

Albania: a place to happily grow old in? International retirement migration, and changing landscapes of ageing and care in later life

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Abstract

Since the end of communism, Albania has undergone major political, economic, social, and environmental changes. Large-scale emigration has been accompanied by population decline and rapid ageing, particularly in rural areas. Older people are left on their own when all their adult children have migrated, with some eventually moving to a residential care home. Meanwhile, Albania is emerging as a destination for International Retirement Migration (IRM), especially among Italians. The paper asks whether Albania is a place for a happy retirement, and for whom. It documents and analyses migration–development dynamics in Albania with a *focus on older people*, and related discourses around ageing, migration, and care in later-life. The discussion draws attention to three key recent developments: i) rapid population ageing linked to emigration; ii) Albania’s incorporation into the geographies of European IRM; and, iii) the growth of residential care for older Albanians in the country. Drawing on academic literature, INSTAT data, and media examples, the paper shows how global and national inequalities intersect to shape later-life migration and immobility, and points to directions for future research.

Keywords: International Retirement Migration; Albania; inequalities in ageing and care; migration; ageing

Introduction

Since the fall of the communist regime over 35 years ago, Albania has gone through significant political, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental transformations. During the communist years (1945–1991) emigration abroad was banned and thus reduced to a trickle. The fall of the regime thus marked the start of mass migration both internally and abroad. It is for this reason amongst others, that Albania has been considered as an ideal context in which to study the

interactions between migration and development.¹ This paper contributes to these discussions by focusing on a group of people that is often ‘left out’ and ‘left behind’, *older people*. It does so from the perspective of Albania as a country of emigration, but also, increasingly, as a country of immigration, including for retirement migration.

In a context of truly large-scale outmigration and rapid societal changes, the overarching aim of this paper is to document and analyse the evolution of broader contemporary (post-communist) migration and development dynamics in Albania, with *a focus on older people*. The paper further weaves in *immigration to Albania*, specifically for retirement (*International Retirement Migration*: IRM). Early academic literature on IRM in Europe focused on migration from northern towards Mediterranean Europe, especially the southern and eastern coasts of Spain, including Alicante. Since then, geographies of such intra-European ‘lifestyle’ migration have shifted to the east and further south, with Italy one of the most recent ‘frontiers’, where pensioners such as Brits and Germans move to.² However, Italian retirees too have moved abroad, with Albania becoming an increasingly attractive retirement destination in recent years.

The article uses a comparative device between lived experiences and perceptions of two groups of older people: Italian migrant retirees in Albania and Albanian pensioners who continue to live in Albania, often on their own, after all their children and grandchildren have emigrated, usually abroad. Through the concept of ‘geographic arbitrage’³ the article highlights the intersectional inequalities that shape life in older age both within and between the two groups. The paper asks the overarching question: Is Albania a place to happily grow old in, and for whom? Within this, key research questions seek to address the development of IRM as a novelty in Albania, alongside key changes regarding the role of older people in society and care in later life.

While answers to these questions require robust and rigorous primary data collection and analysis through in-depth and long-term scientific research, this paper offers a rapid analysis of secondary materials and observations, which nonetheless outline some general patterns and narratives to move the conversation forward. Besides a review of the academic literature and statistics from relevant authorities, I analysed a range of secondary sources. They consisted primarily of articles published in Albanian (and selected Italian) newspapers, where I sourced examples of older people’s stories, their lived experiences and thoughts, as reported by older people in these media outlets. Selected televised debates of experts on the topic and opinion makers broadcast on Albanian television were also analysed to complement these individual stories, so as to give a flavour of public discourse.

The paper is structured as follows: after this introduction, it examines migration in Albania with a focus on older people, especially Italian retirees. It then compares the lived experiences of two groups of older people: Italian retirees in Albania and Albanian older people living there. Next follows a deep dive into some of the key societal changes of recent years, with a focus on attitudes to, and practices surrounding, care for older people. The final section concludes.

¹ King, Russell. 2005. Albania as a laboratory for the study of migration and development. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 7(2), 133–155.

² King, Russell / Cela, Eralba, and Tineke Fokkema. 2021. New frontiers in international retirement migration. *Ageing & Society* 41(6), 1205–1220.

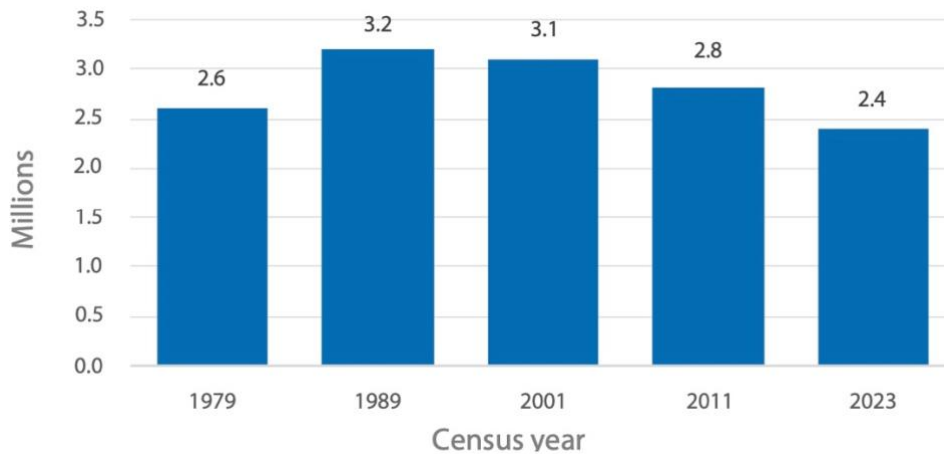
³ Hayes, Matthew. 2014. We gained a lot over what we would have had: The geographic arbitrage of North American lifestyle migrants to Cuenca, Ecuador. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40(12), 1953–1971.

Changing dynamics of migration in Albania

From a country on the move to the new Alicante for Europe's retirees?

Since the fall of the communist regime in the early 1990s, Albania has experienced large-scale emigration, leading to severe population decline. The latest Population and Housing Census (PHC) held in October 2023 enumerated a resident population of 2.4 million, widely regarded as an overestimate (see Figure 1).⁴ Greece and Italy remain the main destinations for Albanian migrants, while migration to other Western European countries, especially the United Kingdom (UK), and to North America and Australia, has increased.⁵

Figure 1: Population change by census year (in millions)



Source: INSTAT. 2024. *Albania population and housing census 2023: main results*. Tirana: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 28 June 2024, 114.

Most emigrants have been of working age, although some older people have also migrated. Combined with low fertility and high longevity, this has resulted in population ageing. By 2023, nearly 20 % of Albania's resident population was aged 65 years and over, up from 7.5 % in 2001.⁶

Continued large-scale emigration of working-age Albanians has created widespread labour shortages across all sectors of the Albanian economy, increasingly addressed through international labour recruitment, thus turning Albania also into an immigration country. *Retirement immigration*, particularly from Italy, forms part of this emerging migratory mix.

Data on immigrants to Albania by age groups, country of origin, and reasons for migration are patchy. However, some statistics on residence permits issued by Albanian authorities help build an albeit imperfect picture. Table 1 shows permit holders in near- and post-retirement age groups, while Figures 2 and 3 present population pyramids of 'foreign' residents by age and sex from 2016 to 2023.

⁴ INSTAT. 2024. *Albania population and housing census 2023: main results*. Tirana: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 28 June 2024.

⁵ INSTAT, *Albania population and housing census 2023*.

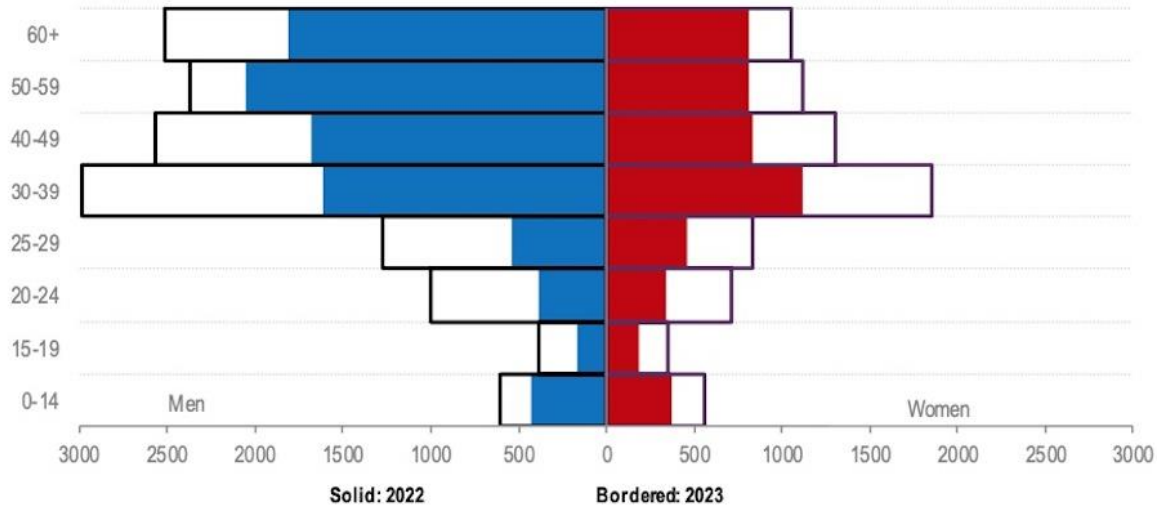
⁶ INSTAT, *Albania population and housing census 2023*, 115.

Table 1: Foreigners with residence permits in Albania by age-group, 2019–2024

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Total	13,507	13,609	14,921	18,151	21,460	21,940
Age-group						
50–59	2,209	2,870	2,935	3,287	3,491	2,952
% total	16.3	21.1	19.7	18.1	16.3	13.5
60+	1,589	2,616	2,775	3,148	3,560	3,007
% total	11.8	19.2	18.5	17.3	16.6	13.7

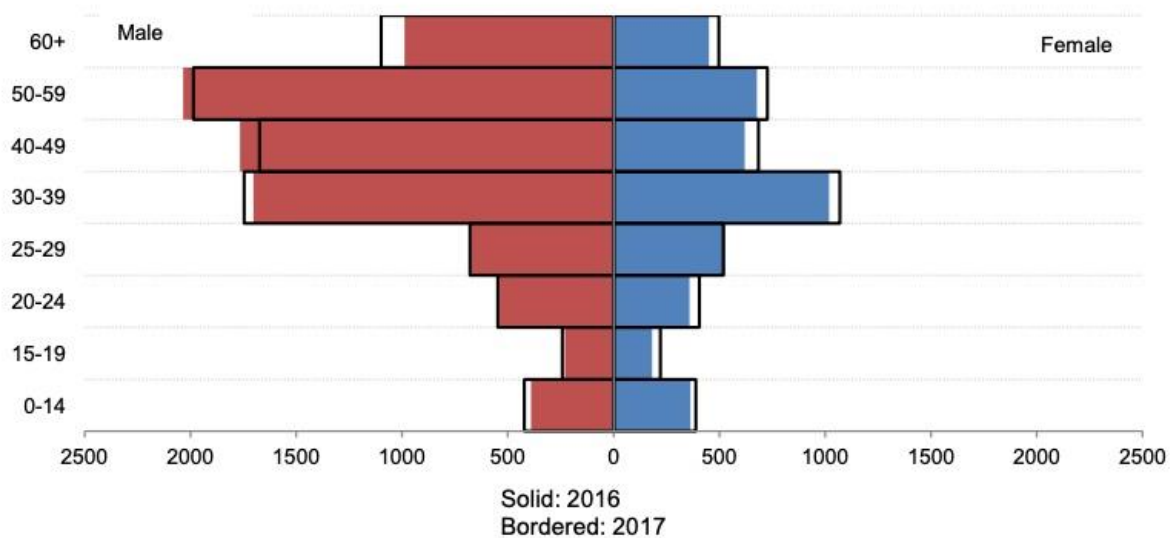
Source: author's compilation based on INSTAT tables (2019–2023 and 2020–2024).

Figure 2: Population pyramid of foreign resident population in Albania by main age-groups and sex



Source: INSTAT. 2024. *Foreigners in Albania 2023*. Tirana: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 23 August 2024, 2.

Figure 3: Population pyramid of foreign resident population in Albania by main age-groups and sex



Source: INSTAT. 2018. *Foreigners and asylum seekers in Albania 2017*. Tirana: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 22 August 2018.

Analysing these data, the following picture emerges: (i) the *share* of residence permit holders in the near-retirement and post-retirement age ranges (50–59 and 60+) is emerging as significant

(although numerically low).⁷ Disregarding 2024 for now, Table 1 shows that between 2019 and 2023 this share hovered between c.16 % and c.21 % for the 50–59 age-group, and from c.12 % to c.19 % for the over-60s. However, from a peak of 2020, these shares have been falling, which can be explained by more resident permit categories opening up for younger migrants such as digital nomads, students, and international labour migrants; (ii) numerically, however, both age-groups have seen steady growth in numbers up until 2023; (iii) the fastest growth has taken place for the 60+ migrants, whose numbers doubled between 2019 and 2023; and (iv) a stark gender disparity with vastly more men in these ages coming to live in Albania than women (Figures 2 and 3). However, 2024 marks a turning point in this growth, with marked declines in both numbers and shares for both age groups. One explanatory factor could be that figures for 2023 were boosted by the government regulation to issue retirement visas with favourable tax breaks on pensions (from 2022 onwards). Meanwhile, 2024 may reflect the worsening of the cost-of-living crisis in Albania (as elsewhere), including rapidly rising rents and costs for groceries and medical care. If so, one of the key features that made Albania attractive to retirees is now potentially pricing out those on lower budgets.

Data on reasons for residence permits issued are similarly partial, as only the main groups are noted. From data made available, the vast majority of permits are issued for employment reasons (well over half by 2024). The category of retirement is missing from such data, presumably both because of the recency of the legislation and because of the small numbers (so they might come under the category ‘other’). By 2024, a little over 16 % of all residence permits were issued for this category.⁸ However, without precise data, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions. Many people in the age group of interest for this paper – 50 and above – may not be retiree migrants, but come to Albania on employment contracts, especially in the highly skilled sectors of the economy, working as self-employed entrepreneurs, or working in the (International) Non-Governmental Organisation sector. Similarly, the category ‘other’ may include a number of other reasons beyond retirement. While statistical categories box people in, reality is a lot more complex, as the case of Italian retirees to Albania suggests.

Italian pensioners discover their European Florida

Although Italians have long retired abroad, Albania has emerged as a retirement destination only since the mid-2010s. Italians were already familiar with Albania and its people, given the large-scale post-1991 Albanian migration to Italy, memorably symbolised by overcrowded rusty old ships like ‘Vlora’ and ‘Panama’ sailing across the Otranto Straits to land at the Italian ports of Bari and Brindisi with thousands of impoverished and traumatised Albanians on board seeking a new life.⁹ Over the following decades, Italy became home to the second-largest community of Albanian migrants abroad (after Greece), numbering well over half a million by 2025.¹⁰

Data about Italian retirees in Albania are difficult to establish with any measure of accuracy. By the end of 2024, INSTAT recorded 3,763 ‘foreign’ residents of Italian ‘origin’ holding a stay permit living in Albania, accounting for over 17 % of all ‘foreign’ residents in Albania in that year (out

⁷ Official age thresholds for retirement differ by country and occupation.

⁸ INSTAT. 2025. *Foreigners in Albania 2024*. Tirana: Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 25 August 2025, 1.

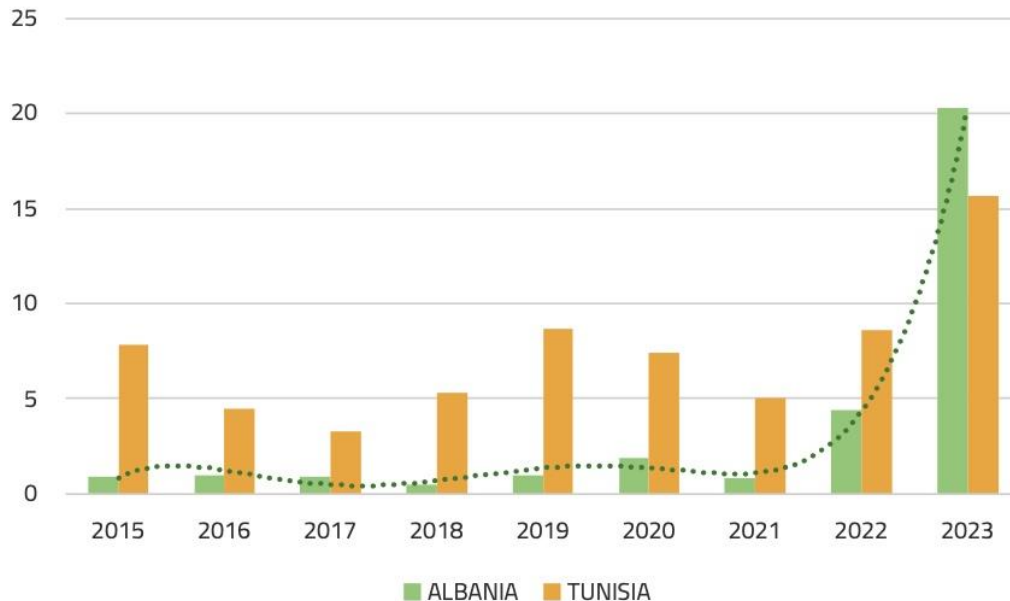
⁹ King, Russell and Nicola Mai. 2008. *Out of Albania*. Oxford: Berghahn.

¹⁰ UN-DESA. 2025. *Key migration statistics Italy: five largest immigrant groups*. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA), 30 January 2025.

of a total of 21,940).¹¹ This was an increase of 11.5 % on 2023. In 2024, Italians also made up c.16 % of residence permit applicants, and since the mid-2010s, have ranked among the top origin groups.¹² Most residence permits were issued for employment, followed by family reunification, and a notable ‘other’ category. Permits specifically for retirement were introduced in 2022, so earlier retirees likely used any of these other categories to settle. For instance, mixed couples might have used the ‘family reunification’ route, while others reportedly used ‘fictive’ employment contracts to circumvent visa regulations (see also next section).¹³ This might explain to some extent also the dominance of men in the older-age groups noted earlier, as in mixed couples only the Italian partner – typically the husband – required a residence permit.

Data from Italian sources provide additional insight. In 2024, the Italian National Institute of Social Security reported 228,600 Italian pensioners aged 65+ living abroad.¹⁴ Albania ranked among the top ten most ‘significant’ destinations, with retirees there overwhelmingly men (c.84 %). Although numerically small (fewer than 500 aged 65+), INPS identified Albania as a *top emerging retirement destination*, with further growth expected (see Figure 4).¹⁵

Figure 4: Migratory fluxes towards Albania and Tunisia (number of emigrants per 100 thousand resident pensioners in Italy); 2010–2023



Source: INPS. 2025. *Annual report, July 2025* (in Italian). Rome: L'Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (National Institute of Social Security) (INPS); (accessed: 10 January 2026), 251.

Reasons for migration stated by INPS include fiscal advantages primarily in the form of tax breaks on pension income, lower cost of living, but also geographical and cultural proximity, combined with the Mediterranean climate.¹⁶ This points to a complex profile of the Italian

¹¹ INSTAT, *Foreigners in Albania 2024*, 2.

¹² INSTAT, *Foreigners in Albania 2024*, 1; INSTAT. 2023. *Foreigners in Albania 2022*. Tirana: National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), 21 August 2023, 4.

¹³ OraNews. 2018. *Italian pensioners in Albania* (in Albanian & Italian). *OraNews*, 11 July 2018.

¹⁴ INPS. 2025. *Annual report, July 2025* (in Italian). Rome: L'Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (National Institute of Social Security); INPS (accessed: 10 January 2026), 243.

¹⁵ INPS, *Annual report*, 247–249.

¹⁶ INPS, *Annual report*, 251.

retiree, certainly of those moving to Albania, as we shall also see shortly from first-hand accounts. Far from an elite phenomenon of ‘affluent individuals [...] moving for a better quality of life’ that used to define typical ‘lifestyle migrants’ in early IRM studies,¹⁷ Italian retirement migrants to Albania seem to be motivated (also, if not primarily) by economic factors and hedging against precarity in later life. Researching lifestyle migration of older individuals from North America to Cuenca, Ecuador, Hayes¹⁸ used the concept of “geographic arbitrage” to explain how moving across borders in the Global North to South direction was an exercise of “symbolic and economic power” for lower-income individuals living in the Global North, enabling them to escape precarity in old age due to economic crises in these societies, and take advantage of opportunities by relocating day-to-day expenses to a low-cost location in the Global South. The economic advantage of this geographic differentiation is further enabled by the global mobility regime that privileges Global North citizens over those from the South.

For a closer look at how “geographic arbitrage” plays out in the context of Italian retirement migration to Albania, we now turn to ...

The Italian expat retiree
... *starting a new life in Albania*

A seventy-year-old is now younger than in the past. They are active people, many get busy, organise themselves in structured groups, and with the patronage of the municipality organise meetings and cultural events. We are not talking about non self-sufficient retirees who live in melancholy. We are talking about people starting a new life. [...] A life – because in Italy it would not be life, but survival. [Mr Roberto Laera]

The above quote is from an interview with Mr Roberto Laera, an Italian retiree living in Tirana, interviewed for an article in the *Balkan Observatory* in 2018.¹⁹ Mr Laera was talking about the small but growing community of Italian retirees who chose to retire in Albania. At the time of the article, in 2018, Mr Laera ran both a consultancy offering services to ‘expats’ living in Albania and an association for Italian pensioners there.

According to Mr Laera, the typical Italian retiree was (in 2018) a pensioner from the north of Italy – Tuscany, Lombardy, Piedmont and Emilia; someone who was self-sufficient and had no health problems; someone who was active as the quote above also indicates. These are not super-wealthy people, but have mostly worked as artisans and upon retirement receive a modest pension (by Italian standards) of around EUR 800–1000 per month, which would be insufficient to accommodate a good life in Milan or Florence, but combined with any savings, can allow the recipient to enjoy a far better quality of life in coastal sunny Albania, and even afford a few “small luxuries like going [a bit more frequently] to a [good] restaurant”. These retirees come to Albania to start a new life, Mr Laera argued, “because in Italy it would not be a life, but survival”.

These sentiments were echoed by other Italian retirees, four of whom share their experiences and views next. First, Mr Angelo Alo, who came to live in Albania in 2015 upon retirement after

¹⁷ Benson and O'Reilly. 2009b: 609–610, quoted in King, Russell / Cela, Eralba, and Tineke Fokkema. 2021. New frontiers in international retirement migration, 1207.

¹⁸ Hayes, *We gained a lot over what we would have had*.

¹⁹ Pedrazzi, Nicola. 2018. *Enjoying retirement in Albania*. *Balkan and Caucasian Observatory*, 5 April 2018. Names and stories of all retiree interviewees are presented as reported in the news articles/TV programmes.

having worked for many years in Italy for Enel, the Italian national grid company.²⁰ Maximising the utility of his pension income was key to this decision, as Mr Alo notes:

I came to Albania in November 2015 and thanks to my pension I live very well. With a pension of 1500–1600 euros and a rent of 200 euros per month with a two-story house, with a garden and everything is a luxury for me. For this house in Italy I have to pay at least 700–800 euros.

The move to Albania and the resulting savings further allowed Mr Alo to pursue his passion: amateur cheese production, in the small lab he set up on the grounds of his house in the outskirts of Durrës. In Albania, he can even find buffalo milk for mozzarella. And when there is not much else to do, Mr Alo goes for a walk with his Albanian and Italian friends in Durrës, a coastal city in Albania not far from the capital Tirana, dubbed by journalists as ‘Albania’s Florida’ due to the growing community of Italian retirees living there.

The second story is of Mr Carmine Iampietro, a 67-year-old (at the time of the first interview in 2017) former motorcyclist from the Milan region who moved to Durrës around the same time as Mr Alo.²¹ “I always wanted to have a house by the sea, and I’m glad I finally did it, since it is quiet and beautiful. You can have a good quality life with just [my] pension here”, he said. We catch up with Mr Iampietro again in December 2025, this time through an interview for an Italian TV Channel.²² Now in his mid-70s, Mr Iampietro is well settled in Durrës and continues to enjoy life in the “small paradise by the sea”, as he puts it. While showing the Italian journalist his nice apartment with a beautiful sea-view, Mr Iampietro recounts why, for him, it makes economic sense to live in Albania instead of Italy. “It is 30 % cheaper”, he notes, and “bills are a fraction of what I would pay in Italy”. They visit the local market, with the fresh fruit and vegetables, where, ironically, several market sellers are older Albanians. Later, they join his group of Italian pensioner friends sipping cool drinks by the sea. Two other pensioners in the group – Massimo and Giuseppe – chipped in, sharing their thoughts and experiences of moving to Albania. Haye’s²³ “geographic arbitrage” is evident in their stories, as they tell how they left Italy because of worsening economic conditions and public services such as healthcare. Albania had not been their first retirement destination, with Giuseppe having moved to Portugal in 2019, while Massimo moved to the Canary Islands. However, over the years, the cost of living went through the roof, so they sought alternatives. Giuseppe would have liked to have retired in the Caribbean, but it was too far away, and for medical reasons, he preferred to stay close to Italy.

For all these Italian pensioners Albania is an ideal place to happily grow old in: economically, socially, and culturally, where their pensions allow for an above-average quality of life, complemented by affordable and high quality private healthcare; enjoying its Mediterranean food, climate, and culture with the added bonus of many local people speaking Italian; with the advantage of its geographic proximity to Italy and therefore closeness to relatives, especially adult children and grandchildren, who still live there; and overall, a nice social life in the company of friends as the Italian retiree community keeps growing.

²⁰ OraNews, *Italian pensioners in Albania*.

²¹ Mejdini, Fatjona. 2017. *Italians see Albania as cheap place to retire*. *Balkan Insights* (BIRN), 20 April 2017.

²² TGCom24. 2025. *In Albania for a new life: how Albania is turning into a “small paradise” for Italian pensioners* (in Italian). *E sempre Cartabianca*, 24 December 2025.

²³ Hayes, *We gained a lot over what we would have had*.

Behind them is Italy, which, as Mr Alo puts it, has “become an unlivable country, both economically and humanly”, especially for pensioners. Mr Laera agrees: “In the north [of Italy], many pensioners are alone”, whereas “[I]n Albania there are values, there is a respect for older people that we no longer have [in Italy]”. While the (imagined) *place accorded to older people in society* may be another reason for Italian retirees to move to Albania in old age, let us see what the reality is for Albanians themselves, through the story of...

The Albanian pensioner
... and the rise of the ‘asylum’

Pleqëria fëlliqësia, s’të do djali, s’të do bija, s’të do kojshia dhe as miqësia (old age is dirty, no one wants you, not your son and not your daughter, not your neighbour nor your kin). [The ‘Pensioner’]

A reader with the alias ‘The Pensioner’ commented with the (in Albanian rhyming) quote above on an article published in one of Albania’s dailies, which reported on an outing that a care home in the northern city of Shkodër had organised for its older residents to mark the International Day of Older People on 1st October 2024.²⁴ This Albanian pensioner’s lamentation that “no one wants older people” is in stark contrast to Mr Laera’s perception of Albanian society’s enduring family-oriented values and respect for older people that we saw earlier.

As noted earlier, Albania has experienced large-scale emigration, as a result of which many older people have been left to live on their own, after all their children have emigrated. My own research has documented these experiences in parts of rural Albania over the years, and the importance of networks of family, kin, and local communities for older people’s survival and a dignified life, in the context of absent or rudimentary public social services.²⁵ However, emigration has continued unabated and has resulted in entire rural areas being hollowed out, and the very fabric of communities coming undone.

Meanwhile, some older people have moved to urban areas following the simultaneous large-scale rural to urban migration of their family members that took place over this time.²⁶ Here, they joined city-based older people whose children and grandchildren, too, have often emigrated abroad. It is here in urban areas that many older people, especially the ‘older old’ – in their 70s and 80s – now find themselves living in care homes, something which was almost unheard of even ten years ago. In the summer of 2024, a tragic event shone a light on the plight of older people, neglect and poor care some experience in some care homes. In August 2024, an 82-year-old pensioner died in a privately run care home after his 78-year-old roommate struck him on

²⁴ Kavaja, Ergys. 2024. *Older people from a retirement home spend a day differently: a touristic outing on the lake* (in Albanian). *Shqiptarja online*, 1 October 2024. In Albanian, the term ‘asylum’ (*azil*) is used in daily parlance and most mass media, to denote an ‘old people’s home’. In this paper, I use various terms interchangeably – old people’s home, residential care home, nursing home, care home – but which refer to the same. See also a linked discussion on this in the penultimate section of the paper.

²⁵ Vullnetari, Julie and Russell King. 2008. Does your granny eat grass? On mass migration, care drain and the fate of older people in rural Albania. *Global Networks* 8(2), 139–171; King, Russell and Julie Vullnetari. 2006. Orphan pensioners and migrating grandparents: the impact of mass migration on older people in rural Albania. *Ageing and Society* 26(5), 783–816; Vullnetari, Julie. 2012. *Albania on the move: links between internal and international migration*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

²⁶ Vullnetari, *Albania on the move*.

the head with an iron walking stick.²⁷ It later transpired that both were suffering from dementia, yet the care home did not seem to have provided specialist care.

However, the mass media have also reported positive and more nuanced stories. For another set of examples, I refer to the article published in Euronews Albania marking the International Day of Older People on 1st October 2024.²⁸ Three women in their eighties – Elvana, Bukuria, and Gliqeria – are interviewed in a residential care home in Tirana. From what little is reported about their background, we learn that they were widowed and lived on their own prior to arriving at the centre. Elvana, whose only other relative was a son who had emigrated to England, had felt very lonely on her own; “loneliness smothers you”, as she put it. She found plenty of company in the care home and had made friends, so her experience had been a positive one. In contrast, Gliqeria, 82, said she missed the “warmth” of her home, and she seemed to have a relatively active life while there, going food shopping in the local market, cooking, etc. She had always imagined her later life living together with her children and grandchildren, and the idea that she would one day end up living in a care home had never crossed her mind, so this was something she found very hard to accept. “In the beginning I was very unhappy”, she said, “but now I got used to it [...] I didn’t like it, but I didn’t want to upset my son”. Finally, Bukuria, 88, had spent nearly a decade after being widowed, dividing her time between living alone at home and then with her son and daughter’s family. Tired of constant moving, she longed for a place of her own and found peace in the care home. Here, she appreciated having her privacy with her own room, as well as focusing more on reading and friendships, as opposed to household chores like cooking, food shopping, and guest hosting, which was all she seemed to be doing previously.

A final lived experience comes from the programme ‘One of us’ which broadcast to the public a day in the life of a pensioner living in a care home in Ibe, a village near Tirana.²⁹ Mr Elmaz Sinojmeri, an engineer by profession and from Tirana, aged 67, had been in the nursing home for two years by the time of the interview (December 2024). He was persuaded to go there by his older sisters, after living for 16 years on his own, “alone like a cuckoo,” as Mr Sinojmeri described it. While health problems were a strong factor for moving there, so was loneliness, which in retirement was compounded by the divorce from his wife and the emigration of his only child abroad. Like in the other examples noted earlier, Mr Sinojmeri too found the idea of living in the care home difficult at the beginning, but slowly got used to it, and eventually felt it was the right decision. Being there was costly, he said. However, he had access to around-the-clock care and had friends to chat or play board games with. Meanwhile, Tirana is not far, so he can visit his sister and her family, where he also spends festivities like Christmas and New Year’s. His daughter also visits him almost monthly (as she lives in Kosovo), and they spend that time together in their house in Tirana.

Reflecting on the situation more widely, Mr Sinojmeri pointed to the rise in the number of nursing homes in the last few years, especially in Tirana. From his point of view, this was a necessity, a “sacrifice”, for many working sons and daughters who would otherwise need to leave

²⁷ *Shqiptarja*. 2024. The murder at the older people’s home in Tirana: the testimony of arrested nurses is uncovered (in Albanian). *Shqiptarja online*, 9 August 2024.

²⁸ Euronews Albania. 2024. Old age in an old people’s home: experiences of older people in the absence of their children (in Albanian). *Euronews Albania*, 1 October 2024.

²⁹ Nako, Xhensila. 2024. 16 years alone like a cuckoo (in Albanian). *Shqiptarja* ‘One of us’, 25 December 2024.

their jobs “to look after us” (i.e. older people). “But if you leave your job, you’re finished. Your work is the source of your income,” he added.

Stories such as these about older people living alone, especially in remote rural areas, and the rise of institutional care provision, have appeared with increasing frequency in Albanian media in recent years. They are often accompanied by televised debates in which journalists, public intellectuals, and activists link these developments to large-scale outmigration, as well as to changing perceptions and practices around care in older age, even when sons and daughters are around. We turn to these changes next.

Changing dynamics of ageing and care in later life in Albania

Provision of institutional residential care for older people

First, there is the organisation of care and living in later life. The major changes are twofold: the *increase in the provision of institutional residential care for the Albanian elderly*, which goes hand in hand with *a change in perceptions towards acceptance* of such care provision as an option. Numerically, the rise in the provision of institutional residential care is very small. According to a study by the ILO, as of 2022, only 23 institutions offered residential care for older people across all of Albania, with a capacity to accommodate just over 700 people, covering less than 1 % (0.78 %) of the estimated number of older people needing long-term care countrywide.³⁰ Of these, only eight care homes were publicly funded and run. To these are added a few more day-care centres and other non-residential services, but these far outstripped demand. Community care was similarly limited, with capacity to be offered to only 1.8 % of the estimated number of the elderly in need of long-term care.³¹ As such, waiting times for those who need such long-term publicly funded residential care can go into months, if not years.

As with other social services in Albania, such as education and healthcare, a two-tier social care economy – including care for older people – has developed there over the last 35 years. As public provision has fallen far behind demand in both quantity and quality, private providers have eagerly stepped in to take advantage of lucrative markets, with a mixed provision of for-profit and non-profit aims. However, the cost of living in privately run residential homes, “with a room of one’s own”, as Bukurie emphasised in the earlier example, especially those that seek to make a profit, is often impossible to cover with the meagre pensions most older people receive in Albania. According to the ILO study noted earlier, private for-profit residential care institutions charged ALL (Albanian lek) 45,000 or more per month (in 2022), with additional payments required for additional services, especially more specialist care.³² Those who can afford to live there, therefore, have either some personal savings from good jobs previously, or – as is often the case – are supported by their children, including through remittances from abroad.

Beyond *social class inequalities*, there is also a significant *geographical disparity* in such residential care provision, limited as it is. Of the 23 residential care homes noted above, some 13 were in the capital Tirana, with the remaining 10 scattered across the main cities around the

³⁰ ILO. 2022. *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania: challenges and key policy issues*. Working Paper. Budapest: International Labour Organisation (ILO) Decent Work Technical Support Team and Country Office for Central and Eastern Europe.

³¹ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 11.

³² ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 11, 16. This was around EUR 450 which far exceeds average pensions in Albania (just over ALL 16,000 in 2019, or around EUR 150/month).

country.³³ Rural areas continue to be underserved, especially in more remote and mountainous regions. Such geographical distribution of residential services is understandable given that a third of Albania's population now lives in Tirana, as enumerated by the 2023 Census.³⁴ Meanwhile, rural areas have suffered significant depopulation, making public services there economically unviable. Nevertheless, data suggest that the need for some form of public social care for older people is just as acute in rural and, especially, remote areas. Staying with the same ILO study, nearly half (46 %) of older people (65 years or older) in Albania live in rural areas, where they often constitute the only, or the majority, population, due to the massive rural exodus of younger people over the last three post-communist decades (1991–2025).³⁵ *Elderly people living in rural areas are especially vulnerable as they face complex disadvantages.* These include lower pensions – over 50 % lower – than their urban counterparts, and few or non-existent healthcare provision and limited access to community care.³⁶ Moreover, older people in rural areas also face arguably higher levels of *loneliness and social isolation*.³⁷ Often left alone after all their adult children have migrated to urban centres within Albania or abroad, whatever remains of the local community is what sustains them. With such massive rural outmigration, healthcare provision has also been decimated, while social care lags behind.

As Albania's population is projected to continue ageing, and more rapidly than until now, it is reasonable to expect a rise in both demand and provision of residential (and day or mobile) care services for older people in the coming decades.³⁸ The Albanian government's National Action Plan (NAP) on Ageing 2020–2024, approved by the Albanian Government in December 2019, presented a vision for a dignified life in older age.³⁹ However, the government's financial investment in enabling this vision remains limited. For example, the ILO estimated that *total public expenditure on social care services* in Albania in 2017 was around 0.1 % of GDP; additional *expenditure on long-term elderly care* built into this NAP was around 0.04 % of GDP per year.⁴⁰ According to this NAP on Ageing, the government planned to build just *one* additional public residential care home, while envisaging additional care provision through other forms, such as providing support mechanisms for family carers and developing home care providers. With such limited public investment, it seems likely that the strongest care provision will come from the private sector.⁴¹

³³ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 11.

³⁴ INSTAT, *Albania population and housing census 2023*, 117.

³⁵ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 1.

³⁶ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 16. In 2019, the average urban scheme pension was ALL 16,254 (around EUR 150 /month), while its average rural counterpart was ALL 9,165; the 'social pension' introduced for the first time in 2015, was ALL 7,465.

³⁷ Conkova, Nina / Vullnetari, Julie / King, Russell, and Tinneke Fokkema. 2018. Left like stones in the middle of the road: Narratives of ageing alone and coping strategies in rural Albania and Bulgaria. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences* 20(20), 1–9.

³⁸ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*.

³⁹ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 20.

⁴⁰ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*, 20.

⁴¹ ILO, *Long-term care for the elderly in Albania*.

Changing perceptions and practices around older-age care

The second key societal change that merits discussion is *socio-cultural attitudes towards living in residential care homes for older people* in Albanian society. As noted earlier, while the *scale* of residential care provision remains negligible, the importance of the phenomenon is more symbolic in its *societal significance*. The social acceptance that *Albanian older people* may live in an old people's home signals a shift in attitudes and perceptions around the place and role of older people in society, and the institution of family more widely.

Traditionally, multigenerational households were the norm. In rural areas, these extended families lived in close geographical proximity to each other and formed neighbourhoods (*lagje*), as people relied on these kin and social networks for material, emotional support, and generally their social life. Older people were venerated, often being considered as pillars of local communities. Generally, they had significant decision-making power both within the household and local communities, albeit in strongly gendered ways, with older men dominating local rural public life, while women's role was mostly consigned to the domestic sphere. Intra-household practical care was exchanged, whereby older people provided childcare and/or help with household chores, while the younger generations looked after older people as they aged. Hands-on care was almost entirely reliant on the unpaid labour of women in the household, including older women and grandmothers.⁴²

These traditional patterns of social organisation experienced radical changes during the nearly half a century of socialist transformations (1945–1990), especially the formation of nuclear families (young/working-age parents and their children) as part of the country's industrialisation drive and accompanying urbanisation in the post-war years. Gender relations underwent significant changes, too, especially in urban areas and especially as formal education spread across the country.⁴³ While the (communist) Party and the state took on a central role in people's lives, including centralising a number of decisions that were previously locally negotiated, multi-generational family structures in rural areas endured. Reasons for this include: restrictions on internal migration, especially to urban areas, a ban on international migration, and an inadequate supply of housing for a rural population that was rapidly growing. As such, in the context of multi-general families, care for older people continued to be provided within the family and at home. This expectation was also enshrined in state legislation from the mid-1970s onwards, according to which it was the *duty of the family to care for people in later life*, especially for parents who were disabled and lacked the necessary means of livelihood. Putting an older parent in an old people's home was, therefore, the exception rather than the rule, not least as such institutions were nearly non-existent. Only older people who had no children or other close relatives to look after them were eligible to be housed there. These practical considerations were combined with the social stigma that accompanied even the thought of putting one's parents in an old people's home.⁴⁴ What was once seen as a move that would symbolise a lack of respect and care from an adult child towards their older parent/s, and therefore as socially unacceptable, is now gradually changing.

⁴² Vullnetari, Julie and Russell King. 2016. Washing men's feet: gender, care and migration in Albania during and after communism. *Gender, Place and Culture* 23(2), 198–215.

⁴³ Vullnetari and King, *Washing men's feet*.

⁴⁴ Vullnetari and King, *Washing men's feet*.

Alongside the rise of cases reported in the media, the presence of some notable public figures in care homes has sparked public discussions about such socio-cultural changes in Albanian society. The recent death of Mrs Margarita Xhepa at the age of 93 (early April 2025) is one such instance. One of Albania's most famous cinematography icons, Mrs Xhepa's career spanned over eight decades in leading roles across the theatre and television screen. The fact that she spent the final years of her life in an old people's home, albeit an expensive one, drew condemnation from the wider public towards the Albanian authorities for not providing the necessary support to avoid such an – in the eyes of many – undignified fate, especially for a figure of this calibre. Her colleague, Mrs Tinka Kurti, another film icon, who similarly lived in the same care home on the outskirts of Tirana, described her feelings during an interview about her own move to the care home as a "tragedy".⁴⁵ Similar to the examples we saw earlier, both women had been living at the care home after being widowed, and as their immediate family – their sons – had emigrated to North America. Their Tirana-based networks of distant relatives and neighbours did keep an eye on them while they lived at home, but in the end, the kind of round-the-clock care they required in their advanced age made a move to a care home a sensible solution.

A public discussion ensued, including several televised debates, about the changing way of 'doing families' in contemporary Albania, care for older people in later life, the increasing presence of older people's homes in the country's care landscape, and the role of older people in the family and wider society. Numerous factors were noted from materialities of contemporary life, to large-scale emigration, to the advent of modern family norms and cultures. However, *emotions and care* for one another often took centre stage. These, some of the discussants argued, had been key to family and community life before, and were amongst the first to fall victim to the new (capitalist, neoliberal, modern?) way of life.⁴⁶ These dynamics are further unpacked next.

Profiles of older people in residential care homes

From the examples we saw earlier, and others reported in the mass media, we can build a tentative profile of older people most likely to live in an old people's home. First, they are rarely part of a couple: it appears that most of them are *widowed or divorced, therefore, living without a partner, and entered a care home after having lived alone for some time* – 16 years in Mr Sinojmeri's case. Indeed, my previous research, which explored experiences of older people living alone in rural areas after all their children had emigrated, aligns with this pattern.⁴⁷ When asked how they envisaged their future, elderly research participants in my studies responded that they would continue to live in their home for as long as both spouses were alive, viewing the death of one partner as the main point of uncertainty. At that stage, they hoped to move in with one of their adult children's families in Albania or abroad. Research amongst older Albanians who were migrating transnationally to live with their children's families showed that these were people in the 'younger-old' age groups.⁴⁸ Those in the 'older-old' groups found such migrations almost impossible due to the difficulty of travel, as well as other factors such as social isolation abroad.

⁴⁵ TopChannel. 2025. *Tinka Kurti in an asylum* (in Albanian). *TopChannel Albania*, 8 April 2025.

⁴⁶ TopChannel, *Tinka Kurti in an asylum*.

⁴⁷ King and Vullnetari, *Does your granny eat grass?*; King and Vullnetari, *Orphan pensioners and migrating grandparents*.

⁴⁸ King, Russell / Cela, Eralba / Fokkema, Tineke, and Julie Vullnetari. 2014. The migration and wellbeing of the zero generation: transgenerational care, grandparenting and loneliness amongst Albanian older people. *Population, Space and Place* 20(8), 728–738.

Therefore, *age is the second intersecting factor, combined with limited mobility and independence*. From the examples above, we observe that nursing home residents are often in the ‘older-old’ age groups – in their 70s and older – and/or who need medical care due to illnesses such as dementia, Alzheimer’s, or diabetes, or have limited physical mobility, such as being in a wheelchair. This often means they are less able to take care of their daily needs on their own or without regular assistance. According to journalist Ermelinda Hoxhaj, during one of the televised debates noted earlier, these were around 70 % of older people she had encountered while visiting numerous old people’s homes in Albania in the course of her reporting over the years.⁴⁹ The views within the care home in Ibe village, shot while filming Mr Sinojmeri’s interview we saw earlier, gave a similar impression as well.⁵⁰

Third, *emigration, often abroad, of sons and daughters* was usually a reason older people ended up living on their own, and then in a care home, as we saw from the earlier examples. However, this was not always the case. As Mr Sinojmeri’s interview also showed, there is increasing acceptance that even when sons and daughters live in Albania, or even in the same town or city, they have their own lives, much of which is occupied by their job (or at times more than one job). “Without a job, you’re finished”, in Mr Sinojmeri’s words. For example, a 92-year-old man interviewed by *Shqiptarja* in a Tirana park where he went to socialise, described living alone after his wife’s death, despite his daughter and grandchildren also living in Tirana.⁵¹ His only regular companion was a kitten brought to him by his niece, while his family visited him once a month or so. He considered himself fortunate to still be able to care for himself independently.

A final point, and where the somewhat similar profiles presented so far diverge, is the type of care home older people went to: publicly or privately funded. The *socio-economic background* (i.e. level of savings, pensions, assets, or financial help from children) made the difference between a well-looked-after, happy later life in a private care home, vs publicly funded places where older people have been at times subjected to horrendous physical and psychological abuse in the past. The vast majority of the examples presented earlier, and the overwhelmingly positive stories, therefore, were from older people interviewed in private, expensive care homes. While private care homes are expanding and heavily investing in promotion, the waiting times for publicly funded residential homes are long – up to two years, according to one account. Mr Hashmet Koboçi, a 72-year-old former miner, told a reporter in 2018 how he had waited for two years to come to the publicly funded care home in Tirana. Prior to this, he had lived for ten years on his own, after his wife “abandoned” him and emigrated to Italy. He could no longer continue to live independently due to his complex respiratory medical problems caused by his work in the mines for over three decades.⁵² Most older people from low-income backgrounds who live on their own cannot afford a care home, even if they wanted to live in one, so they struggle on their own instead. Most of these low-income older people also live overwhelmingly in rural, remote areas, adding a *spatial dimension to compound these intersecting inequalities*.⁵³

⁴⁹ TopChannel, *Tinka Kurti in an asylum*.

⁵⁰ Nako, *16 years alone like a cuckoo*.

⁵¹ Shqiptarja. 2025. [The 92 year old who challenges his age: once specialised in the Soviet Union, he now lives alone](#) (in Albanian). *Shqiptarja online*, 15 March 2025.

⁵² Hoxhaj, Ermelinda. 2018. [Five applications a day for the public older people’s asylum](#) (in Albanian). *TV Klan online*, 26 August 2018.

⁵³ See, for another example, Euronews Albania. 2023. [The century-old mother who lives alone](#) (in Albanian). *Euronews Albania*, 4 November 2023.

Nevertheless, for the time being, the family and community continue to be the main sites of care provision for older people in Albania, both hands-on and emotional care. Where older people live alone, neighbours and remaining relatives watch out for them, often providing small everyday and emotional support. In urban areas, old-age care is increasingly provided through paid day carers, almost always women, often internal and at times international migrant women.

Concluding remarks

This paper has sought to document and analyse the evolution of broader contemporary (post-communist) migration and development dynamics in Albania, with a *focus on older people*. In so doing, it has included immigration, and more specifically *International Retirement Migration* (IRM) from Italy, thus noting shifting European geographies of IRM further South, and complexifying typologies of IRM beyond pure ‘lifestyle’ migrations. Using Haye’s concept of “geographic arbitrage”,⁵⁴ the paper has sought to answer the core question: Is Albania a place to happily grow old in, and for whom? It was found that Albania can be an ideal place to grow old in for some international retirees, such as Italians, who use their higher economic and symbolic power to move out of old-age precarity facing them in the Global North (such as Italy) to a low-cost Global South location (like Albania), where they can enjoy a small piece of paradise by the sea. In contrast, many Albanian pensioners in Albania struggle to cover their day-to-day cost of living on their meagre pensions, while enduring the separation from their emigrant children and grandchildren, often living abroad. They and society are gradually accepting that life in older age may well involve a move, but to a care home, rather than with their family. Intersecting inequalities – socio-economic background, living alone (or in a couple), age, ability, level of independence, and medical care needs, along with geographical location and having emigrant children abroad, together, contributed towards differentiated outcomes for these older Albanians as seen in this analysis.

Linked to the above, the paper has further documented and analysed some of the key changes that have taken place in Albanian society regarding ‘doing families’, the role of older people in society, and care in later life. The scale of outmigration in Albania over the last 35 years has had a profound impact on these dynamics, and the ways in which intra-family relationships can be maintained, especially transnationally across borders and over long distances. However, broader societal and economic changes have meant that even when older people’s children have not emigrated, familial care provision can no longer be guaranteed. Whilst considered as painful, by some experienced as “tragic”, and still “shameful” in the eyes of others, there is a gradual acceptance that long-term care for older people *can* also be provided in older people’s homes. All of these together signal major societal changes for Albanian society, not least around the meaning of older age and care in later life.

Meanwhile, in terms of public policy, a paradox can be observed. While Albanian policy makers and international/‘foreign’ donors raise the alarm about the risks of population ageing, especially for the ability of the state to provide adequate pensions and other types of welfare in a context of a rapidly shrinking labour force, Albania’s economic development policies also include attracting ageing immigrants to retire to Albania. Yet public welfare provision for older people already living in Albania remains weak, at a time when reliance on family and social networks

⁵⁴ Hayes, *We gained a lot over what we would have had*.

cannot be guaranteed, not least because of outmigration. Nevertheless, as I have strongly argued in previous publications, it is imperative to avoid looking at older people through a deficiency and/or needs lens. For example, elsewhere I have demonstrated how older people in Albania are often the linchpin of families and migration projects, with productive and reproductive work ranging from childcare provision to emotional support, to looking after financial and real estate assets for migrant family members living abroad.⁵⁵

In closing, while this article sought to draw attention to key features of Albania's dynamics of migration and development, further rigorous research is needed in a number of directions. A non-exhaustive list of research questions – a kind of research agenda – can be offered to this end: what is the landscape of care provision in Albania for older people? What are these older people's profiles, experiences and views of life in a care home? What are the experiences, thoughts and views of older people themselves about these socio-cultural and economic changes in society in their lifetime? How are these experiences shaped by unequal power relations along intersecting subjectivities of gender, age, formal education, ethnic background, rural-urban background, family situation, individual and family migration experience, and individual aspirations? What does it mean to be an older and ageing person in Albanian society today, and what factors shape these ideas of identity and belonging in later life? How does Albanian society today value the contribution older people make to society, whether through childcare provision, everyday household chores, emotional support to other family members, and beyond? How can experiences of relatively well-to-do international retirees coming to live in Albania compare, link to, and intersect with, those of Albanian retirees themselves? What is the current state of IRM to Albania, who migrates, where do they move to, what life do they enjoy? What are Albanian central and local authorities doing or ought to be doing, to support a dignified life post-retirement for (Albanian) older people? How can older people be meaningfully involved in these public policy debates and decision-making processes around decisions that affect their life? And last but not least, what do all these questions above look like when asked about, and from the perspective of, older Albanian migrant retirees who have worked abroad for many years and are now reaching retirement age, and contemplating the decision of where to spend their years in later life, including whether or not to return for retirement to Albania?

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⁵⁵ Vullnetari, Julie. 2023. Older people's contribution to development through carework: the role of childcare by grandparents in migration and development. *Progress in Development Studies* 23(4), 444–460.

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