

An In-Depth Analysis of the Determinants of Albanian Youth Emigration in the Post-Communist Era (1990-2020)

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study investigates youth emigration from Albania during the period 1990–2020, focusing on migration intentions among university students and the socio-economic factors influencing these intentions. The analysis concentrates on Geography students at the University of Tirana and places their migration expectations in comparative context with existing empirical evidence on Albanian medical students, a group typically associated with high-skilled migration.

Methods: The study combines a historical review of major phases of Albanian emigration with quantitative survey data collected from Bachelor and Master students in Geography at the University of Tirana (n = 354). Data on medical students are not collected directly but are drawn from secondary sources, including published studies and national reports, to support contextual comparison. Quantitative analysis employs descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests to examine relationships between emigration intentions, socio-economic perceptions, field of study, and the role of social networks. Established migration frameworks, including push–pull theory and cumulative causation, guide the interpretation.

Results: The results show that emigration intentions among Geography students are high, with 68–76% reporting plans or strong expectations to migrate. The most frequently cited drivers include economic insecurity, low anticipated wages, limited career prospects, and perceived governance problems. Preferred destination countries are Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy. When compared with findings from studies on medical students, the results indicate that high emigration propensity is not limited to internationally competitive professions.

Implications and Limitations: The findings suggest that youth emigration in Albania reflects broader labor-market and institutional constraints rather than discipline-specific opportunity structures alone. However, as the study is based on a single academic institution and self-reported intentions, the results should be interpreted as exploratory and not fully generalizable to all Albanian students.

Keywords: Albania; brain drain; inequality; social justice; youth emigration

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a global phenomenon that has accompanied human development throughout history, producing both positive and negative effects on sending and receiving societies (Popescu et al., 2021). Albania represents an extreme case within post-socialist Europe. Since the collapse of the communist regime in 1990, the country has experienced persistent and large-scale emigration, particularly among young people aged 15–29 (INSTAT, 2015). It is estimated that nearly half of Albania's population has emigrated or attempted to emigrate at least once, making migration a structural feature of the country's social and economic transformation (Vullnetari & King, 2008; Vullnetari & King, 2015; Brooks & Meçe, 2022; Kopliku & Çaro, 2022).

Under communism, emigration was criminalised and strictly controlled; attempts to cross the border were

harshly punished and often resulted in imprisonment, persecution of relatives, or loss of life (Gjerazi, 2024). This legacy has left a lasting imprint on collective memory. Consequently, the post-1990 opening of borders represented not only a demographic and economic rupture but also a profound psychological and cultural shift. Since then, emigration from Albania has evolved through several phases shaped by political instability, economic crises, and changing mobility opportunities within Europe and beyond.

To better understand contemporary youth migration, this study distinguishes three main periods in Albania's post-1990 emigration history. The first period (1990–2000) was characterised by mass and often chaotic movements triggered by regime change, economic collapse, and the 1997 crisis. The second period (2000–2010) marked the consolidation of legal migration, diversification of destinations, and the emergence of less visible forms of student migration. The third period (2010–2020) introduced new dynamics, including persistent asylum seeking, high levels of potential emigration, and the increasing importance of education- and skill-based mobility, particularly among young people. Across all three periods, the balance between push and pull factors shifted, yet economic insecurity, weak institutions, and unequal opportunities remained central.

First period of emigration 1990-2000

In the early 1990s, Albania recorded one of the highest emigration rates in Central and Eastern Europe, with an estimated 10–15% of the population leaving during the first years of transition (World Migration Report, 2000). The first massive departures occurred in July 1990, when thousands of mostly young Albanians entered Western embassies in Tirana. This was followed by the well-known maritime departures from Durrës and Vlora in 1991, as well as large-scale irregular crossings into Greece.

Extreme poverty, the collapse of state enterprises, and the lack of basic services constituted the dominant push factors during this period (World Bank, 2011). Following the collapse of Ponzi schemes and the near-civil conflict of 1997, political and physical insecurity further intensified migration pressures, particularly among young men. Geographic proximity and historical ties made Italy and Greece the primary destinations, despite the considerable risks involved.

Second period of emigration 2000-2010

By the early 2000s, mass departures had largely ceased, yet total emigration continued to rise. INSTAT estimated approximately 700,000 emigrants in 2001 and 864,485 in 2005, representing nearly 27% of the population (INSTAT, 2004). Migration became increasingly individualised and legally regulated, while destination patterns diversified beyond Italy and Greece to include Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

Between 2001 and 2011, Albania's population declined by 9.7%, largely due to emigration and low fertility, with youth remaining overrepresented among migrants and a growing participation of young women (INSTAT, 2014). (Figure 1.)

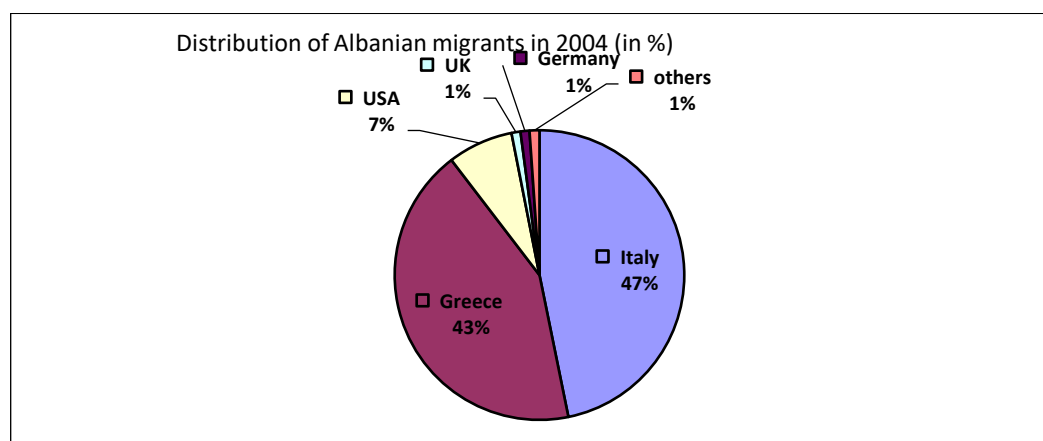


Figure 1 illustrates the changing geographical distribution of Albanian migrants, highlighting the diversification of destinations during this second migration period.

Educational aspirations became increasingly important push factors, particularly for families sending students abroad. By 2011, more than 25,000 Albanian students were enrolled in foreign universities, many of whom did not return after graduation. After the 2008 global financial crisis, economic insecurity re-emerged as a dominant driver, especially among return migrants who subsequently re-emigrated (Gëdeshi & King, 2018).

Third period of emigration 2010-2020

Contrary to expectations that emigration would gradually decline three decades after the fall of communism, the third period of Albanian emigration is characterised by the persistence—and in some forms intensification—of outward mobility. During this decade, asylum seeking, student migration, and labour migration increased, particularly toward Western European countries. Germany emerged as the most attractive destination for both asylum seekers and students, especially following visa liberalisation and the growing demand for skilled labour (EMN, 2016).

Between 2013 and 2015, the number of Albanian asylum applications rose sharply. In 2013, 11,075 Albanians applied for asylum in European countries; this number increased to 16,805 in 2014 and peaked at 65,900 in 2015, with Germany accounting for the majority of applications. Although stricter monitoring and discouragement campaigns led to a decline after 2016—31,553 applications in 2016 and 22,075 in 2017—emigration pressures remained substantial (INSTAT; IOM, 2018). These figures indicate that emigration during this period was not episodic but structurally embedded in Albania’s socio-economic context.

Sustained emigration during this decade has had clear demographic consequences, particularly for the age structure of the population. Table 1 illustrates the increase in Albania’s median age between 2011 and 2020, rising from 33 to 38 years. The increase is slightly higher for females than males, reflecting the growing participation of young women in migration, especially for educational purposes. These trends confirm the centrality of youth in contemporary Albanian migration and point to long-term implications for labour supply and demographic sustainability.

Table 1. Albanian median age 2011 and 2020

Gender	Median age by gender in years		
	2011	2020	Difference
Female	32.6	37.2	4.6
Male	33.9	38.2	4.3
Total	33	38	5

(Source: INSTAT, Albania)

During this period, more than 300,000 people emigrated from Albania, ranking the country first in Europe in terms of emigrants as a share of the total resident population (INSTAT, 2021a). On average, approximately 45,000 people left the country each year, while only about 27,000 immigrated, resulting in a consistently negative migration balance. At the same time, potential emigration increased significantly, from 44% in 2007 to 52% in 2018, with the highest intentions recorded among young adults aged 18–40 (Gëdeshi & King, 2018).

The push and pull factors shaping emigration during the third period largely mirror those of the second period but with greater intensity and persistence. One of the main push factors remains high youth unemployment. Between March 2012 and December 2020, Albania’s unemployment rate averaged 13.74%, reaching a peak of 18.2% in 2014 and declining only modestly thereafter (INSTAT; Macrotrends). Even the lowest recorded rates during this period remained sufficiently high to significantly influence young people’s decisions to seek opportunities abroad.

Another critical push factor is the decline in remittances, which had already begun in the previous decade. Compared with 2010, remittances as a share of GDP decreased by 3.7%, and by 13.6% compared with 1992 (World Bank data). For many households that had relied heavily on remittances as a primary source of income, this decline further exacerbated economic insecurity and reinforced migration incentives.

According to International Monetary Fund estimates, Albania's GDP has decreased by approximately 18% over the last two decades due to the cumulative effects of large-scale emigration and "brain drain." The migration balance remained negative throughout the third period. Table 2 shows that not only did this imbalance persist between 2014 and 2017, but it also tended to increase, indicating that emigration continued to outpace immigration year after year.

Table 2. Migration balance in Albania (2014-2017)

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017
Difference from the previous year	273,000	405,000	259,000	373,000

Source: Instat Albania (2017)

Additional push factors during this period include high levels of perceived corruption, growing concerns about personal security, and difficulties in finding employment aligned with one's field of study. In 2019, Albania fell seven places in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, moving from rank 99 in 2018 to 106 in 2019, reinforcing public perceptions of weak governance and limited institutional trust (Transparency International, 2019).

Pull factors continued to include better employment prospects, higher wages, access to quality education, and established Albanian migrant networks in destination countries (Noja et al., 2018). A particularly notable trend during this period is the increasing number of Albanian students pursuing higher education abroad, especially in medicine. The high demand for healthcare professionals in countries such as Germany has led to a growing outflow of medical graduates, many of whom do not return after completing their studies. This trend underscores the importance of examining youth emigration not only through aggregate statistics but also through the lens of educational pathways and labour-market mismatches, with significant implications for Albania's future workforce and public service systems (Ogwuru & Uma, 2017).

This paper aims to analyse emigration trends among Albanian youth with particular attention to the relationship between migration intentions and fields of study. The central analytical focus is a comparison between graduates of medical schools—who benefit from strong international demand and relatively clear migration pathways—and students of Geography, a discipline characterised by more limited opportunities in foreign labour markets. By juxtaposing these two groups, the study seeks to assess whether emigration among Albanian youth is primarily driven by field-specific professional advantages or by broader socio-economic conditions within the country.

The empirical analysis draws on questionnaire data collected from Bachelor's and Master's students in Geography at the University of Tirana. Geography was selected due to the authors' institutional access and familiarity with this academic community, allowing for a detailed examination of students' migration intentions, perceived opportunities, and socio-economic motivations. Rather than treating medical graduates and Geography students as symmetrical empirical groups, the comparison situates Geography students' responses against existing evidence on medical graduate emigration, thereby providing a contextual benchmark for interpreting field-based differences.

Preliminary evidence suggests that, despite the more favourable international prospects associated with medical qualifications, students in other disciplines such as Geography also exhibit strong intentions to emigrate. This indicates that educational background alone does not sufficiently explain youth emigration patterns in Albania. Instead, migration aspirations appear closely linked to broader factors such as employment insecurity, wage expectations, governance quality, and future life prospects. Consequently, youth emigration cannot be understood solely as a function of individual academic achievement but must be analysed within a wider socio-economic framework.

The analysis in this study is guided by the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Graduates from medical schools are more likely to emigrate due to higher professional opportunities abroad, particularly in countries such as Germany, compared to graduates from other fields such as Geography.

Hypothesis 2: Among graduates in non-medical fields, emigration intentions are influenced more strongly by socio-economic conditions in Albania—such as unemployment and economic instability—than by academic discipline itself.

Hypothesis 3: Social networks, including family and peer connections, play a significant role in shaping emigration decisions across both medical and non-medical fields, reinforcing migration tendencies regardless of discipline.

Beyond demographic and economic explanations, this study approaches youth emigration in Albania as an issue closely connected to social equity. Persistent constraints in access to stable employment, adequate wages, and professional recognition contribute to a context in which migration is perceived by many young people as the most viable pathway for personal and professional advancement. By combining historical context with empirical survey data, the study aims to contribute to evidence-based discussions on youth mobility and to inform policy debates on how structural conditions in Albania shape migration choices.

Given the complexity of these dynamics, the findings underscore the importance of migration policies grounded in empirical research and institutional collaboration. Addressing the structural drivers of youth emigration—rather than focusing exclusively on high-skilled outflows—remains essential for creating a more sustainable and inclusive future for young people in Albania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on youth migration has expanded significantly over the past two decades, particularly in relation to countries of the Global South, where young people represent a disproportionate share of emigrants. Albania constitutes a particularly salient case, as youth have consistently dominated emigration flows since the collapse of the communist regime in 1990. Despite this reality, early post-socialist migration studies largely overlooked young people as a distinct analytical category, focusing instead on aggregate migration flows or household strategies (Vullnetari & King, 2008). More systematic attention to Albanian youth emigration has emerged only since the early 2010s, especially in relation to student mobility and the non-return of graduates educated abroad (King, 2017).

Albania has frequently been described as a “country on the move,” reflecting the persistence of both internal and international migration across successive historical phases. Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the social, economic, and political implications of youth migration for both sending and receiving countries (Brannen et al., 2002; Leccardi, 2005; Caro, 2013; Cairns, 2019). Within this literature, youth migration is understood as a multidimensional process shaped by a combination of economic constraints, educational aspirations, institutional instability, and future-oriented life strategies. Studies focusing on Albania consistently highlight unemployment, income disparities, and limited career prospects as key drivers of youth emigration (Milasi, 2020). Negative expectations regarding domestic labour markets have been shown to significantly increase the propensity of young people to seek opportunities abroad.

At the same time, youth emigration generates complex and often contradictory outcomes. On the one hand, migration can facilitate skill acquisition, international exposure, and personal development. On the other hand, sustained outflows of young and educated individuals contribute to brain drain, demographic ageing, and long-term labour-market distortions in sending countries (Meroni & Velasco, 2023). For Albania, these dynamics are particularly acute given the scale and duration of emigration and the limited absorptive capacity of the domestic economy. Empirical research has also noted persistent challenges in measuring youth migration accurately, especially within the European context, where data collection practices, age classifications, and migration definitions vary widely (King, 2017). The absence of a universally accepted definition of “youth” further complicates comparative analysis and policy formulation.

More recent literature has paid growing attention to education-related mobility, including participation in international programs such as Erasmus+. While such programs are often framed as temporary and circular, evidence suggests that they may also function as stepping stones toward longer-term emigration, particularly when return opportunities are limited (Wu & Ou, 2021). This is especially relevant in countries like Albania, where international educational exposure often coincides with weak domestic labor-market integration.

Nevertheless, existing studies tend to concentrate on highly mobile or internationally competitive fields, such as medicine and engineering, while comparatively less attention has been given to students in disciplines with more constrained international demand.

Conceptually, youth migration has also been examined through the lens of “waithood,” a condition in which young people experience prolonged transitions to stable adulthood due to limited employment opportunities and institutional barriers (Cotter et al., 2019). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding Albanian youth emigration, as migration is frequently perceived not merely as an economic choice but as a strategy to overcome stalled life trajectories. Related research has further explored the role of social networks, identity negotiation, and transnational ties in shaping migration aspirations and decisions (King, 2017).

Despite the growing body of literature on Albanian youth migration, several gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical evidence comparing migration intentions across different fields of study, particularly between internationally competitive professions and less mobile academic disciplines. Second, existing research often privileges macro-level explanations while underexploring how young people in non-elite educational fields interpret their future prospects. Finally, few studies explicitly situate youth emigration within a broader discussion of structural inequality and opportunity constraints. Addressing these gaps, the present study contributes to the literature by examining migration intentions among Geography students and situating their aspirations in comparative perspective with evidence on medical graduates, thereby broadening the analytical scope of youth migration research in Albania.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed analytical approach combining historical analysis and quantitative survey research to examine youth emigration from Albania over the last three decades. First, emigration trends from 1990 to 2020 are analyzed across three distinct post-communist periods using secondary data from national and international sources. This longitudinal perspective allows for the identification of changes in the scale, direction, and composition of youth emigration over time. Second, primary quantitative data are used to examine contemporary emigration intentions among university students, with a specific focus on the role of field of study and socio-economic conditions.

Migration theories, including push–pull dynamics, cumulative causation, world-systems theory, and transnationalism, inform the analytical framework of the study. These theories are not treated as methodological tools but serve to guide the formulation of research questions and the interpretation of empirical findings, particularly in understanding how structural inequalities, social networks, and global labor-market dynamics shape youth migration decisions.

The empirical component of the study is guided by three research questions: the extent to which Geography students intend to emigrate after graduation; whether socio-economic conditions exert a stronger influence on emigration intentions than academic discipline; and the role of social networks in shaping migration decisions. Correspondingly, the analysis tests hypotheses regarding differences between medical and non-medical fields, the relative weight of socio-economic drivers, and the reinforcing effect of family and peer networks on emigration aspirations.

The study population consists of students enrolled in Geography programs at the University of Tirana, selected because Geography represents a field with limited international labor-market demand compared to medicine. Data were collected in two phases. The first survey was conducted in May 2019 among second-year students in the Professional Master for Geography Teachers program. Out of 100 distributed questionnaires, 82 valid responses were obtained. The second survey took place in March 2020 and targeted Bachelor’s students and all Master’s programs within the Department of Geography, including the Professional Master for Geography Teachers, the Professional Master in Applied GIS, and the Master of Science in Geography. The questionnaire was distributed electronically to approximately 650 students, resulting in 372 valid responses. Overall, the final sample comprises 354 respondents across both survey phases.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered in identical form in both phases to ensure comparability. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions addressing intentions to emigrate after

graduation, preferred destination countries, perceived push factors such as unemployment, low wages, limited career opportunities and corruption, the influence of social networks abroad, and the likelihood of returning to Albania after emigration. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were informed of the academic purpose of the study.

Quantitative data were processed using Microsoft Excel and analyzed using descriptive and basic inferential techniques. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize emigration intentions and motivations, while cross-tabulations were employed to explore relationships between emigration intentions and explanatory variables such as study level, destination preference, and social-network influence. These results were then interpreted in comparative perspective using secondary evidence from existing studies on medical graduates. Although the analysis relies primarily on descriptive statistics, the results allow for hypothesis testing regarding the relative importance of socio-economic factors and academic discipline in shaping youth emigration intentions.

This methodological approach ensures transparency and replicability while remaining appropriate to the exploratory and comparative aims of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Trends and tendencies of the “hidden” emigration of skilled population (focusing on doctors, nurses and medicine students)

Over the last decade, and particularly since 2015, the emigration of highly skilled young people from Albania has intensified and emerged as a central concern in public debate, academic research, and policy discussions. Scholars have consistently identified Albania as one of the European countries most affected by brain drain, with limited mechanisms for compensatory brain gain through return or circular migration. This pattern is especially pronounced in the medical sector, where outward mobility has accelerated in response to international labour demand and persistent domestic constraints.

The emigration of skilled professionals initially followed a two-stage trajectory. In the first phase, following the collapse of communism, highly educated individuals moved internally from rural areas and smaller towns toward Tirana and other major urban centres. Over time, this internal concentration evolved into international emigration, primarily toward Italy, Greece, the United States, and Canada. In the last decade, however, Germany has emerged as the dominant destination, particularly for doctors and medical graduates, reflecting structural demand for healthcare professionals and comparatively favourable employment conditions.

One of the most decisive structural drivers of this trend is the persistent wage gap between Albania and destination countries. In Albania, a doctor with more than five years of professional experience earns on average approximately €450 per month, while teachers earn between €300 and €400, and full-time professors at public universities earn around €650. These wage levels represent only about 20% of GDP, far below the OECD average of approximately 55%. Albania also records the lowest gross wages and labour productivity among Western Balkan countries (Civici et al., 2020). Such disparities significantly reduce the attractiveness of domestic employment for skilled youth and strongly encourage emigration.

The scale of medical emigration is clearly reflected in administrative data. Table 3 presents the number of certificates issued by the Order of Doctors of Albania between 2013 and 2017. These certificates are required exclusively for professional practice abroad and therefore serve as a reliable indicator of emigration intentions. The steady increase over this period demonstrates a sustained rise in the number of doctors preparing to leave the country.

Table 3. Number of doctors provided with a certificate from the Order of Doctors of Albania (2013–2017)

Years	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Number of doctors	76	128	143	208	207

Source: The Associate of The Doctor’s Order in Albania

This outflow has produced tangible shortages in regional and rural hospitals. In response, authorities have introduced a “patronage system,” under which doctors based in Tirana periodically provide services in underserved areas. While this mechanism has partially mitigated short-term shortages, survey evidence indicates that it does not address the structural causes of emigration. At least 21% of doctors working in regional hospitals express an intention to leave the country immediately, while an additional 55% would emigrate if presented with a suitable opportunity. Only one quarter plan to remain in Albania, underscoring the fragility of the healthcare workforce.

Beyond medicine, another less visible but equally consequential process has expanded: student emigration that becomes permanent after graduation. This “hidden” brain drain involves young people who leave Albania for educational purposes and subsequently integrate into foreign labour markets. Data from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MoESY) reveal a widening gap between the number of students seeking education abroad and those who return. Because systematic data on return migration are limited, diploma recognition in Albania is used as a proxy indicator for return.

As shown in Table 4, although the number of legalized diplomas for studies abroad remains high, the number of recognized diplomas has declined sharply. This trend indicates that while interest in studying abroad continues to grow, the proportion of graduates returning to Albania is decreasing.

Table 4 Number of legalized and recognized diplomas (2018–2019)

Year	2018	2019
Number of students graduated from high school	36,328	35,466
Legalized diplomas	14,880 or 48% of the graduated	17,768 or 50.7% of the graduated
Recognized diplomas	670 or 4.5% of the legalized diplomas	364 or 2.04% of legalized diplomas

Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania

Despite the fact that only about one fifth of applicants are admitted to foreign universities, the absolute number of Albanian students abroad continues to rise. During their studies, many students become socially and professionally integrated into host countries, making return less attractive, particularly given low wages, limited professional opportunities, and high levels of perceived corruption at home. The substantial financial investment made by families further reinforces the expectation of remaining abroad after graduation.

Highly educated emigration extends beyond undergraduate and master’s levels. According to UNDP estimates, approximately 2,500 Albanians have earned or are pursuing a PhD in OECD countries, representing around 40% of all Albanian PhD holders. The majority are employed in universities, research institutions, or specialized sectors abroad. For a small country, this represents a significant loss of advanced human capital with long-term implications for research capacity, innovation, and higher education.

Emigration Potential among Geography Students at the University of Tirana (Survey analyses)

To assess whether high emigration intentions are limited to internationally marketable professions, a survey was conducted among Geography students at the University of Tirana—a field with comparatively limited demand in foreign labour markets. The results reveal that emigration intentions among these students are remarkably high and consistent across study levels.

In the first survey phase (May 2019), conducted among students enrolled in the Professional Master for Geography Teachers, 68.2% reported an intention to emigrate after graduation. In the second phase (March 2020), which included Bachelor’s students and all Master’s programs within the Department of Geography, emigration intentions increased slightly. On average, approximately 71% of respondents across all levels expressed a desire to leave Albania, with the highest proportion observed among Bachelor students (76.3%). These findings indicate that emigration aspirations among Geography students are comparable to those documented for medical graduates, despite differences in international employability.

Analysis of push factors highlights notable differences between study levels. Master's students identified low wages as the primary driver of emigration (47.8%), followed by limited opportunities to work in their profession (32.7%) and general insecurity (12.1%). Bachelor students, by contrast, emphasized uncertainty about future employment in their profession (62.5%) as the dominant factor, followed by low wages (20.8%) and insecurity (14.6%). These differences reflect varying degrees of exposure to labour-market realities and proximity to graduation.

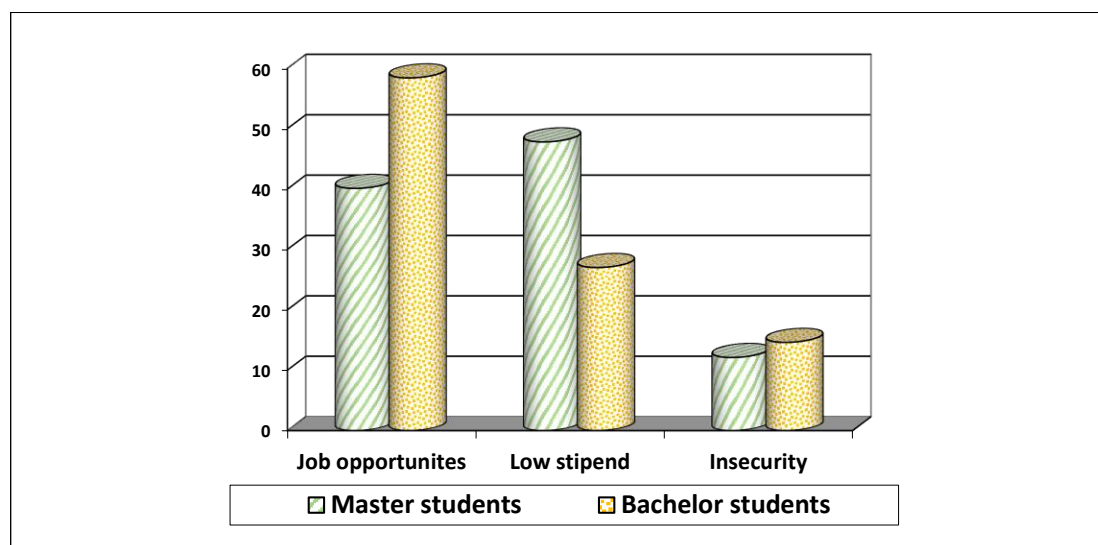


Fig 2 Main push factors for Master and Bachelor students of Geography

Destination preferences further reinforce the continuity of Albanian migration patterns. Germany was the most frequently selected destination (26.7%), followed by the United Kingdom (21.9%), Italy (15%), and the United States (10.5%). Germany's prominence reflects its strong economy, ageing population, and demand for skilled labour, while choices such as the UK, Italy, and the USA are strongly influenced by the presence of family members and established social networks.

Intentions to return to Albania after emigration are generally low. Among Master's students, 41% stated that they do not intend to return, while this figure rises to 53.3% among Bachelor students. Family ties remain the strongest factor encouraging potential return, selected by 87.7% of those willing to come back. In contrast, only 8% identified investment or business opportunities as a reason for return, reflecting limited confidence in the domestic economic environment and business climate.

The economic cost of sustained youth emigration is considerable. Public investment in education amounts to approximately €493 per student per year, excluding additional household expenditures for housing, transportation, and study materials. When graduates emigrate permanently, this investment benefits destination countries rather than contributing to Albania's development (Civici et al., 2020). Although several policy initiatives—such as the National Youth Strategy and the National Youth Action Plan—have sought to address these challenges, their impact has been limited, and emigration intentions remain high.

Overall, the results demonstrate that youth emigration in Albania is not confined to professions with strong international demand. Instead, it reflects broader structural constraints affecting young people across disciplines. The persistence of high emigration intentions among both medical and geography students underscores the systemic nature of youth emigration and highlights the need for comprehensive policy responses that extend beyond sector-specific interventions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMANDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has examined youth emigration from Albania over the three decades following the collapse of the communist regime, combining historical analysis with original survey data collected among Geography students at the University of Tirana. The findings confirm that emigration remains a structural and persistent feature of

Albania's socio-economic transformation. Despite political stabilization and gradual economic growth, the intention to emigrate among young people remains exceptionally high, particularly among those completing higher education.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that youth emigration is not limited to internationally competitive or highly demanded professions such as medicine. While the emigration of doctors and medical graduates is substantial and well documented, survey results show that students in less internationally marketable fields, such as Geography, express similarly high emigration intentions. On average, more than 70% of Geography students surveyed intend to leave Albania after graduation, with even higher rates among Bachelor students. This finding challenges the dominant narrative that youth emigration in Albania is primarily a "medical brain drain" phenomenon.

The analysis identifies economic insecurity as the most powerful driver of emigration intentions across fields of study. Low wages, limited employment opportunities in one's profession, high unemployment, and persistent corruption emerge consistently as key push factors. Social networks abroad further reinforce these decisions by reducing perceived risks and facilitating migration pathways. Importantly, intentions to return after emigration are weak, particularly among younger cohorts, indicating a shift from temporary or circular migration toward more permanent forms of settlement abroad.

From a broader analytical perspective, the results suggest that youth emigration in Albania should be understood not only as a labour-market response, but also as an expression of structural injustice. Limited access to decent work, unequal life chances, weak institutional trust, and restricted youth participation in decision-making processes contribute to a context in which emigration appears as the most viable strategy for achieving personal and professional dignity. If current trends persist, Albania risks accelerating population ageing, labour-force contraction, and the long-term erosion of its human capital base.

Recommendations and further research on the topic

The findings of this study point to the need for comprehensive and justice-oriented policy interventions that address the structural causes of youth emigration rather than its symptoms alone. *First*, improving employment conditions for young graduates must be a central priority. This includes increasing entry-level wages in public-sector professions such as education and healthcare, aligning salaries more closely with regional standards, and ensuring transparent and merit-based recruitment processes.

Second, stronger links between higher education institutions and the labour market are urgently needed. Universities should collaborate more closely with public and private employers to expand internships, traineeships, and applied research opportunities, particularly in fields with limited international mobility. Such measures could reduce uncertainty among students and improve their transition from education to employment.

Third, targeted return and retention strategies should be developed for graduates who have studied abroad. These could include fiscal incentives, housing support, recognition of international qualifications, and career advancement schemes for returnees. Without concrete and competitive reintegration mechanisms, policies encouraging return migration are unlikely to succeed.

Fourth, governance reforms remain essential. Combating corruption, strengthening institutional accountability, and increasing political stability are not only governance goals but also migration policies. Survey respondents consistently associate emigration with a lack of trust in institutions and limited prospects for change. Addressing these issues would directly affect young people's willingness to build their futures in Albania.

Finally, youth participation in policymaking should be expanded. Including young people in the design and evaluation of employment, education, and migration policies would improve policy relevance and help restore confidence among a generation that increasingly feels excluded from decision-making processes.

Further Studies on the topic: While this study provides important insights, several limitations also highlight directions for future research because:

The empirical analysis is based on data from a single academic institution and one non-medical field of study.

Future studies should expand the sample to include multiple universities and additional disciplines in order to improve generalizability and enable more robust cross-field comparisons;

The study focuses on emigration intentions rather than observed migration behaviour. Longitudinal research tracking students from graduation into early career stages would allow for a clearer understanding of how intentions translate into actual migration outcomes and return decisions.

Qualitative approaches could complement survey data by exploring in greater depth how young people perceive opportunity, injustice, and belonging, both before and after migration. In particular, interviews with returnees and non-returnees could shed light on the conditions under which return becomes a viable option.

Future research should examine the gendered dimensions of youth emigration more explicitly, given the increasing participation of young women in migration flows, as well as the long-term demographic and social consequences of sustained youth outmigration for sending regions.

By addressing these research gaps, future studies can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of youth emigration and support the development of evidence-based policies aimed at creating equitable and sustainable futures for young people in Albania.

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AI Tools Declaration: No AI tools were used for data analysis. AI assistance was used only for language refinement.

Authors' contributions

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Data collection: Albana Kosovrasti, Sonila Papathimiu.

Data analysis and interpretation: Albana Kosovrasti, Sonila Papathimiu.

Writing – original draft: Albana Kosovrasti, Sonila Papathimiu.

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All authors approved the final version.

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