



The Rights of Immigrants and the Challenges of their Re-Integration after the Return to Albania

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Abstract

Immigrants' rights constitute a fundamental issue in contemporary societies, as they directly influence social integration and individual well-being. At the international level, numerous conventions and treaties have established standards for the protection of immigrants' social rights; however, their implementation varies considerably across countries. This situation highlights the necessity of strengthening policies and programs aimed at safeguarding and promoting immigrants' rights, ensuring equal opportunities for participation and development within host societies. Such efforts are essential not only for the welfare of immigrants but also for social cohesion and overall societal progress. Emigration has been a persistent phenomenon in Albania since the 1990s, marked by the large-scale departure of citizens seeking better living conditions abroad. In recent years, however, a growing number of Albanian migrants have returned to their country of origin due to economic, social, and personal changes in host countries. The re-integration of return migrants into Albanian society presents a range of challenges, particularly in relation to employment, social inclusion, and access to fundamental rights. This paper aims to examine the rights of immigrants and the main challenges associated with their re-integration after returning to Albania, emphasizing the need for a coordinated institutional and social approach to foster inclusion, social cohesion, and sustainable national development.

Keywords: Rights, Immigrants, Integration, Convention and Treaties, Continuous Phenomenon

1. Introduction

Human mobility is an intrinsic aspect of human existence, and freedom of movement is widely recognized as one of the most fundamental individual rights and a prerequisite for participation in society (United Nations, 1948, as cited in European Commission, n.d.). Since the mid-20th century, international frameworks have sought to protect basic human rights, including those of migrants, setting standards for their treatment in host countries.

In recent years, migration governance—particularly regarding return and reintegration—has remained a central issue for international policy. The European Union and other global actors have emphasized the importance of sustainable reintegration as part of comprehensive migration strategies. Sustainable reintegration is understood as

supporting returnees' economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being in their home communities (European Commission, n.d.; OECD, 2020). This rights-based approach aims to go beyond mere physical return to ensure that migrants are able to rebuild their lives in their countries of origin.

Despite these efforts, empirical research shows that many returnees do not receive adequate reintegration assistance, and existing programs often fail to meet the diverse needs of returnees due to gaps in design, implementation, and monitoring (OECD, 2020). For example, large-scale reintegration programs funded by the EU and implemented with partners such as the International Organization for Migration have been criticized for insufficient transparency and support, with many returnees reporting unmet needs after return (Associated Press, 2025).

In the Albanian context, migration became a mass phenomenon in the 1990s as citizens sought better economic prospects abroad. More recently, a notable increase in return migration has been observed, especially after global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from Albania's National Institute of Statistics indicate that approximately 108,000 returnees were recorded between 2012 and 2024, with higher return rates after 2020 (Politiko.al, 2025). While many returnees have the right to reintegration support through institutions such as the National Employment and Skills Agency, utilization of these services remains limited and often fails to address the specific needs of different groups of returnees (Politiko.al, 2025).

Return migration itself encompasses more than physical relocation; it involves reintegration into the labour market, re-establishment of social networks, cultural adaptation, and recognition of qualifications obtained abroad. Effective reintegration requires a coordinated, evidence-based policy response that aligns legal protections with comprehensive socio-economic support tailored to the realities faced by returnees in Albania and comparable contexts.

2. Methods

This research is grounded in a multidisciplinary analysis of migrants' rights and the reintegration challenges faced by returnees in Albania. The study combines legal analysis with field research to examine the effectiveness of national and international frameworks in regulating migration, facilitating reintegration, and identifying gaps between policy and practice.

The methodological approach followed a structured, multi-phase process:

1. **Literature Review and Legal Analysis:** The initial phase involved collecting and reviewing primary legal documents, academic literature, international treaties, and national legislation. Particular emphasis was placed on recent studies and policy reports related to return migration and reintegration in Albania (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025) and evaluations of services available to returnees across Albanian municipalities (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025).
2. **Analytical Interpretation:** Building on the literature review, this phase involved critical analysis and synthesis of key legal and policy instruments governing migration and return in Albania. The objective was to interpret how international standards intersect with national laws and influence governance and protection frameworks for migrants and returnees (Terre des hommes Albania, 2025).
3. **Field Research:** Empirical data were gathered through structured interviews and focus group discussions with return migrants, legal experts, and representatives of NGOs working on migrant reintegration. These qualitative insights provided contextual depth to the legal analysis and helped identify practical barriers to reintegration such as unemployment, lack of information about available services, and social exclusion (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025).
4. **Data Evaluation and Comparative Analysis:** The final phase involved analytical assessment of the collected qualitative and secondary data. This included comparing reintegration strategies in Albania to regional practices and identifying patterns, challenges, and potential best practices for reintegration policies, supported by empirical evidence of reintegration outcomes (Politiko, 2025; INSTAT, 2025).

The integration of legal, policy, and empirical perspectives was designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of return migration and reintegration in Albania. Through this combined methodology, the research seeks to inform policy development and contribute to academic discourse on migration governance.

2.1 Legal Framework on Emigration and Migrants' Rights in Albania

The modern Albanian legal framework on migration traces back to the Law on Migration enacted in 1995, responding to significant emigration flows following the early 1990s. This legislation reflects Albania's national context of widespread

emigration driven by socio-economic instability and high unemployment. Over time, this legal framework has been complemented by strategic commitments to align national regulations with international standards on migrants' rights. The legal framework addresses migration through three primary dimensions:

2.2 Facilitation of Regular Migration Channels

Albanian legislation emphasizes the combination of combating irregular migration with proactive measures to expand legal migration pathways. Given that employment motives largely drive emigration from Albania, creating safe and legal avenues for labour migration is critical. Although the Constitution and international instruments affirm the right to emigrate and integrate internationally recognized rights, structural limitations persist in providing comprehensive labour migration pathways and enforcement mechanisms (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025).

2.3 Protection of Albanians Living Abroad

The Albanian Constitution guarantees the protection of rights for citizens residing abroad and supports cultural and national identity. National legislation further aims to safeguard these rights and strengthen ties with the homeland. Specific provisions include:

- **Political Rights:** Albanian citizens abroad retain voting rights and participation in political life, although practical mechanisms such as remote voting have faced implementation challenges.
- **Social and Economic Rights:** Consular services are expected to assist citizens with legal procedures such as property claims and pension entitlements; however, coverage and effectiveness vary across posts.
- **Educational and Cultural Rights:** Institutions like the Institute of the Diaspora are tasked with preserving language and cultural heritage, although their impact depends on funding and coordination.
- **Administrative Assistance:** The state is mandated to facilitate administrative procedures, including document issuance and consular support, although returnees often report difficulties navigating these processes due to limited information and bureaucratic barriers (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025).

2.4 Return and Reintegration of Migrants

Albanian law also addresses migrant return, whether voluntary or forced due to irregular status abroad. The framework aims to facilitate sustainable reintegration through services such as job placement assistance, recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, financial support for economic reintegration, preservation of social security rights, and incentives for business development. However, **significant challenges remain** in implementation:

- **Ambiguity and Non-binding Provisions:** Many legal texts lack precise, enforceable language, resulting in inconsistent application.
- **Implementation Gaps:** Institutional capacity to enforce reintegration provisions remains limited, with services often inaccessible or poorly adapted to returnees' needs (Politiko, 2025; World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2025).
- **Reintegration Difficulties:** Empirical evidence indicates that many returnees face higher unemployment rates and limited access to stable work upon return, particularly in the period following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a deterioration in conditions for access to services and increased intentions to re-emigrate (INSTAT, 2025; Politiko, 2025).
- **Vulnerable Groups:** Returnees from marginalized communities, such as Roma and Egyptians, often face compounded barriers to effective reintegration, including social exclusion, lack of documentation, and discrimination (UNDP Albania, 2025).

These implementation challenges point to the need for strengthened coordination, targeted support mechanisms, and evidence-based policy reforms to effectively uphold the legal rights of returnees and support their sustainable reintegration into Albanian society.

3. Key Aspects of Migrant Rights, Policies, and Best Practices

Ensuring the protection of migrants' rights across social, economic, and political dimensions is fundamental to promoting inclusion, equality, and long-term integration. Contemporary migration research emphasizes that effective migration governance requires comprehensive policies addressing employment, housing, education, and civic participation, both in host countries and countries of origin (OECD, 2020; IOM, 2022). These domains constitute the core pillars of migrant protection and sustainable integration.

3.1 *Employment and Social Protection*

The right to work is widely recognized as a cornerstone of migrant integration and economic self-sufficiency. Equal access to employment opportunities, free from discrimination based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, or religion, is a key obligation under international labour standards (ILO, 2019). In Albania, the Labour Code regulates employment relations, establishing provisions on working hours, minimum wages, annual leave, occupational safety, and social insurance coverage. However, empirical studies indicate that returning migrants often face barriers in accessing stable employment, particularly due to skill mismatches and limited recognition of qualifications acquired abroad (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022).

Social protection—encompassing health insurance, workplace safety, unemployment benefits, and paid leave—is essential for ensuring decent working conditions and preventing labour exploitation. International evidence suggests that migrants' inclusion in national social protection systems significantly enhances labour market participation and reduces vulnerability (OECD, 2020). Effective enforcement of labour legislation and regular monitoring by relevant authorities remain crucial for safeguarding migrant workers' rights and promoting their integration into the formal economy.

3.2 *Housing*

Access to adequate and secure housing represents one of the most persistent challenges faced by migrants and returnees. Housing is increasingly understood not merely as shelter but as a determinant of social stability, access to services, and overall well-being (UN-Habitat, 2020). Migrants often encounter discrimination, affordability constraints, and limited access to long-term accommodation, particularly following forced return or prolonged absence from the home country.

International best practices highlight the importance of integrated housing policies that combine temporary reception facilities with long-term housing solutions and community-based support (IOM, 2022). In Albania, empirical assessments reveal that housing insecurity significantly undermines reintegration outcomes, particularly for vulnerable groups such as low-income families and ethnic minorities (UNDP Albania, 2023).

3.3 *Education*

Education plays a central role in the social integration of migrants and their families. Inclusive education systems contribute to human capital development and long-term social cohesion by addressing linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers (UNESCO, 2019). Effective educational inclusion requires equal access to public education, language and cultural orientation programs, academic support services, and curricula that promote diversity and social inclusion.

Studies demonstrate that migrants' educational outcomes improve significantly when host and origin countries invest in targeted integration measures, including language training and recognition of prior learning (OECD, 2020). In the Albanian context, returnee children often face challenges related to curriculum differences, language adaptation, and limited institutional support, underscoring the need for flexible and inclusive education policies (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022).

3.4 *Civic and Political Participation*

Civic and political participation constitutes a vital dimension of migrant integration, enabling individuals to engage actively in community life and democratic processes. Migrants commonly participate through civil society organizations, community initiatives, and advocacy groups, which play a key role in promoting social inclusion and protecting rights (IOM, 2019). Where legally permitted, political participation—such as voting and standing for office—further strengthens

migrants' sense of belonging and representation.

Migrant-led organizations contribute significantly to legal assistance, awareness-raising, and community outreach. Research highlights that civic education programs, language training, and institutional support mechanisms are effective in fostering active participation and social trust (OECD, 2020).

3.5 *International Best Practices*

Comparative international experience provides valuable insights into effective migrant integration policies. Countries such as **Canada and Australia** have developed structured employment integration programs combining skills assessment, mentorship, and language training (OECD, 2019). **France and the United Kingdom** ensure broad access to health care for migrants, adapting services to address migrant-specific needs (WHO, 2018). **Sweden and Switzerland** emphasize cultural orientation programs and strong cooperation with civil society organizations, while **Germany and New Zealand** have established comprehensive legal aid and social welfare frameworks for migrants (IOM, 2022). **The Netherlands and Norway** invest heavily in education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities for migrants.

These models demonstrate that integrated, rights-based approaches yield more sustainable integration outcomes and offer relevant lessons for policy development in Albania.

3.6 *Challenges Faced by Returning Migrants in Albania*

Return migration constitutes a critical dimension of Albania's migration landscape. Migrants return for diverse reasons, including forced return by immigration authorities, difficulties integrating into host labour markets, family considerations, psychological factors, or the completion of initial migration objectives (IOM, 2019). Reintegration, however, remains a highly complex and multidimensional process.

Empirical evidence indicates that returning migrants in Albania frequently face challenges related to unemployment, limited access to social services, housing insecurity, and insufficient recognition of skills and qualifications acquired abroad (INSTAT, 2021; UNDP Albania, 2023). Reintegration also involves rebuilding social networks and readapting to cultural norms, processes that are often underestimated in policy design.

Research consistently shows that without coordinated institutional support, returnees are at increased risk of economic marginalization and re-emigration (OECD, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive, evidence-based reintegration strategies that integrate legal protections with targeted socio-economic support, tailored to the specific needs of returning migrants in Albania.

3.7 *Perceptions and Motivations of Returnees*

Return migrants' perceptions of their migration experience play a crucial role in shaping reintegration outcomes and future mobility intentions. Empirical evidence suggests that many returnees perceive their experience abroad as beneficial, particularly in terms of skills acquisition, professional development, and exposure to different labour markets (OECD, 2020; IOM, 2019). However, these perceptions vary significantly by gender and age.

Data indicate that male returnees are more likely to report positive migration experiences (78.5%) compared to female returnees (69.7%), reflecting gendered differences in labour market participation and access to opportunities abroad (INSTAT, 2021; World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022). Younger returnees generally express more positive attitudes toward migration; nonetheless, higher levels of dissatisfaction are reported among specific age groups, particularly those aged 18–29 and 40–49. These patterns suggest that unmet expectations, labour market barriers, and family responsibilities significantly influence returnees' evaluations of their migration experience (OECD, 2020).

Future intentions further illustrate the uncertainty surrounding reintegration. Approximately 39.6% of returnees express a desire to remain in Albania permanently, while 27% plan to stay temporarily. Notably, nearly half (49%) of involuntary returnees expect to remain permanently, compared to 39% of voluntary returnees, highlighting the constrained choices faced by individuals returned through forced mechanisms (IOM, 2022). At the same time, around one-third of returnees remain undecided, underscoring the instability and fragility of reintegration processes and the persistent risk of re-emigration in the absence of adequate support structures (OECD, 2020).

3.8 Major Reintegration Challenges

One of the most frequently reported challenges faced by returning migrants in Albania is insufficient income. Many returnees struggle to secure employment that matches their qualifications and work experience acquired abroad. Wage disparities and comparatively poor working conditions in Albania, relative to host countries, are commonly cited sources of frustration and economic insecurity (INSTAT, 2021; UNDP Albania, 2023).

Entrepreneurship is often viewed by returnees as a viable reintegration strategy; however, empirical studies reveal substantial barriers to business investment, including bureaucratic complexity, limited access to finance, difficulties in attracting investors, and insufficient guidance on navigating the domestic economic environment (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022). These obstacles frequently discourage returnees from pursuing entrepreneurial initiatives, despite possessing relevant skills and savings.

Another persistent challenge concerns the recognition of foreign diplomas and professional qualifications. Lengthy and complex administrative procedures hinder labour market integration and contribute to skills underutilization (OECD, 2020). For returnee children, reintegration into the Albanian education system is often complicated by differences in curricula, teaching methods, and language proficiency, increasing the risk of educational exclusion (UNESCO, 2019).

Bureaucratic inefficiencies further exacerbate reintegration difficulties. Returnees commonly report delays in renewing identification documents, challenges in reclaiming social security rights accrued abroad, and a lack of accessible, reliable information on reintegration services and procedures (IOM, 2022; UNDP Albania, 2023). These institutional barriers undermine trust in public institutions and weaken reintegration outcomes.

4. Policy Response and Strategic Planning

Migration governance increasingly recognizes return as a fundamental human right that must be supported by comprehensive and inclusive public policies (United Nations, 2016; IOM, 2019). In Albania, the **National Strategy on Migration 2024–2030** establishes strategic priorities aimed at strengthening reintegration mechanisms and maximizing the developmental potential of return migration.

Key policy objectives include leveraging skills and experience acquired abroad for local development, facilitating the recognition and transfer of educational and professional qualifications, and promoting reintegration through targeted financial support, job placement services, and incentives for entrepreneurship (Government of Albania, 2024). Evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these measures depends heavily on institutional coordination, adequate funding, and sustained cooperation among government bodies, civil society organizations, and international partners (OECD, 2020).

4.1 Challenges in Measuring Migration in Albania

International migration has significantly shaped Albania's demographic trajectory over the past two decades. Large-scale emigration has been the primary driver of population decline, particularly among young people seeking employment, education, and family reunification opportunities abroad (INSTAT, 2021). Youth emigration has therefore played a central role in the country's demographic contraction.

The political and economic transformations of the 1990s triggered successive waves of emigration that were not offset by immigration or natural population growth. Census data reveal a net population loss of approximately 269,000 individuals between 2001 and 2011, representing around 8.8% of the population recorded in 2001, while estimates suggest that nearly 482,000 Albanians emigrated during this period (INSTAT, 2021). Although return migration has increased since 2008, particularly following economic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic, it remains insufficient to reverse long-term demographic decline.

Migration patterns have also evolved over time. Initially male-dominated, Albanian migration has become increasingly gender-balanced since the early 2000s, reflecting processes of family reunification and the establishment of more permanent diasporic communities (IOM, 2019). Return migration is often characterized by circularity, with individuals moving back and forth depending on economic opportunities and personal circumstances.

5. Data Limitations and Institutional Gaps

Despite its importance, reliable migration data remain scarce. Migration statistics are frequently incomplete, inconsistent, and difficult to compare due to divergent definitions, data collection methods, and institutional capacities (OECD, 2020).

In Albania, the population census remains the primary source of migration data, but its ten-year frequency and limited migration-related indicators restrict its analytical value.

To address these gaps, INSTAT has increasingly relied on complementary sources such as the Labour Force Survey and is exploring innovative approaches, including mirror statistics and bilateral data exchanges with destination countries (INSTAT, 2024). However, these initiatives require harmonized definitions, improved administrative data systems, and stronger international cooperation to ensure accuracy and comparability.

5.1 *The Need for Standardization and Innovation*

The absence of a unified methodology for measuring migration flows constitutes a major obstacle to evidence-based policymaking. Developing standardized definitions, strengthening administrative data, and enhancing cross-border data sharing are essential steps toward improving migration governance (OECD, 2020; IOM, 2022).

Reliable and disaggregated data are crucial for understanding migration dynamics, evaluating reintegration policies, and designing targeted interventions that respond effectively to migrants' needs. Without robust data systems, reintegration strategies risk remaining fragmented and insufficient to address the complex realities faced by return migrants in Albania.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This study has provided a comprehensive examination of migrants' rights and the multifaceted challenges associated with reintegration following return to Albania. Emigration and return migration are deeply interconnected processes that shape demographic trends, labour markets, and broader socio-economic development. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing evidence-based migration policies that promote sustainable reintegration and social cohesion (OECD, 2020; IOM, 2022).

The findings confirm that returned migrants in Albania face multiple and overlapping barriers, including economic insecurity, limited access to employment, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and difficulties in the recognition of foreign qualifications. These challenges are consistent with empirical evidence from national and international studies, which highlight that reintegration outcomes depend not only on individual capacities but also on the institutional and structural environment in the country of return (UNDP Albania, 2023; World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022). The persistence of these obstacles underscores the need for coordinated and cross-sectoral interventions involving government institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners.

Measures adopted by the Albanian government—such as vocational training programs, employment mediation services, business support schemes, and access to social protection—represent important steps toward facilitating reintegration. However, international experience suggests that the effectiveness of such measures depends on sustained political commitment, adequate financial and human resources, and robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms (OECD, 2020; European Commission, 2021). Without systematic assessment, reintegration policies risk remaining fragmented and insufficient to address the diverse needs of returnees.

The analysis indicates that effective reintegration policies must be inclusive, addressing not only economic integration but also social, psychological, and educational dimensions; collaborative, involving local authorities, diaspora organizations, civil society, and the private sector; and context-sensitive, tailored to individual profiles and the specific conditions under which return occurs (IOM, 2019; OECD, 2020). Such an approach aligns with contemporary rights-based frameworks that view reintegration as a long-term and multidimensional process rather than a short-term administrative outcome.

Beyond national frameworks, international best practices offer valuable lessons for Albania. Countries with comprehensive return and reintegration systems tend to prioritize skills recognition, reduce bureaucratic barriers, and actively link return migration to local development strategies (IOM, 2022). Adapting these models is particularly relevant for Albania, given its ongoing demographic decline, youth emigration, and labour market challenges (INSTAT, 2024). Leveraging the skills and experience of returnees can contribute to economic resilience and mitigate the negative effects of sustained emigration.

Social rights for migrants and returnees are increasingly critical in modern, multicultural societies. Equal access to healthcare, education, employment, and social services is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in society and for preventing social exclusion (UNDP, 2023). While Albania's legal framework formally recognizes many of these rights, implementation gaps remain a central challenge. In this context, civil society organizations play a crucial role in bridging

institutional shortcomings by providing legal assistance, psychosocial support, and advocacy platforms for returnees (World Vision Albania & Albanian Center for Economic Research, 2022).

Moreover, digital tools and innovative platforms offer new opportunities to improve access to information, streamline administrative procedures, and enhance transparency in reintegration services. International evidence shows that digitalization can reduce bureaucratic delays and improve service delivery, particularly when combined with clear institutional responsibilities and data-sharing mechanisms (European Commission, 2021).

Ultimately, reintegration should not be perceived as a temporary or isolated policy concern but as a strategic opportunity for national development. A sustainable and inclusive approach to return migration can help Albania harness the human capital of its diaspora, strengthen social cohesion, and promote equitable growth. To achieve this, public institutions responsible for migration governance must be equipped with a clear strategic vision, professional capacity, and reliable data systems, ensuring that reintegration policies are responsive to evolving migration realities and aligned with international standards.

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