, which is a set of customary laws that covers all aspects of life. While much of the Kanun is taken up with marriage, hospitality and the resolution of rights in livestock and property, it is most well-known in Western Europe for its regulation of homicide and blood feud of the type associated with patriarchal societies, such as Sicily or Corsica (Littlewood, 2002). The Home Office even considers ‘blood feuds’ to be connected to criminal gangs rather than patriarchal cultural practice (*CPIN on Blood Feuds*, 2023a: 30). The position of the Home Office with respect to ‘blood feuds’ is that they are not prevalent and that the state can protect Albanians against them (*CPIN on Blood Feuds*, 2023a: 10). Yet, an Albanian legal expert questioned the sources on which the CPINs are based and how the inaccurate information meets the Home Office’s objective to deport Albanian asylum-seekers:

the Home Office information notes [CPINs] rely mainly on what the Albanian officials say. The Albanian officials are well trained from the communist era to portray this kind of life. . . That is all beautiful and pure and nothing is wrong and that we treat everyone humanely, and if you just dig deeper, you can see that that is not the truth. They do quite well the Albanian Government to manipulate the system [ . . . ] the aim of Home Office is to deport as many [ . . . ] it’s their job. (SWP35)

In essence, the CPINs feed into the Home Office’s disbelief regarding the Albanian claims and their entrenched prejudice that they are ‘undeserving’, which has become the official policy line endorsed by the government, as we saw after 2022. As an interviewee put it,

‘the country guidance cases are [ . . . ] quite harsh because they play into the narrative that all Albanian asylum claimants are economic migrants who are faking it’. (LP11)

The evaluation of the latest CPINs by Albanian experts casts doubt on the Home Office’s depiction of the prevalence and severity of blood feuds in Albania, according to the assessment they shared with the ICFI (Neal, 2023b). These experts highlight the need to acknowledge the ‘the impact of blood feuds on the socio-economic situation of individuals and families affected’ and how the Albanian state lacks sufficiency of protection for people in blood feuds (Neal, 2023b: 14–15). Indeed, Albanian country experts and professionals working closely with Albanian asylum seekers concede that Albania cannot be deemed a ‘safe country’, as the UK government legally and politically established, particularly due to its failure to protect vulnerable groups, such as victims of trafficking and blood feuds. As an interviewee put it:

‘the state does not provide, in reality, adequate protection for people who are at risk of criminality, trafficking, blood feud, and domestic violence, these other abuses that are very deeply rooted and very commonplace in Albanian society. [ . . . ] and obviously the vast scale of government corruption and police corruption in Albania, the links between organized crime gangs and the State – these things are not adequately taken into account [by the Home Office]’. (LP8)

The insights from Albanian country and legal experts described above demonstrate that the new policy measures adopted to reduce Albanian arrivals to the United Kingdom were driven by political motifs and the window of opportunity provided by the spike in numbers in 2022. The government could only make its policy solution more appealing to voters by labelling Albanian arrivals as ‘undeserving refugees’ and ‘criminals’ as promoted by the politicisation of Albania’s safety (*the policy*), thus obscuring those vulnerable groups, whose claims may be deserving, and who often get leave to remain. Indeed, many Albanian appeals are successful, and Albanian women and children have a grant rate of above 80% at initial decision stage, Albanians had a 50% success rate on appeal to the First-Tier tribunal for asylum applications over the last 5 years, reaching 57% in 2022 (Home Office, 2023a). These statistics clearly show that Albania’s ‘safety’ argument was politically construed to fit the government’s political agenda on ‘stopping the boats’ and capitalising on negative media coverage, and the momentum provided by the arrivals in 2022.

*‘How can a child be a criminal?’<sup>15</sup>*. The fact that the Albanian state institutions and policies cannot protect the vulnerable Albanians, who are often exploited and trafficked when under-age, is further confirmed by the experiences of the young Albanians we engaged with and their reasons for seeking protection in the first place. We found among many of the young Albanians we spoke to egregious accounts of various human rights violations in Albania, including persecution, trafficking, and exploitation, which are all grounds for seeking asylum. These accounts juxtapose with the idea that some Albanians are not worthy of protection. Across the 46 interviews conducted for this study, many of the young Albanians we spoke to described complex and fraught experiences of migrating to the United Kingdom to seek asylum. Participants recounted fleeing Albania due to threats such as blood feuds, gender-based and domestic violence, or after becoming entangled in trafficking networks. They consistently emphasised the Albanian state’s inability to offer adequate protection, pointing to the absence of infrastructure, services, and institutional capacity to safeguard vulnerable groups. These gaps in protection persist even after return: as Baba et al. (2023) note, victims of trafficking who are returned to Albania often end up being re-trafficked, due to the state’s continued failure to provide safety or reintegration support.

The migration journeys described in our interviews were often marked by further harms, including exploitation en-route or upon arrival in the United Kingdom. Several participants recounted being trafficked again or compelled into exploitative labour conditions – such as car washes or illegal cannabis farms – by criminal networks that preyed on their age, isolation, and precarity. These narratives expose the layered and ongoing nature of the vulnerabilities these young people face. This is obscured by such reductive framings of Albanians as ‘criminals’, as an interviewee told us.

Such accounts directly challenge dominant political and policy framings that portray Albanians as economic opportunists or criminals abusing the asylum system. In contrast, the young people we interviewed demonstrated clear grounds for international protection. Indeed, most participants were eventually granted refugee status in the United Kingdom – an outcome that affirms the credibility of their claims and underscores that return to Albania is not a safe option. The criminalisation of these young people’s presence in the United Kingdom serves to erase their experiences of harm and persecution, reducing their trajectories to simplistic narratives that overlook the structural forces shaping their victimhood and decisions. In particular, many of the young women and girls shared intimate

and distressing accounts of trafficking. Although such experiences fall squarely within the criteria for asylum and modern slavery protection, they are frequently overshadowed by racialised and gendered criminalised accounts of Albanian men and boys, their accounts being marginalised from the policy discourse.

While political discourse has seemingly closed off the discursive space for most Albanian claims to be considered credible compared to relocating to the United Kingdom for economic or criminal means, our accounts show the substantive risks that some Albanians face and thus should be interpreted on a case-by-case basis rather than denigrating an entire national group.

## Conclusion

Although the Albania-UK bilateral agreement to return asylum applicants had no impact on the Albanian arrivals, Italy has recently forged an agreement with Albania to 'offshore' some of its asylum claims, which is politically advantageous for Italy. Yet, the recent ruling by the European Court of Justice stipulated that EU member states, such as Italy, cannot designate countries – such as Albania – as 'safe' if they do not offer sufficient protection to the entirety of the population (Amnesty International, 2025), namely, Albanians, which means that the Court does not deem Albania a 'safe country of origin'. This ruling challenges the broader trend across Europe of framing Albania as a safe country, despite it facing issues common to many former communist nations, such as corruption, weak institutions and organised crime; therefore, shedding light on how these decisions are politically motivated rather than founded in Albanian asylum seekers' lived realities. For Albania, this designation is politically beneficial not only in supporting its EU candidacy and potential future membership but also in addressing economic challenges, such as brain drain. Albania's proximity to the EU offers Western governments favourable conditions to solve their immigration/asylum problem by making use of poorer Eastern European countries' desire to join the EU and forge unequal bilateral agreements with the country. Albania, on the other hand, attempts to whitewash its human rights problems through forging bilateral agreements and, despite their pervasiveness across its citizens, illustrates the saliency of politics in joining the EU block and the asymmetrical power dynamics between Western nations and Albania.

This article examined how the case of Albanian arrivals in 2022 led to the politicisation of this nationality, as the government wished to set an example of successful immigration deterrence. To do so, the government placed the issue of Albanian arrivals on the political agenda by using two interlinked framings: Albania as a *safe country* and Albanians coming to the United Kingdom as *criminals*. Capitalising on the window of opportunity provided by the Albanian arrivals, the government's legal and political actions further enshrined the proposed policy solution, namely, that Albanian claimants are undeserving, fitting the 'bad refugee' categorisation. Our empirical analysis showed that there was a concerted political effort to deny Albanians sanctuary in the United Kingdom, despite evidence from Albanian experts refuting the government's portrayal of Albanian institutions and laws as being able to protect vulnerable groups, as those who seek protection in the United Kingdom. Viewing all Albanians through a racialised and gendered 'criminalisation' lens, the UK state fails to acknowledge that the right to protection is individual and should be open to all Albanians despite their nationality, as we show, there are some who are fleeing persecution, and thus, are deserving of protection.

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## Notes

1. Refugee resettlement ‘involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a country in which they have sought protection – usually somewhere with a large number of refugees – to a third country which has agreed to admit them as refugees where they can rebuild their lives’ (Refugee Council, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/refugee-resettlement-facts/>)
2. More specifically, this term refers to a set of policies introduced in 2012 by then-Home Secretary Theresa May, with the aim of making life difficult for those who arrive in the United Kingdom illegally. As she said at the time: ‘The aim is to create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal immigrants’. “Hostile environment”: the hardline Home Office policy tearing families apart’. *The Guardian*. More generally, the term refers to all policies that are aimed at making life difficult for all migrants living in the United Kingdom.
3. Blood feuds are a traditional practice of revenge killings rooted in the Kanun, a set of Albanian customary laws used to structure Albanian society. These feuds, primarily occur in northern Albania.
4. Project Ref: ES/W000474/1 Jan 2021-February 2023. The project had the ethics approval from the School of Law and Social Justice, University of Liverpool, application number 8735.
5. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/19978120/suella-braverman-stop-illegal-channel-migration/>
6. For example, some Daily Mail headlines ‘Albanian criminals are committing “blatant manipulation” of UK’s modern slavery laws and are being “coached” on what to do if they are arrested, National Crime Agency officials warn’ (15 Nov 2022); ‘More than 40 Albanian criminals and migrants who tried to enter the UK via boat arrive back in their home country aboard a Home Office removal flight after being deported’ (23 Dec 2022).
7. UK-Albania Joint Communiqué: Enhancing bilateral Cooperation in areas of common interest (December 2022).
8. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2025/how-many-people-are-returned-from-the-uk>
9. In Albania’s case, this refers to physical and sexual violence against women and girls and the failure of state institutions to protect them against it (see UNDP (2019) Research Brief)
10. As in line with the EU accession political criteria, which require that a prospective EU member state has stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities ([https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/acccession-criteria\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary/acccession-criteria_en)).
11. <https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/vilification-albanian-migrants-refugee-asylum-crime-trafficking/147925/>
12. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/edi-rama-suella-braverman-channel-home-secretary-prime-minister-b2306551.html>
13. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/society/2022/11/albanian-migrants-men-uk-criminal-gangs>
14. ‘Definitely what I believe is that deterrence to stop illegal immigration works. When I became prime minister, I prioritised the agreement with Albania, which is now working for me. We returned 5000 people to Albania as a result of this agreement. What we have seen is that with this agreement, the number of illegal Albanian immigrants coming to Great Britain has dropped by over 90% over the past year’, PM Sunak told the BBC in January 2024 (<https://albaniadailynews.com/news/british-pm-sunak-praises-migration-deal-with-albania>).
15. Quote by an immigration lawyer, who represents Albanian young people, whom we interviewed. The interviewee refers here to Albanian children coming to the United Kingdom and who are described by politicians and media as ‘criminals’.

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