AN EMPTYING STATE? DEMOGRAPHIC AND INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION TRENDS IN ALBANIA

Julianna Ármás
https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2022.1.71-88

Abstract: The study examines demographic and migration trends in Albania within the framework of the concept of demographic transition. By outlining the historical-political-economic characteristics of the post-World War II period, the paper explains the factors that led to the population explosion in Albania and the rapid decline of the country's population after the fall of socialism. As a specific feature of Central, East and Southeast Europe, Albania's depopulation situation is exacerbated by the high rate of emigration from the country, particularly among the young, educated generations. As it currently stands, Albania has no incentives to encourage people to bear children or to stay in the country, but it also has no "migration hinterland" like Western European countries. The Albanian population, currently 2.8 million, is projected to fall to 2.1 million by 2060 as a result of all these developments.

Keywords: Albania, demographic transition, demography, emigration, international migration.

Introduction

Demography is a major political and social issue in countries where demographic change is leading to significant shifts in the structure of population. In developing countries with high birth rates but already

declining death rates, population growth is outstripping the capacity for economic growth. While most European countries, for example, are facing declining and ageing populations due to high life expectancy, low mortality rates and low and declining birth rates, which cannot be compensated by migration. Population changes have political and economic consequences–such as migration waves or the challenge of resource scarcity–not only for all countries, but also, in a globalised world their regional and international impact cannot be ignored.

In terms of European demographic trends, Albania is a latecomer: in the transition from high fertility and mortality to low fertility and mortality, Albania entered the last phase of the 'demographic transition' in 2001 at the latest in Europe (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 17). The reason is that until the fall of socialism, Albania was not only a historical but also a demographic outlier in Southeast Europe, but then faced the same challenges as the other Balkan countries, namely a declining birth rate, an ageing population and emigration (Judah, 2019). The aim of this paper is to present the demographic and migration processes in Albania in the context of the concept of demographic transition after the Second World War and, in particular, after the fall of socialism since the 1990s. The temporal delimitation is justified by the fact that the population started to decline everywhere in Europe after the Second World War, thus allowing us to put demographic processes in context.

The paper seeks the reasons for the rapid population decline that followed the Albanian population explosion in the 1950s. To this purpose, the concepts of the first and second demographic transitions are first presented, and then, in order to apply it to Albania, the historico-political and economic processes that shaped the country-specific factors after the Second World War are described. We then review the evolution of the demographic situation in Albania and turn to emigration as the most important factor in population decline. At the end of the paper, we look at what the current demographic situation foresees for Albania's population, society and economy.

Concept of Demographic Transition

Different theoretical approaches are available to describe demographic change. The well-known theory of Thomas Malthus in the late 18th century took a biological-economic approach, stating that population growth (geometric series) is faster than food production (numerical series), so that the prosperity resulting from economic growth cannot be spread over a wider population. According to Malthus, this tendency is balanced by nature through wars, diseases, epidemics, etc. Although his predictions were later disproved by population and food supply trends, the challenge of finite resources is still with us today (Mereconomics, 2015). In the 1930s, Princeton University began to study the long-term series of natural population tendencies in industrialised countries, and then developed the concept of demographic transition using an economic-sociological approach (Pecze). By outlining the five stages of the concept, it is easy to illustrate the claim that Albania is a latecomer among European countries in demographic terms, and so we will use this approach to illustrate the demographic processes in Albania.

The demographic transition describes a long-term trend of declining birth and death rates, resulting in a change in the age distribution of the population. The age and sex distribution of the population is primarily influenced by birth and death rates, but factors such as migration, economic performance, war, political and social changes, and even a major natural disaster should be taken into account (Tulchinsky– Varavikova, 2014). From high births and deaths to low births and deaths, there are successive stages and equilibria (traditional, transitional, law stationary, graying of the population, regression).

In the first stage of the demographic transition, birth and death rates are high and in equilibrium. Life expectancy is short, while mortality is high, as a result of poor living conditions, epidemics and low standards of medical care. The high balance is achieved by a high fertility rate, but the population growth rate is still very low, less than 0.05 per cent. This

stage is now only true for tribal populations. The second, transitional phase began in Europe after the first industrial revolution in the 19th century. Mortality declined owning to the development of medicine and the modernisation of agricultural and industrial production, which increased security of supply. Meanwhile, birth rates remained high and often increased: an exponential population growth began and continued in Europe until the end of the First World War. In the third stage, fertility and birth rates begin to fall, slowing the rate of population growth. Although the population is still growing (natural increase is estimated at 1-2 per cent per year), mortality rates continue to fall. Factors such as female employment, the spread of contraceptive methods and urbanisation are behind the lower birth rate. In the fourth phase of the demographic transition, the birth rate is falling rapidly and the number of deaths are stabilising, so that population growth continues to decline (Tulchinsky– Varavikova, 2014). According to the mainstream interpretation, the fourth stage marks the end of the demographic transition, but with birth and death rates having stabilised at low levels in modern societies, a fifth stage can be distinguished, when population decline occurs (A demográfiai átmenet, 2023).

As fertility rates in developed countries[1] failed to reach 2.1–which is the rate needed to maintain the population–after the 1960s, a level that would ensure easy population replacement, thus ending the demographic transition, theorists began to introduce the concept of a "second demographic transition". The distinction of the new era was justified by changes in fertility behaviour and in family and spousal relationships, with mortality levels remaining unchanged from the previous ones. As marriage rates fall and divorce rates rise, new forms of cohabitation outside marriage are becoming increasingly popular, leading to a rapid decline in fertility rates. The population is ageing, with a permanent decline in population numbers (KSH, 2023).

1 *'A highly industrialized country that has high per capita incomes, low birth rates and death rates, low population growth rates, and high levels of industrialization and urbanization. Examples include the USA, Canada, Japan, and many countries in Europe.'* (Oxford Reference, 2023)

The second transition was sociologically explained as a result of changes in values, which had an impact on family, relationship and fertility behaviour. Traditional values, represented by local and/or religious communities, were weakened and the focus shifted to the fulfilment of the individuum. As a result, individuals prefer less committed relationships than cohabitation, which also discourages childbearing (KSH, 2023). Although critics question the validity of the second demographic transition–it does not define a new end-state compared to the first, or the trends outlined can be reversed–the changes in values and demographic behaviour outlined are experienced in Central and Eastern Europe after the 1990s, Latin America and Japan too after the Western European countries, thus providing a useful framework for interpreting new demographic patterns and predicting the demographic future of countries. However, the term "demographic shift" is more commonly used instead of demographic transition (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 17-18).

It is important to note that the demographic transition model in general has been subject to criticisms. The demographic transition has not been clearly prevailed anywhere in Europe, even missing entire phases, and the model depicts irreversible processes, even though demographic change is not necessarily linear. Mortality in Europe was already declining before the great industrialisation of the 19th century, a trend that continues to this day at a slower or faster rate. Fertility declined first in France at the end of the 18th century, then from the end of the 19th century in countries such as Germany, England, Belgium or Hungary, from the beginning of the 20th century in Denmark or Spain and only between the two world wars in the Balkans. Yet it is a widely used concept because, despite its simplifications, it describes important processes; however, a country-specific interpretation of these processes requires an overview of the political-economic-cultural characteristics of the region or country concerned. This will be tested below for Albania from the end of the Second World War onwards (A demográfiai átmenet, 2023).

The Demographic Dimension of the Albanian Special Path

The Albanian Communist Party (*Partia Komuniste e Shqipërisë*, PKSh), led by Enver Hoxha, proclaimed the People's Republic of Albania in 1944. Like the countries of the socialist bloc, it was a one-party system with centrally planned economic management, but in many ways the Hoxha regime was unique. Hoxha pursued a policy of isolationism since the 70s, as suspending cooperation with its allies one after the other; he severed relations with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union and finally, in 1978, with China. While the 1970s and 1980s saw a wave of liberalisation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Albania became even more isolated (Domachowska, 2019: 88). A good example of this was the declaration of Albania as the world's first atheist country in 1976 by the Party of Labour of Albania (*Partia e Punës e Shqipërisë*, PPSh), which included in its constitution a ban on religious worship and made it a punishable offence to participate in religious ceremonies and possess religious books. Meanwhile, belief in the Hoxha regime and communism was encouraged. In essence, the regime saw the internationally connected church, which rejected communist propaganda, as a threat (Bezati, 2019).

After Hoxha's death in 1985, Ramiz Alia succeeded him as head of Albania. Their worldviews did not differ, but Alia, recognising the dysfunctionality of the system, focused on improving economic performance as Albania became the poorest country in Europe by 1990. However, this could not stop the protests organised around the demand for better living conditions, and political and economic regime change began in Albania (Domachowska, 2019: 89). The political changes of the early 1990s marked an important turning point in the country's demographic development. During the years of socialism, abortion or international migration were severely restricted by the central leadership. Abortion and using contraception were considered criminal offences in Albania, as they were incompatible with the party's ambition to increase the country's population at any cost (Mejdini, 2017). The Albanian Criminal Code also prohibited leaving the country, according to which absconding or refusing to return home was

considered treason, punishable by a minimum of 10 years' imprisonment. In essence, until Hoxha's death in 1985, but especially until the fall of the regime, emigration from Albania did not exist (Domachowska, 2019: 88).

In addition, Albania underwent a fertility transition between 1960 and 1990, during the years of socialism. As already mentioned, the Albanian political leadership, even compared to other socialist countries, managed population policy according to strict rules. Population was seen as a matter independent of society, serving only to ensure the labour force and defence, and population growth was accordingly encouraged. Maternity leave was extended from 6 weeks to 6 months and health care was free. However, those who were single or childless were fined or socially ostracised for rejecting the traditional family model and failing to live up to the Hoxhaist ideal (Mejdini, 2017).

Despite these incentives, fertility halved between 1960 and 1990, partly due to illegal abortion and partly to female emancipation. Between 1960 and 1980, there were roughly 210,000 abortions, but the actual number is higher. Since abortion was a criminal offence, many women resorted to alternative means of abortion or had abortions outside clinics. Poor living conditions and hard physical labour were the main reasons for abortion, which in most cases were reported by women as miscarriages. Infant mortality was extremely high in these years due to the living conditions caused by the economic situation and frequent shortages of food and medicines. In the 1930s and 1940s, infant mortality accounted for 18.5 per cent of all deaths, doubling by the time of socialism (Mejdini, 2017). In 1991, on-demand abortion was introduced and then legalised in 1995 (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 50). Liberalisation was also reflected in official figures: in 1993, 494 abortions per 1,000 births were performed, a figure that had fallen to 162 by 2020, but is still significant (INSTAT, Births and abortions by Type and Time, 2023). In connection with the declining fertility rates it should be noted that in Albania, socialism also brought about women's equality. The extension of primary education to girls and the subsequent encouragement of women's employment in agriculture and industry also contributed to the decline in fertility over the period (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 39).

Population Trends in Albania

Historically and socially, Albania has often been a Balkan outlier, and until the fall of socialism this was also true in terms of demography–but then it joined the ranks of the Balkan countries: an ageing society, emigration, shortage in the number of children. According to the Institute of Statistics (*Instituti i Statistikës* – INSTAT), Albania currently has 2.8 million inhabitants, 1.3 per cent less than in 2021 (INSTAT, Population of Albania, 2022). However, it is more meaningful to compare this with 1999, when the country's population peaked at 3.4 million, a 16 per cent decrease in the country's population in just 20 years (Eurostat, Population on 1 January by age and sex, 2023). The comparison with 1945 is even more striking: at the start of socialism, Albania's population was 1.07 million, so the country's population tripled under the Hoxha dictatorship to which the baby boom after the Second World War should be taken into account as well. The 1980s still saw natural population growth of more than 2 per cent a year, but it has been in steady decline ever since (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 25).

Today the Albanian population is still relatively young (median age 37.6 years) and the proportion of elderly people is low. On current trends, this could soon change, with life expectancy at birth increasing steadily from 72.1 years for men and 77.3 years for women in 2005 to 74.4 years and 78.7 years by 2021 (INSTAT, Life expectancy by sex, 2023). While at the peak of Albania's population boom in 1960 the fertility rate was 6.9 (Galanxhi–Nesturi–Hoxha, 2014: 40), by 2021 it will have fallen to 1.32, the lowest ever recorded, and the last time fertility exceeded 2.1 to maintain the population was in 2001 (INSTAT, Total Fertility Rate by Type and Year, 2023). The number of live births exceeded the number of deaths for the last time in 2020, which was only due to the previous high birth rate, and here too there is a decline. 2021 was the first year in which the natural increase in the population took a negative value (INSTAT, Population of Albania, 2022): the number of live births in 2021 (27,2011) was almost 3 percent lower than in the previous year (INSTAT, Live births by age group of mother by Age Group, Type and Year, 2023), while the number of deaths (30,580) was 10 percent higher

than in 2020 (INSTAT, Population of Albania, 2022). In terms of deaths, 2020 produced a spike: 26 per cent more deaths than in 2019, but this increase might be due to the Covid-19 pandemic, with roughly one-third of the 27,000 deaths occurring in covid hospitals (Gjediku, 2021). Albanian trends in fertility and ageing are therefore in line with both the Western Balkans and Europe nowadays.

To reduce the negative birth rate, the state has been paying a one-off payment benefit for newborns since 2019: 40 000 Albanian lek (320 euros) for the first child, 80 000 Albanian lek (640 euros) for the second, and 120 000 Albanian lek (1000 euros) for the third and all subsequent children. Not only citizens but also permanent residents and those who register their children in Albania are eligible (Judah, 2019). A one-off maternity allowance is paid after the birth of a child if the parent was employed and paid social security contributions for the previous year; the maternity allowance is amounting to half the minimum wage (92 euros). Maternity leave is for one year, during which the state pays an infant care allowance if the parent was insured for the previous year (80 per cent of salary for 6 months, then 60 per cent). The state does not pay family allowances unless the family is receiving social benefits (KINCS, 2019: 192). However, the underdeveloped family support system is not able to mitigate the rapid decline in the number of births, which is (also) a result of socio-economic and cultural changes in Albanian society.

In addition, the changes in the number of marriages and divorces are in line with the European trends described as the second demographic shift. In 1990, there were 28,992 marriages, in 2010 25,428 and in 2021 19,709. Compared to 1990 (2,675), the number of divorces showed a major jump in 2010 (3,478), with 3,113 divorces in 2021 (INSTAT, Marriages and Divorces by Type and Year, 2023). Although Albanian women are still giving birth relatively early, this is also steadily shifting: in 1990, the 25-29 age group accounted for 37 per cent of births, in 2021 it is only 34 per cent, while the 30-34 age group has increased from 21 per cent to 27.5 per cent (INSTAT, Live births by age group of mother by Age Group, Type and Year, 2023).

Emigration and the Role of the Diaspora

While before the fall of socialism, the Albanian birth rate was no different from that of Kosovo or Montenegrin Albanians, emigration was different. In the neighbouring countries, the guest worker system to Western European countries was active, while Albanians living under the Hoxha dictatorship were completely locked. In 1991, this distinction disappeared, with the population leaving mainly to Italy and Greece[2] in search of freedom and a better life in the West. Albania became the largest country of origin of migrants in Europe in terms of the number of people leaving the country compared to population. Between 1991 and 2011, emigration was the primary cause of Albania's population decline in several major waves. Between 1991 and 1992, population flows were completely unrestrained, with around 300,000 Albanians leaving the country. Between 1992 and 1996, the same number of people emigrated illegally, despite the temporary economic growth in the country and the strengthening of border controls. In 1996-1997, Albania descended into anarchy as the pyramid scheme collapsed and the country fell into the hands of rebels and local criminal groups. Fear of violence spurred the migration of hundreds of thousands more people. After 2001 the international migration slowed down due to socio-economic improvement and the country's stabilization (Domachowska, 2019: 94). The last major wave started in 2009, after Albania received visa liberalisation from the European Union (Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 10).

Between 2001 and 2011, according to INSTAT data, 482,000 Albanians left the country, accounting for more than 35 per cent of the labour force, followed by a further half a million in the last decade (Filipi et al., 2015, 21); it is estimated[3] that today more than one and a half million Albanians live abroad, a significant figure especially considering that the country has no history of armed conflicts that would have resulted in such a large diaspora. According to Statista's 2020 survey, Albania is the third

2 Especially Greeks from South Albania and Orthodox Albanians emigrated to Greece. Between 1991 and 1996 approximately 200,000 Albanians arrived only to Greece. (Adamczyk, 2016: 50)

3 The exact number of Albanians living abroad is difficult to determine due to the phenomenon of "circular migration", but it can be said that net migration is persistently negative.

country in the world with the largest diaspora in relation to its population, after Guyana and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 30.7 per cent of Albanians living abroad (Buchholz, 2022). There is no doubt that the first Albanian diasporas date back a long time: the first community was established in Italy in the 15th century by 200,000 Albanians who had emigrated during the Ottoman occupation. The Arbëresh community has preserved its Albanian cultural and linguistic roots to this day. Later, Albanians also emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, where they held important administrative positions or military ranks, and the Albanian diaspora is today highly respected in Turkey. In the United States, many left in the early 20th century, and in 2012 the oldest Albanian cultural association in the US celebrated its 100th anniversary. During the 19th–20th centuries Albanians emigrated in significant numbers to Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, the United States, Argentina, and Australia due to political economic reasons. The main destination that was (also) Greece, until the mid-'30s the number of people with Albanian roots counted up to 400,000 (Carletto et al., 2006: 768). But even if we take into account the forced displacement of Albanians from Kosovo, mainly to Turkey, the number of Albanians currently living abroad is still orders of magnitude lower. The reasons for migration are structural in Albania today, the size of the Albanian diaspora is a reflection of economic stagnation and lack of perspective (Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 9-10).

Emigration in the hope of a "better life" was already a trend among the Albanian population after the fall of socialism, and it has remained essentially unchanged since then, as the state has failed to provide the resources and opportunities for the well-being of its citizens. The most important pull factor is the group of economic reasons, namely the lack of job opportunities and poor living conditions. Especially around and after the 1997 riots, the lack of public security emerged as an important factor too. The poor functioning of institutions leads to a lack of trust among citizens, exacerbated by corruption and organised crime. It also acts as a disincentive to immigration or resettlement, and the existence of a grey economy or the inefficiency of the public administration is deterrent. Although it was a significant phenomenon until the mid-'90s, an interesting example is the (still) prevalent kanun in the northern region of Albania and since blood feud (vendetta) is part of it, results a specific socio-cultural push factor for

leaving the homeland. According to the INSTAT 2019 survey, the reasons for migration from Albania are as follows: 83.7 per cent of respondents leave the country for employment reasons, 9 per cent for family reunification, 3.5 per cent for better study opportunities and 3.8 percent of respondents cited 'other reasons'(Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 14-15). Western European countries need skilled workers, for example Germany introduced the Skilled Workers Immigration Act in 2020, which would make it easier for skilled professionals and trainees from third countries to work in the country. Albania was among the top 10 countries, with 778 visas granted to Albanian nationals between March and December 2020 (SchengenVisa, 2021). The shortage of skilled workers due to emigration was clearly visible in Albania during the covid-19 pandemic (Taylor, 2022); 3,500 doctors and health workers have left the country in the last 10 years (Kuka, 2022).

The problem of emigration is exacerbated by the fact that young, skilled workers are the most likely to emigrate. In 1990, 40 per cent of teachers and academics left the country primarily to Greece and Italy but also to Western European countries, while in the early 2000s, 60 per cent of university graduates–at Western countries' universities–emigrated or never returned to Albania (Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 15). According to Youth Network's 2021 survey, 90 per cent of young people are seriously considering emigration for education, job opportunities or just "the chance of a better life" (Tirana Times, 2021). Corruption and unemployment are cited as the biggest problems in the country, while the quality of education is considered 'bad' or 'very bad' by respondents. 90 per cent of Albanian migrants live in Europe, with the remainder in the US (8%). Italy (40%) and Greece (37%) are the top destinations for emigration, due to proximity and similarities in culture and lifestyle. It should be noted that not only outward migration but also internal migration is a major challenge. This is mainly towards the capital, Tirana, resulting in rural and mountainous areas becoming uninhabited. Only the capital region is projected to grow in population between 2019-31, with 35 per cent of the population concentrated there.

A further problem is that many Albanians apply for refugee status abroad, despite the fact that Europen countries legally speaking consider Albania as a "safe country" . Yet, we are talking about one of the poorest countries in Europe with problems such as corruption, organised crime, lack of

an independent judiciary. Valid asylum claims include those fleeing, for example, crime, violence, forced marriage or blood feuds. It is interesting to note that the Albanian government is rather dismissive of the risk of blood feuds: it would mean acknowledging the greater burden of asylum applications–the reduction of which is essential for EU accession–and the inadequacy of the judicial and law enforcement system (Taylor, 2020). Between January and July 2022, 5,800 Albanians applied for asylum in the European Union, double the number of applications in the same period last year (Taylor, 2022). The top receiving country is France (2021: 4,885, 2020: 2,010, 2019: 8,501) followed by Greece (2021: 1,125), then Germany: 1210) (Eurostat, Asylum applicants by type of applicant, citizenship, age and sex - annual aggregated data, 2023). The number of asylum applications in the UK is even higher: 7,627 Albanians have applied for asylum up to June 2022, double the number of the previous year (3,578). An increasing migration wave is difficult to predict, as the number of refugees can be influenced by a number of factors, from geopolitical and economic events to information flows. Behind the increase in the number of Albanian nationals arriving in the UK–crossing the La Manche Channel or the Channel Tunnel–is the activity of people smugglers (Walsh, 2022).

Despite doubts about whether an asylum application will be granted, it is worth a try for Albanians, but it also creates considerable political tension. While their asylum applications are being processed, Albanians may access the social welfare system of a European or EU country and find work. The processing of applications generally takes a long time, with two thirds of applicants who received a decision in 2021 waiting two years for a document and 35 percent waiting three or more years in the United Kingdom. The deportation process can also be lengthy, especially in France due to the bureaucratic peculiarities of the country, which is the largest applicant country for Albanians in the EU as indicated above (Walsh, 2022). Reducing the number of asylum applications is a precondition for Albania's continued integration into the EU, which also involves reducing tensions between Albania and the UK. To promote this, a bilateral agreement was signed between the two countries in August 2022 to combat criminal gangs involved in people smuggling (Syal, 2022).

However, the UK is further tightening the criteria for Albanians seeking asylum: as part of the planned new package of measures, Albanians' claims will be able to be rejected in weeks instead of months, on the grounds that 'Albania is a safe and prosperous country' (Gallardo, 2022).

While emigration is undoubtedly a major challenge, it should be noted that diaspora remittances are a key instrument for the socio-economic development of the country and a major pillar of economic stability and development in Albania. Albanian families use remittances mainly for daily consumption, with remittances accounting on average for 15% of household income. The dynamics of remittance flows can be divided into three phases. They increased between 1991 and 2007, with Albania becoming the most remittance-dependent country in the region in 2007. Between 2007 and 2013, remittances declined due to the global economic crisis, but then resumed their upward trend (Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 36-37). According to World Bank data, remittances accounted for 9.4 per cent of GDP in 2021, and while this is down from the highest ratio in 1993 (28%), remittances have averaged nearly 11 per cent of GDP over the last ten years (World Bank, Personal remittances, received (% of GDP), - Albania, 2023). In addition to helping households' income, there is also an economic potential in the large Albanian diaspora. The objectives of the Albanian Diaspora National Strategy 2021-2025 include the promotion of diaspora investment, the creation of small and medium size enterprises in areas such as agriculture and food industry. However, this can only be achieved through investment promotion measures such as tax reductions or by reducing corruption and the grey economy (Diaspora.gov.al, 2020: 34).

Towards an Emptying Country?

Albania has entered the last stage of the demographic transition and/or the second demographic shift later compared to European trends. Declining fertility rates, rising average age and falling death rates are all features of the regression phase. This is exacerbated by the specific feature of Central and Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe,

namely the high rate of emigration. The situation is further aggravated by the country's Hoxhaist-isolationalist past, which has left its mark on demographic trends, and the economic performance is still struggling with its legacy.

Taking into account that Albania cannot compensate for high emigration rates like Western European countries, and that the country does not have an extensive family support system to encourage birth rates, INSTAT estimates that the country's population will fall to 2.6 million in 2030, 2.4 million in 2050 and 2.1 million in 2060 (INSTAT, Total population projections by age, low growth scenario by Sex, Age_group, Type and Year, 2023). Current demographic and migration trends, which started in parallel with the collapse of socialism, already pose a significant risk for Albania. The situation is exacerbated by the outflow of young, skilled workers. Apart from the most popular destinations, Italy and Greece, they are all leaving for Western European countries, where skilled labour is needed. Their shortages are already being felt in the labour market, in sectors such tourism or agriculture. But it is also challenging the social security system, which may face problems in paying pensions, benefits or health care (Taylor, 2022). At the same time, Albania has an important advantage in that its population is relatively young, so that the rapid depopulation could be mitigated by appropriate economic and social measures and job creation. However, the country's capacity to cope with this is not yet fully developed, and remittances are a major source of the economy.

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