

**Russell King and Nicola Mai, Out of Albania:  
from Crisis Migration to Social Inclusion in Italy**  
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Post-1990 Albanian migration—mainly to Italy and Greece—has been one of Europe’s most remarkable and still-evolving migration episodes of recent years. Albania has the highest migratory flow in Europe which is five times higher than the average flow of emigration in most other developing countries (Barjaba 2004). Despite its scale and intensity, Albanian migration remains relatively under-researched. King and Mai’s book is a significant contribution to research on Albanian emigration primarily to Italy, with some comparative data on the Albanian presence in Greece and the UK. Both interesting and well written, *Out of Albania* examines all aspects of Albanian migration, from the initial “boat people” who arrived in Italian coasts in 1991 making news headlines worldwide, up to return to Albania. Initially welcomed, Albanians quickly became denigrated with a series of highly negative stereotypes. By presenting mainly qualitative data from three different regions of Italy and from Albania with Albanian migrants and key informants, the authors manage to challenge and deconstruct these stereotypes. The only shortcoming—inherent in qualitative research—is the degree of generalisability of the findings.

Chapter 2 provides a succinct account of Albanian history dating back to Illyrian times, through the Ottoman Era and finally the long-winding years of Enver Hoxha’s Stalinist-type communism. Central to understanding the explosive nature of Albanian emigration in the early 1990s is the fact that emigration during communism was considered a serious political crime: anybody who attempted to leave the country was shot on the spot! As the authors explain in Chapter 3, watching Italian television secretly gave Albanians a periscope with which to observe the outside world. Especially for young people, Italian TV projected lifestyle models that were very different from the life style models assigned by communism. In this way, the idea of migrating abroad (above all to Italy) could be seen as the logical outcome of a wider process of disembedding of Albanian young people’s identities from the homogeneous, moralised, collectivist-nationalist landscape that prevailed before 1991.

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Chapter 4 examines the role of the Italian media in generating the phenomenon of ‘Albanophobia’ among the host society. The authors explain that the timing of Albanian immigration might have contributed to their rejection by the Italian society. As Italy fought to create a unified, ‘European’ national identity in the early 1990s, the Albanians intruded into the picture. Albanians replaced the semi-colonial internal other, the southerner, with a true colonial other, the outsider/insider figure of the Albanian immigrant. The Albanian immigrant figure was ‘perilously close to Italians in physiological terms’ and ‘dangerous’ precisely because it reminded Italians of their own disavowed southern past of poverty, emigration and brigandage (Mai 2003).

In Chapters 5 and 6 (the longest of the book), the authors unfold the main corpus of migrant life-stories. Chapter 5 covers participants’ pre-migration background in Albania; the migration and arrival phases in Italy; their experiences of work, housing and family and community life; and their reactions to Italian migration laws. Chapter 6 discusses a central theme to the book, the ‘Albanian assimilation paradox’. The migrant group which is rejected by Italian society the most is also the most ‘similar’ to the host society, and moreover sees itself as such. Despite this stigmatisation Albanians seem to have achieved a dynamic social integration (although the nature of this integration varies between different parts of Italy).

The last chapter, based on fieldwork in Albania, analyses social and economic aspects of Albanian migration. Thorniest among those is the issue of emigrants leaving their old parents behind “like stones in the middle of the road” (p.220). Often, these old parents feel so sad that they are separated from their children and—most importantly—grandchildren that they decide to emigrate to be reunited with their families abroad. This chapter deals also with the issue of return to Albania. It seems that return migration to Albania is still far from reality. The role of migrants’ remittances, albeit important, is not adequate to guarantee a longer-term development of the Albanian economy. Certain obstacles—such as the poor infrastructure and the lack of trust towards political elites—yet have to be overcome.

Since the collapse of the communist regime and the huge flow of immigration “out of Albania”, the migration literature related to this country’s experience has been growing rapidly. The present volume is a very welcome addition to this literature and provides extensive and substantial information and insights into the nature of recent Albanian migration. Apart from constituting a standard reference to migration studies, the book is highly recommended to scholars of Mediterranean and Balkan studies. In any case, this is definitely a book worth reading!

## References

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