

ADMIGOV

Advancing Alternative Migration Governance

EU Exit Regimes in Practice: Sustainable Return and Reintegration in Albania

An Interim Report on Albania

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1. Introduction

This interim report of the Advancing Alternative Migration Governance project (ADMIGOV) provides a case study of the EU Exit regime's implications for return and reintegration processes in Albania. Following on from ADMIGOV Deliverable 2.1 (Oomkens & Kalir, 2020), in this report we refer to Exit (with a capital E) as:

...the policies and practices that are aimed at having irregular migrants leave the territory of Member States of the European Union (EU) and of the EU as a whole. [...] By Exit regimes we refer to both the legal and operational infrastructure that governs Exit. Legal infrastructure refers to the formal procedures (laws, regulations, directives, readmission agreements, etc.) that, firstly, determine the illegalization of status for irregular migrants, and, secondly, outline the process that should result in their voluntary/assisted return or forced removal from EU territories. Operational infrastructure refers to the work of, and the investment in, state and non-state agencies responsible for the implementation of the process that is put forward by the legal infrastructure. The operational infrastructure thus includes agencies and organizations in charge of pre-removal detention, forced deportation, assisted and voluntary return programs, and partnership programs (p.7).

The aim of this interim report is to assess sustainable reintegration post-Exit in Albania.

Specifically, this report examines:

- return migrants' decision-making regarding the acceptance or refusal of assisted voluntary return packages;
- return migrants' experiences since their return to Albania. In this analysis we seek, in particular, to understand whether migrants who are returned to Albania via assisted voluntary return or forced removal are being sustainably reintegrated in Albania;
- in what ways reintegration processes are impacted by EU Exit regimes;
- the post-Exit monitoring process in Albania.

As stated in ADMIGOV Deliverable 2.1 on Exit (Oomkens & Kalir, 2020), the Sustainable Development Goals and the New York Declaration (NYD) form a central reference for this project. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), which builds on the NYD, sets out explicit commitments regarding return and reintegration. Objective 21 is dedicated to '*Cooperat[ion] in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration*'.

Regarding return procedures, Objective 21 further specifies, inter alia, that participating states should:

- guarantee that '*(...) all returns in the context of such voluntary programmes effectively take place on the basis of the migrant's free, prior and informed consent*' (Action B);
- '*Ensure that the return of migrants who do not have the legal right to stay on another State's territory is safe and dignified, follows an individual assessment, is carried out by competent authorities through prompt and effective cooperation between countries of origin and destination, and allows all applicable legal remedies to be exhausted, in compliance with due process guarantees and other obligations under international human rights law*' (Action E);

- *‘Establish or strengthen national monitoring mechanisms on return, in partnership with relevant stakeholders, that provide independent recommendations on ways and means to strengthen accountability, in order to guarantee the safety, dignity and human rights of all returning migrants’ (Action F);*
- *And ‘Ensure that return and readmission processes involving children are carried out only after a determination of the best interests of the child and take into account the right to family life and family unity, and that a parent, legal guardian or specialized official accompanies the child throughout the return process, ensuring that appropriate reception, care and reintegration arrangements for children are in place in the country of origin upon return’ (Action G).*

Regarding reintegration, Objective 21 specifies commitments to:

- *‘Promote gender-responsive and child-sensitive return and reintegration programmes that may include legal, social and financial support, guaranteeing that (...) returning migrants are assisted in their reintegration process through effective partnerships, including to avoid their becoming displaced in the country of origin upon return’ (Action B);*
- *‘Facilitate the sustainable reintegration of returning migrants into community life by providing them with equal access to social protection and services, justice, psychosocial assistance, vocational training, employment opportunities and decent work, recognition of skills acquired abroad, and financial services, in order to fully build upon their entrepreneurship, skills and human capital as active members of society and contributors to sustainable development in the country of origin upon return’ (Action H);*
- *And ‘Identify and address the needs of the communities to which migrants return by including respective provisions in national and local development strategies, infrastructure planning, budget allocations and other relevant policy decisions and cooperating with local authorities and relevant stakeholders’ (Action I).*

The above Action points detail the kinds of policies foreseen by the GCM to support sustainable reintegration. Sustainable reintegration is a central term used in the GCM; however, it is quite vaguely conceived as *‘conducive conditions for personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion in communities’*. This is a central challenge as what sustainable reintegration is can be understood differently in different contexts.

Deliverable 2.4 on Sustainable Reintegration will provide a wider overview of the conceptualisation of sustainable reintegration. For the purpose of this interim report, sustainable reintegration will be defined as:

The individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon return (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015, p. 8).

In line with our desk research into EU legislation, migration policies, and the implementation thereof, the terminology used in this report mostly draws on EU legislative sources. This approach

also conforms with 'The EMN Glossary' defined by the European Migration Network to improve comparability between member states.¹

¹ European Commission (Migration and Home Affairs), 'EMN Glossary' [WWW-document], URL https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/european_migration_network/glossary_en (accessed 03 March 2020).

2. Exit Governance and Trends in Albania

This section presents an overview of migration trends and exit governance and trends in Albania.

2.1 Migration trends in Albania

A considerable amount of research has been conducted regarding the unique migration dynamics that the Albanian case study presents (see, for example, King et al., 2011). In this introduction to the case we will provide only a high-level overview of the out-migration and return migration of Albanian nationals.

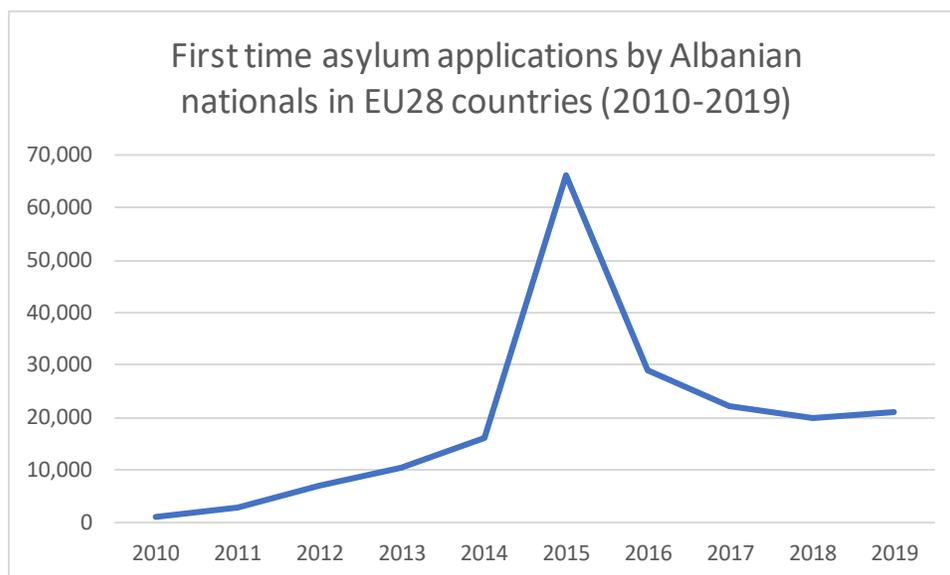
Albania's contemporary migration history began in 1990, when the fall of the communist regime removed the border controls that had prevented out-migration for almost 50 years (King & Vullnetari, 2009). The sudden outflows were intense: between 1991 and 1993 an estimated 200,000 Albanians left mostly for neighbouring countries Greece and Italy (King, 2003, p. 284), fleeing poverty and insecurity and seeking broadened horizons for personal fulfilment (King & Vullnetari, 2009). These outward flows, largely driven by economic factors, continued throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s, resulting in substantial population decline (Gëdeshi & King, 2018). According to population census data, 600,000 Albanians left Albania between 1990 and 2001, and 481,000 emigrated between 2001 and 2011 (INSTAT data cited in Gëdeshi & Xhaferaj, 2016, p. 13). These outflows tended to be irregular (mitigated in part by mass regularisation programmes in Italy and Greece towards the end of the 1990s) and consisted mostly of young men seeking work abroad (sometimes followed by their wives and families later on) (Gëdeshi & King, 2018; King & Vullnetari, 2012). In the 2000s, the main destination countries diversified somewhat to include other European countries – particularly the UK –, as well as to the United States, although Greece and Italy continued to receive the largest share of these flows (Vullnetari, 2012).

Regarding return movements to Albania, no official statistics exist. It should be noted that return has been inherent to the often temporary or circular nature of Albanian migration to Greece (Gëdeshi & King, 2018). Some migration projects were also forcibly discontinued, given their irregularity: both Greece and Italy implemented mass forced returns (King et al., 2011) – some 30,000 in 2004 (De Zwager et al., 2005, p. 57). Towards the mid-1990s, there were some voluntary and independent returns, largely by people who had left Albania in the first wave of out-migration (De Zwager et al., 2005). However, this trend was reversed by the collapse of the pyramid savings schemes in which considerable remittance wealth had been invested (De Zwager et al., 2005; Vullnetari, 2012). The ensuing economic and political crisis precipitated further mass emigration from Albania, which included the re-migration of former returnees (Zwager et al., 2005). In the early 2000s, very little voluntary, independent return seems to have taken place (De Zwager et al., 2005; King & Vullnetari, 2009). It was the 2008 financial crisis, which had particularly severe effects in Greece and, to a lesser extent, Italy, which prompted large return flows to Albania, as Albanian migrants in these countries faced reduced incomes and rising unemployment (Gëdeshi & King, 2018). Between 2009 and 2013, a reported 133,544 Albanian adults (aged 18+) returned to Albania, mostly from Greece and Italy (INSTAT/IOM, 2014).

In the wake of the economic crisis, shrinking economic opportunities in Greece and Italy led to renewed pressure on the Albanian economy as remittances fell and migrants in Greece and Italy returned to the Albanian labour market. Given the extremely limited opportunities for legal labour migration, Albanians have used asylum-seeking in EU member states as an economic

survival strategy. As Figure 1 shows, the number of first-time asylum applications by Albanian nationals in the EU-28 grew steadily from 1,075 to 16,145 between 2010 and 2014, before increasing dramatically to 66,145 in 2015 (Eurostat, 2021a). This figure fell to 29,145 in 2016 and has fluctuated around the 20,000 mark since 2017, although the number of total applications by Albanian nationals has remained somewhat higher due to repeat applications (Eurostat, 2021a).

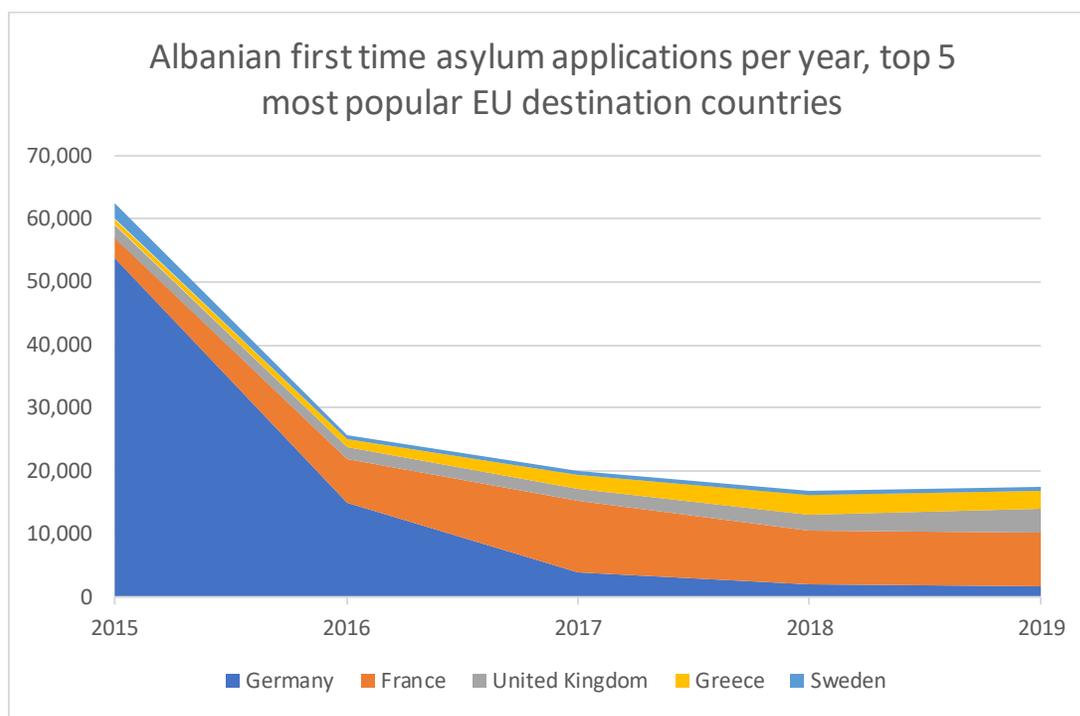
Figure 1. First time asylum applications by Albanian nationals in the EU28 between 2010 and 2019



Source: (Eurostat, 2021a)

As Figure 2 (below) shows, Germany and France have received the largest shares of these asylum flows. Germany was the most popular destination country for asylum seekers in the earlier years of the Albanian asylum outflows (particularly in 2015, when it received 53,805 first time applications). In more recent years, however, applications in Germany have fallen dramatically (to 1,695 in 2019), while France has become the more popular destination – although first-time applications in France have also decreased from a peak of 11,425 in 2017 to 8,510 in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021a). Following Germany and France, the largest numbers of applications submitted between 2015 and 2019 were received by the United Kingdom, Greece and Sweden, which thus make up the five most popular EU destination countries for Albanian asylum seekers in this recent period (Eurostat, 2021a).

Figure 2. Most popular EU28 destinations for Albanian asylum seekers

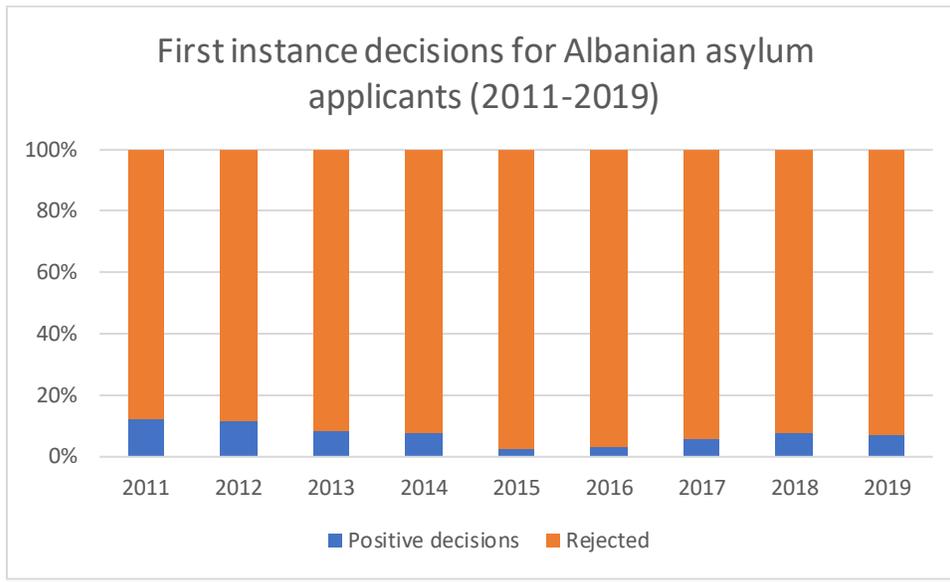


Source: (Eurostat, 2021a)

2.2 Exit governance: returns to Albania

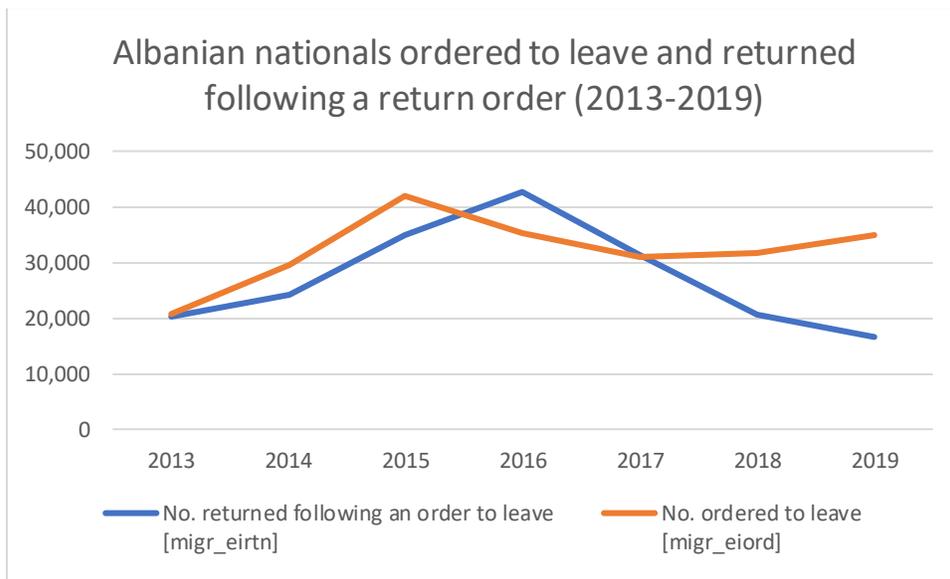
Very few Albanian asylum seekers have been granted asylum: the EU+ recognition rate for Albanians was only 3% in both 2015 and 2016 (EASO, 2016, 2017). Figure 3 shows the proportion of total positive vs. negative first instance decisions for Albanian asylum seekers between 2010 and 2019. It can be assumed that rejected asylum seekers will have been given an order to return to Albania. However, the rate of actual returns to Albania is difficult to assess because the official Eurostat returns rate is limited in its precision (Mananashvili, 2017; Oomkens & Kalir, 2020), and because the Albanian government does not systematically collect data on returns. Nonetheless, the Albanian government is known for strong cooperation on forced removals from EU member states (European Commission, 2018), which likely relates to its EU-accession incentives. Albania signed a Readmission Agreement with the EU in 2005 and has agreed implementation protocols with EU member states including France, in addition to bilateral readmission agreements concluded with EU member states including Germany (Unijat et al., 2019). Figure 4 shows the number of Albanian nationals returned from the EU28 following an order to leave compared to the number of Albanian nationals issued with a return order.

Figure 3. First instance decisions on asylum applications by Albanian nationals in the EU28



Source: (Eurostat, 2021b)

Figure 4. The number of Albanian nationals ordered to leave the EU28 compared to the number of Albanian nationals returned from the EU28 following an order to leave



Source: (Eurostat, 2021c, 2021d)

In order to fast-track the asylum procedures of Albanian nationals and facilitate their swift return (in the case of rejection), many EU countries have added Albania to their 'safe countries of origin' lists. Regarding the most popular destination countries for Albanian asylum seekers, France added Albania to its list of safe countries of origin in December 2013. Germany added Albania to its own list in 2015, as part of the 'Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures' enacted on 15 October 2015 (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). According to this Act, asylum seekers from safe countries of origin were to be accommodated in reception centres for the total duration of their asylum procedure, or

until their departure in the case of rejections (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). The Act also established that in-kind support rather than cash assistance should be given to asylum seekers in reception centres (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). In addition, the August 2015 'Act on the redefinition of the right to stay and the termination of residence' enabled the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to impose a temporary re-entry ban on asylum seekers whose claims are rejected as manifestly ill-founded, as typically applies to the claims of asylum applicants from safe countries of origin (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). On 17 March 2016, the 'Act on the Introduction of Fast-Track Asylum Procedures' (Asylum Package II) entered into force (EMN/ BAMF, 2017). This Act introduced a fast-track procedure for certain types of asylum applicants, including those from safe countries of origin, whose applications should henceforth be decided on within one week, or within a maximum of three weeks if an appeal is lodged (EMN/ BAMF, 2017). The 'Act on the Introduction of Fast-Track Asylum Procedures' also clarified the grounds for suspending deportation for health reasons: henceforth defined as life-threatening or serious illness which would significantly worsen upon the deportation being carried out (EMN/ BAMF, 2017). These policy changes had significant consequences for many of the respondents included in this study.

Of particular relevance to the study sample is German policy regarding assisted voluntary return and reintegration. In Germany, the Federal Government and the Länder established the 'Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum-Seekers in Germany' (REAG) in 1979 and the 'Government Assisted Repatriation Program' (GARP) in 1989 (Oomkens & Kalir, 2020). The IOM has been responsible for the implementation of these programmes. The REAG/GARP programmes have provided transportation for rejected Albanian asylum seekers to return to Albania, but have not provided reintegration assistance to Albanian nationals. However, in addition to these national programmes, Germany's federal states (the Länder) have run their own voluntary Exit programmes which – via a diversity of implementing partners – have provided return counselling and reintegration assistance in some cases (OECD, 2020). The resulting variability in access to reintegration support for Albanian nationals is to some extent observed in the migrant interview data presented in this report. Additionally, in 2017 the Start-up Cash Plus (StarthilfePlus) programme was established to complement the REAG/GARP programmes with supplementary reintegration assistance. Since 2018, Albanian nationals have been eligible for reintegration assistance under StarthilfePlus, but only if they have had temporary permission to stay in Germany (Langzeitduldung) for at least two years – which evidently excludes rejected Albanian asylum seekers who have been in Germany for less than two years. Under StarthilfePlus, eligible Albanian returnees can receive a combination of cash assistance and in-kind assistance for housing and medical costs.

2.3 Post-Exit policy and experiences in Albania

In recent years, national policy in Albania has started to pay attention to the question of return and reintegration. A National Strategy and Action Plan for Migration for 2005-2010 was followed by the creation of a Strategy for the Reintegration of Returned Albanian Citizens 2010-2015 and its accompanying Action Plan. According to this Strategy, reintegration should be facilitated through 36 local 'Migration Counters' designed as 'one-stop shops' to provide information and referral to relevant public and private services both for returning and prospective migrants. The Strategy also established that certain vulnerable categories of returned migrants (for example, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied minors, Roma, and migrants with economic problems) are entitled to specific services. In accordance with the Strategy's aims, a 2011 amendment

(no.10389) to law no. 9668 'On emigration of Albanian citizens for employment reasons' created a special status for returned Albanian migrants who have spent at least a year abroad, and granted them the right to, inter alia, social and economic protection, and free employment orientation, vocational training, education and social housing (Vathi & Zajmi, 2017).

However, the implementation of these measures has been weak. In practice, their effectiveness is limited by the following factors: few returnees register and seek assistance at Migration Counters (seemingly due to a lack of awareness of their existence); the criteria for accessing returnee status excludes those who cannot satisfactorily document their stay abroad or who stayed abroad for less than one year (which includes many more recently rejected asylum seekers); the municipal services responsible for delivering services to returnees are not necessarily equipped with the human and financial resources to do so effectively; and residents of rural areas, in particular, face barriers to accessing economic assistance (Dhembo et al., 2019; Hackaj & Shehaj, 2017; INSTAT/IOM, 2014).

The 2010-2015 Strategy was followed by a four-year gap in which there was no national strategy for reintegration; according to one government official interviewed, this has resulted in the decay of existing mechanisms and practices for inter-departmental/agency coordination and cooperation on returnee reintegration which have had to be re-established. A new National Strategy and Action Plan on Migration was launched in 2019 for the period until 2022. The reintegration of returned Albanian citizens is included as a focus of this Strategy under two strategic objectives. Firstly, in order to 'Ensure safe and orderly migration from, through and to Albania' the Strategy pledges to 'Support return and reintegration of readmitted Albanian citizens' (objective B3.2). Secondly, under objective C which aims to 'Develop an effective labour migration policy while enhancing the positive impact of migration in the national/local socio-economic development of the country' the Strategy commits to 'Facilitate the return and socio-economic reintegration of the Albanian citizens' (C2.5). The Strategy emphasises that the provision of effective support to returnees will require: an accurate assessment of returnees' needs and existing available reintegration support; strengthened capacities for information provision by the Migration Counters; and the development of services to directly support returnees' access to the labour market, vocational training, and entrepreneurship opportunities, as well as to public education, health and housing services. Regarding their economic reintegration, the Strategy further highlights the need to support the recognition of migrants' skills and qualifications gained abroad; relatedly, the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2014-2020 seeks to foster the creation of decent job opportunities.

Besides the state-run Migration Counters, support to prospective and returned migrants in Albania is provided by inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations. On behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH has been running the 'Migration for Development' programme in Albania since 2017. Under this programme (and in addition to providing prospective returnees with information, advice and access to REAG/GARP and StarthilfePlus in Germany), GIZ in Albania provides: 1) information, advice and referral services to prospective and returned migrants in Albania; and 2) financing to local CSOs to directly provide reintegration support to returned migrants. Information, advice and referral services are offered at the German Information Centre on Migration, Training and Career (DIMAK) in Tirana and, more

recently, at a regional DIMAK office in Shkodra. These DIMAK centres provide information, counselling and referrals to employment and training opportunities as well as broader support services to both prospective and returned migrants. Through their CSO programme, GIZ commissions reintegration programming from several CSOs which include Terres Des Hommes, World Vision, ADRA, Swiss Contact, the National Association Education for Life (SHKEJ) and the Foundation “Spirit of Love”- Diakonia Agapes (FSoLDA). Of particular note given its wide geographic coverage and holistic case management approach is the GIZ-funded RE-IN-VEST project (‘Returnees reintegrate and reinvest within country’), an 18-month project² led by World Vision in partnership with SHKEJ and Diakonia Agapes, and implemented across 13 municipalities in Albania. Outside of this collaboration, other key inter-governmental and non-governmental actors working on return and reintegration in Albania include the World Bank and DG HOME, which focus on the needs of Roma communities, as well as CARITAS (Hackaj & Shehaj, 2017).

² At the time of fieldwork (pre-Covid-19), this programme was foreseen to run from March 2019 to August 2020.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This paper provides an analysis of reintegration processes in Albania, based on 50 semi-structured interviews with returned Albanian migrants (40 of whom returned via assisted voluntary return and 10 of whom were forcibly removed), as well as additional interviews with key stakeholders involved in local return and reintegration programming.

The semi-structured interviews with returnees took a life-cycle approach (i.e. starting with the respondent's life prior to migration, their reasons for migration, their experiences of migration, the decision-making or circumstances that led to their return, their experiences of return and reintegration, and their current situation and future aspirations). The interviews with key stakeholders focused on their work with regards to return and reintegration, their conceptualisation of sustainable return/reintegration, their perceptions of reintegration outcomes among Albanian returnees, and their monitoring and evaluation practices and results.

3.2 Data collection

Fieldwork was conducted in Albania between 14 January and 30 January 2020. All interviews were conducted in person, with translation assistance. The sampling strategy for the returnee interviews was necessarily based on a combination of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling, given the lack of comprehensive national or local registers of returned migrants. The target population was defined as Albanian nationals (over the age of 18) who had returned from any EU country in the last ten years, either via assisted voluntary return or deportation. In practice, recruitment focused on the most recent wave of Albanian returnees: those who had sought asylum – mainly in Germany and, to a lesser extent, in France – since 2014 and who had been returned via assisted voluntary return or forced removal (see Section 2 for an overview of these migratory trends). The authors worked with an experienced local researcher, Dr. Ilir Gëdeshi, to identify potential respondents and conduct the interviews. Several recruitment strategies were used, including contacts via Dr Gëdeshi's network, recruitment via an NGO contact, and intercept-point sampling (e.g. in a low-income neighbourhood where it was known that many residents had sought asylum in France), as well as snowball sampling. The characteristics of the final sample are discussed below.

Interviews generally took about an hour (ranging between approximately 30 and 90 minutes). Every care and precaution was taken to adhere to strict research ethics protocols, including the imperative to obtain voluntary and informed consent, ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants (except in the case of key stakeholders who preferred not to remain anonymous), and to 'Do no harm'. Given the highly precarious situations in which some interviewees and their families found themselves at the time of interview, the research team was careful to avoid lines of questioning that might cause distress to the interviewees or their families (who were often present). Interviews were voice-recorded, where consent for this was given. Interview audio files were later transcribed and simultaneously translated into English. In the two cases where consent was not given for audio-recording, the researcher took full notes of the interview discussion. The migrant interview transcripts (and notes, where these were taken) were systematically coded using Atlas.Ti, using a coding tree based on the conceptual framework and life-cycle approach and revised inductively in an iterative process.

3.3 Research participant characteristics

Table 1 (below) presents an overview of the characteristics of the research participants included in the final returnee sample. The sample is not nationally representative but the research team sought to include balanced representation from respondents in terms of gender, geographic dispersion (i.e. urban vs. rural settings, and geographic regions), ethnicity and mode of return (assisted voluntary return vs. forced removal). This was largely achieved, although we discuss this further in the section on limitations below.

Table 1. Returnee research participant characteristics

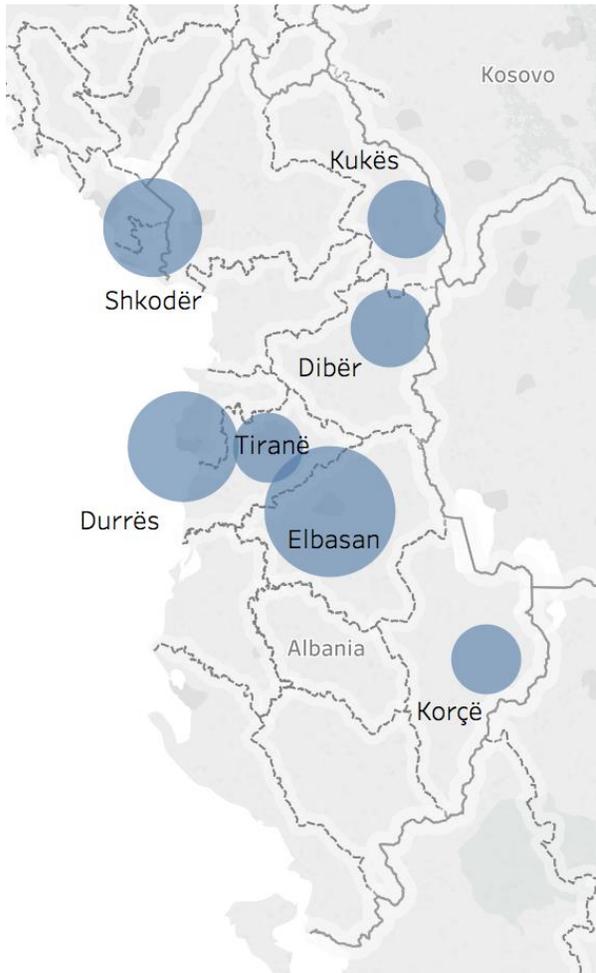
| Primary characteristics | Disaggregation | Number | % of overall respondents |
|--|---------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | | |
| | Female | 24 | 48 |
| | Male | 26 | 52 |
| <i>Rural/Urban</i> | | | |
| | Urban | 21 | 42 |
| | Semi-urban | 15 | 30 |
| | Rural | 14 | 28 |
| <i>Instances of assisted voluntary return/ forced removal per destination country*</i> | | | |
| | Germany | 51 | - |
| | France | 8 | - |
| <i>Mode of return per instance*</i> | | | |
| | Assisted voluntary return | 47 | - |
| | Forced removal | 12 | - |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | | | |
| | Albanian | 31 | 62 |
| | Roma | 12 | 24 |
| | Egyptian | 7 | 14 |
| <i>Years of formal education</i> | | | |
| | None | 3 | 6 |
| | Less than Primary | 8 | 16 |
| | Primary | 16 | 32 |
| | Secondary / Vocational | 19 | 38 |
| | Tertiary | 3 | 6 |

*Six respondents migrated and were subsequently returned to Albania via assisted voluntary return or forced removal more than once, hence the total number of instances of migration and return exceeds the number of research participants.

The geographical distribution of the sample (where interviews took place) is shown below in Figure 5, where the size of the circles represents the share of respondents interviewed in each region. We sought to sample from urban, semi-urban and rural contexts, and across different regions of the country, although our sampling efforts focused mainly on the centre and north of the country, given our understanding that regions such as Elbasan, Kukës and Shkodër have seen the highest numbers of returning asylum seekers (INSTAT/CESS, 2020, p. 58).

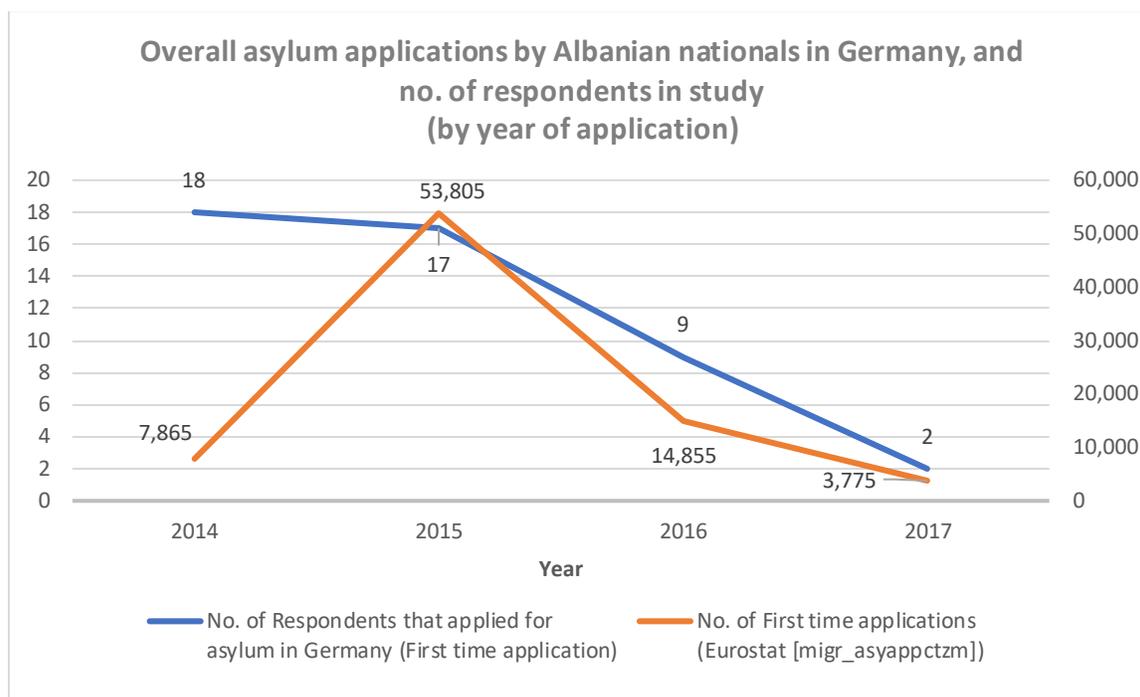
Interviews were conducted in Burrel, Elbasan, Fushë Kruja, Kamëz, Korçë, Kukës and Shkodër, and in the outlying villages and settlements surrounding Burrel, Durrës, Elbasan and Shkodër. It should be noted that some participants who were interviewed in urban centres had nonetheless commuted in (e.g. for work or education) from the villages in which they lived – the distinction between urban, semi-urban and rural return contexts is therefore not straightforward.

Figure 5. Geographic distribution of the sample, by region



As mentioned, the sample predominantly captures asylum migration to Germany. The years of the research participants' arrival in Germany largely follows the overall trend in asylum migration to Germany between 2014 and 2017, although a higher proportion of migrants who arrived in 2014 are represented in this study. This is shown in Figure 6, which compares the year of first time asylum applications by Albanian nationals in Germany (Eurostat, 2021a) to the years in which the study participants applied for asylum in Germany.

Figure 6. A comparison of the arrival of research participants in Germany vs. overall first-time asylum applications by Albanian nationals in Germany



Source: Authors' own elaboration comparing study dataset to data from Eurostat (2021a)

Regarding the key stakeholder interviewees, these were purposively sampled in order to capture the experiences of key governmental, intergovernmental, and NGO actors involved in return and reintegration programming in Albania (see Section 2 for an overview of this landscape). An overview of the key stakeholder sample is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Key stakeholder research participant characteristics

| Stakeholder type | Organisation | No. |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------|
| <i>Governmental</i> | Albanian Government | 1 |
| | Regional Employment Office | 1 |
| | GIZ | 1 |
| <i>Inter-governmental</i> | IOM Tirana | 1 |
| <i>INGO</i> | Terres Des Hommes | 1 |
| | World Vision | 2 |
| <i>NGO and other civil society</i> | Shkej | 1 |
| | Diakonia Agapes | 1 |
| | Roma community leader | 1 |

3.4 Limitations

Given the lack of comprehensive data on the size and characteristics of the returnee population in Albania (as discussed in Section 2, the Albanian government only knows how many Albanian nationals are forcibly removed to Albania – assisted voluntary and spontaneous returns are not

systematically recorded), it is not possible to accurately assess the extent to which our sample is representative of the broader returnee population.

Despite substantial efforts to achieve a balance between ethnic backgrounds, our sample seems to disproportionately represent people from Roma and Egyptian communities (24% and 14% respectively). Roma and Egyptians make up relatively much smaller proportions of the total Albanian population at less than 2% of the overall population (INSTAT/CESS, 2020). However, it has been observed that Roma and Egyptians have been disproportionately over-represented in Albanian asylum outflows to Germany (reported at 11% in 2011), which is the only EU country that registers the ethnic backgrounds of asylum seekers (INSTAT/CESS, 2020). Given the high rates of out-migration from the Roma and Egyptian communities, and their greater geographical concentration and therefore visibility, it was much easier to identify potential respondents from within these communities. Engaging Albanian-ethnicity respondents was substantially more difficult, as they are more geographically dispersed and often do not know other Albanian returnees in their local area, which made snowballing less effective. Key stakeholder interviewees noted that this has also been a challenge for NGOs involved in reintegration programming, who find it more difficult to identify and engage Albanian-ethnicity returnees.

The research team sought to interview people who had returned via forced removal as well as those returned via assisted voluntary return. Although the number of returnees via forced removal (10) is much smaller than those returned via assisted voluntary return (40), this imbalance reflects the results of similar recent studies. For example, Hackaj & Shehaj's (2017) sample of 21 'migrant units' includes only two who were forcibly removed, while the rest returned by assisted voluntary return (p.19). Similarly, the interim findings of an unpublished survey conducted in 2019-2020 by the Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) found that, of the 605 respondents who received a negative decision on their asylum claim, 78% accepted assisted voluntary return compared to only 22% who were forcibly removed to Albania. Finally, it should be noted that, since many interviews were conducted in a family setting – at the interviewees' own convenience – the interviews do not necessarily capture gendered experiences, as some wives (and husbands) may have felt to some extent pressured to give responses that would be acceptable to their spouses, or to their children, parents, or parents in law (see King & Vullnetari, 2006, for similar reflections on fieldwork in the Albanian context).

Lastly, it should be recognised that migration decision-making is a complex, and not necessarily rational, process, which can make it difficult to capture in data collection. Although the semi-structured interview is an appropriate tool with which to explore the complexity, nuance – and sometimes, inconsistencies – of individual decision-making, the retrospective nature of these narrative accounts makes them liable to recall and hindsight bias. In other words, respondents may not accurately remember their past decision-making processes, or may recall and describe past decisions in light of subsequent experiences or current knowledge, thereby mis-representing their past decision-making.

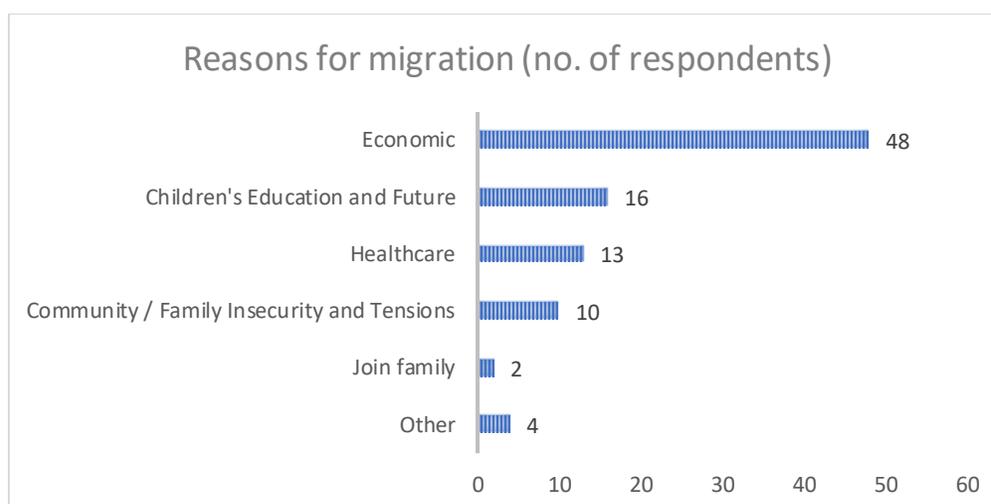
4. Migration decision-making and experiences

In this section we provide a brief overview of our research participants' decisions to migrate and experiences abroad, in order to better contextualise the findings presented in Sections 5 and 6 on their return decision-making, and return and reintegration experiences.

4.1 Reasons to migrate

Respondents most often cited multiple reasons for migrating (34 respondents; 74%). As Figure 7 shows, a large majority emphasised economic reasons for migration. Moreover, economic challenges were often also at the root of their other motivations for migration, including their children's opportunities, access to healthcare, and community and family tensions. These findings align with those of other studies on recent Albanian asylum migration (INSTAT/CESS, 2020; Vathi & Zajmi, 2017; World Bank Group, 2019). In the following sub-section we briefly elaborate on each of these reasons in turn.

Figure 7. Respondents' reasons for migrating



4.1.1 Difficult economic conditions

Almost all respondents cited economic difficulties as a key factor in their decisions to migrate. Economic conditions were also discussed as the primary reason for asylum out-migration from Albania by key stakeholder interviewees. Economic difficulties were experienced as a lack of employment and insufficient income – including from social security provisions (see also INSTAT/CESS, 2020). Thirty-nine respondents (78%) had no formal or regular employment prior to migrating. Five respondents had formal work; and the remaining six were in education. Those who had no formal or regular employment were mostly young and able to work (the average age at migration was 32 years old) but had been unable to find stable employment. Among the 39 unemployed respondents, 16 worked informally, for example collecting scrap metal and plastic, selling second-hand clothes, or doing sporadic construction and carpentry jobs. Some respondents (or their husbands) migrated to Greece seasonally to work in construction or agriculture. Reliant on these low and intermittent sources of income, respondents and their families experienced significant precarity, and often had to buy basic necessities on credit from local stores, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020).

Many households had only one source of income, usually from the adult man (father) of the family. Although some women worked sporadically, those with young children experienced high barriers to employment, namely the lack of childcare (see also INSTAT/CESS, 2020; and Vathi & Zajmi, 2017). One respondent explained that there were no local kindergarden facilities, and two others explained that, even if they found employment, for example in a local factory, kindergarden ends between 11am and 12pm, leaving them without childcare for the rest of their working day. The case of one woman whose husband had passed away points to the particular difficulties faced by single mothers who have to balance childcare and income-generation activities.

In addition to difficulties finding employment, low wages and poor working conditions in Albania further motivated out-migration. For example, one woman who was not working in Albania but who hoped to find work as a seamstress or cleaner in Germany explained:

The salary is very low and the working conditions are not good [in Albania]. In other countries I can take a professional course and I can find work. Even with a minimal salary we can live and get by [abroad]. Every time the political parties change here, people are afraid for their jobs (M121).

A further disincentive to taking up formal employment were the often high costs of transportation to potential workplaces, which would further reduce the already low salaries that employees could expect to take home.

In the absence of secure employment, limited social security provisions aggravate household precarity. Economic aid for those officially registered as unemployed was described by respondents as extremely deficient – those who received economic aid prior to migrating said that they received between 15 to 81 EUR per month. These amounts fail to protect against poverty: the poverty line is set at 5.5 USD per person per day by the World Bank, which categorises Albania as an upper middle income country (World Bank Group, 2020).³ Dhembo et al. (2019) argue that social protection policies in Albania have been insufficient to alleviate poverty, serving less as a social welfare mechanism than as an economic crisis buffer. In Albania, pensions often offer a more significant source of household income. Indeed, in this study some respondents explained that their household relied on the pensions paid to older family members.

Poverty and vulnerability seemed often to be more severe among Roma and Egyptian respondents, although ethnic Albanian households also experienced significant precarity (see De Soto et al., 2005; World Bank Group, 2019). This is consistent with a recent study by INSTAT/CESS (2020) which found that returned rejected asylum seekers represented the poorest segment of Albanian society in terms of household income. In the present study, both ethnic Albanians and Roma and Egyptian respondents described sharing cramped and poor-quality housing between multiple generations – sometimes consisting of only one room and a kitchen. However, Roma and Egyptian families tended to be bigger – and their conditions were therefore more uncomfortable. For example, one young Roma woman described: *'Yes, in one room and a kitchen lived together*

³ According to the latest official poverty figures for Albania collected in 2012, the poverty head count was 39.1 % (World Bank Group, 2020).

my mother-in-law, the three brothers-in-law, my husband, my child and I' (M134). Moreover, before migrating some Roma households lived in informal or temporary constructions – for example, without a toilet, or in a tent or shack. In terms of their food security, in three instances, Roma and Egyptian respondents stated that they had to resort to begging or collecting food from public waste bins. A Roma community leader further suggested that it is not uncommon for Roma families to face institutional discrimination in their applications for economic aid.

Against this background, respondents reported huge frustration with their living conditions and protracted insecurity in Albania, and commonly shared the perception that there were few opportunities to improve their situation in Albania. Expectations of bleak future prospects therefore fed into strong economic motivations to migrate, where they hoped to find work and better living conditions.

4.1.2 Children's Education and Future

Closely related to shared perceptions that Albania offered little hope for a better future, many respondents explained that they migrated primarily, or amongst other reasons, to give their children a better future. Specifically, these respondents hoped to give their children access to a better education and better quality of life. Parents were strongly motivated to give their children a better life than they had themselves experienced. For example, as one mother reflected: *'I don't want them to end up like me. I want them to grow, to have something, to go to school. To have money for everything they need'* (M114). Another father expressed his frustrations with what he perceived as the declining quality of education in Albania:

[...] we do not have a future here in Albania.[...] [A future means] that my children can be educated and get the best from a European country. A future is a better life. Education and everything else is going down here in Albania. I wanted to construct my country but I am obliged [to migrate]. It's not that it gives me happiness to leave (M143).

Inequalities in the education system are highlighted by a recent UNESCO report (2017), which points to the particular disadvantages faced by students from rural and remote, low-income, or ethnic-minority backgrounds, as well as those students with disabilities. In the present study, inclusion issues were mentioned by Roma and Egyptian households who explained that the discrimination that their children faced was a motivating factor for their migration. Many of these respondents explained that they wanted their children to have a better education, and to be free of the discrimination and stigma that they experienced at school:

My children faced discrimination too. Other children tell my children that we are like black people, they offend us by telling my children that we are dirty people etc. (M109).

4.1.3 Healthcare

Access to healthcare was also a significant reason for migration (see also INSTAT/CESS, 2020). Respondents explained that they had left Albania in order to access health treatments for themselves or for a family member which they had been unable to access in Albania. In some cases, it was the respondent's understanding that the necessary treatment was not available in Albania. For example, a Roma woman explained:

When my son was 8 eight years old he had a small accident so I wanted him to go to Germany to get a treatment. He was injured in the eye and no doctor in Albania wanted to treat him. They told me that this kind of transplant was possible only in Germany, Turkey or France (M151).

In other cases, respondents did not trust the quality of the healthcare available to them in Albania, and/or could not afford the treatment. For example, a young man explained his reasons for migrating to Germany as such:

Mostly economic. Low salary. I couldn't afford even buying the medicine, which cost more than 150 Euros for my son or for my wife. My wife was ill too and nearly died during and after the birth and the doctors wanted money. I was not happy with the service (M101).

Many respondents had therefore not been able to address their healthcare needs in Albania due to prohibitive costs and the lack of healthcare insurance. In this way, households' poor economic conditions contributed to their barriers to accessing healthcare. In addition, a Roma community leader suggested that higher levels of deprivation – in terms of poverty, a lack of education, and high rates of rough-sleeping – contribute to the prevalence of health problems among Roma communities.

In Albania, public healthcare insurance is provided through the Mandatory Health Insurance Fund (MHIC) (Tomini & Tomini, 2020). Employees and other economically active persons pay contributions for their access to MHIC, while economically inactive persons (including children, pensioners, those registered as unemployed or receiving social assistance or disability benefits) are entitled to public healthcare insurance without paying contributions (Tomini & Tomini, 2020). However, in practice, approximately one third of the Albanian population remains uninsured (Tomini & Tomini, 2020). Uninsurance is common amongst informal workers, the poor, ethnic minorities such as Roma, and people from living in deprived areas (e.g. rural or peri-urban) (Tomini & Tomini, 2020). Many of the respondents who participated in this study did not seem to have healthcare insurance. According to key stakeholder interviewees, many poorer families face barriers to registering for healthcare insurance. In some cases, they do not have the necessary documents verifying their vulnerability; for others, the costs of travelling to obtain the necessary documents and to the hospital to register for public health insurance is perceived as too difficult and costly. In other cases, they are simply unaware of their entitlements.

Additional financial barriers are posed by a culture of informal payments to healthcare providers which, although illegal, appears to be widespread (Tomini & Tomini, 2020). Respondents in this study also reported how out-of-pocket informal expenses reduce access to quality healthcare:

In Albania, the doctors didn't take care so much. If you don't have a lot of money, if you don't know the doctors, you can die here (M141).

Just as poor economic conditions reduced respondents' access to healthcare, the high cost of out-of-pocket payments for healthcare contributed to respondents' economic precarity. A WHO analysis found that in 2015 12.5% of households experienced catastrophic out-of-pocket payments for healthcare, affecting the poorest households most (Tomini & Tomini, 2020).

4.1.4 Community and family insecurity and tensions

Although less common, community and family insecurity and tensions were among the main reasons for 10 respondents' migration decisions. Blood feuds and fears regarding physical safety were highlighted as reasons for migration by three respondents – of these, one man had been shot and permanently disabled, and one woman reported that she feared for her son's life after her brother-in-law and father-in-law had been killed. For other respondents, perceptions of criminality motivated their decisions to leave Albania – for example, one man cited local mafia activity as part of the political problems that motivated his departure, alongside economic reasons. Low levels of trust in the justice system aggravated respondents' fears, as they felt powerless to address threats or injustices.

Additionally, respondents of Roma and Egyptian ethnicities often cited physical or community insecurity and tensions as a main reason for migration. According to these respondents, they experienced discrimination within their local communities, and even within their households (in the case of inter-group marriages). The crowded living conditions experienced most acutely by Roma and Egyptian respondents intensified household conflicts which also motivated out-migration, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020). As mentioned, multiple generations often lived together in small houses or rooms due to economic constraint. In this context, migration was seen as the only feasible means to escape such family dynamics and living conditions. For example, one young Egyptian woman who had married into a Roma community described the desperation she felt:

Before [migrating] it had been very, very difficult for us. When I came here and we lived all in one room and everybody was saying "I have my money, you have your money, you have your children", you know? And the money I earned was not enough for my children. We had so many conflicts in the house and so I thought it was better for me to leave this situation. [...] [I made the decision] together with my husband. I said to him that it was better to leave or otherwise we should get a divorce (M108).

4.2 The decision-making process

Various patterns in the respondents' decisions-making to migrate could be observed, which we briefly overview here in order to better contextualise their migration, return and reintegration experiences.

First, it should be noted that the research participants were not compelled to migrate by other people. All adult respondents made the decision to migrate by themselves, or together with their families. Respondents who were minors at the time of their migration did not report resisting their families' decisions. The decision to migrate and subsequent preparation was often a household decision discussed within the nuclear family, and often also with extended family (who may have also shared the household).

Respondents tended to migrate with their nuclear (and in some cases, extended) family. Migration for asylum is therefore most often a 'family project' in the Albanian case, as also found by Vathi and Zajmi (2017, p. 35). Family groups were often young families travelling with their young children. Thirty-nine out of 50 respondents migrated with a minor within their group. In some cases, more than two generations migrated together – for example, older adults migrated with their adult children and their children's children. These extended family groups sometimes

included adult siblings, nieces and nephews. Some women migrated whilst pregnant (for whom access to better healthcare services for the delivery of their child was sometimes a primary or additional motivation to migrate). The average size of a family group who migrated together was three to four persons; the largest group size observed was seven. Only four respondents migrated independently of any family members – these were all younger men. Two of these men were minors at the point of departure. Five women (four of whom were married, the other a widow) migrated with (some of) their children, but without their spouses – two of these women were seeking solutions to healthcare problems and did not intend to stay abroad permanently.

Information relayed through social networks was the key determinant of the choice of destination country. This information came through friends and family in Albania, or who were in the destination country at the time of decision-making, or through general hearsay. Respondents made the decision to go to a particular destination country before leaving Albania. Their subsequent journeys to Germany and France tended to be short and relatively direct, completed within a few days via taxi, bus, train, ferry and air travel.

The average cost of travel was 260 EUR per person, including children. The costs ranged between 75 to 500 EUR depending on the number of days spent travelling, personal networks, and group size. Larger groups tended to have lower travelling costs per person. There were no discernible differences in costs between travel routes and mode of transport used. These journeys were usually financed through loans from friends and family. Thirty-nine respondents indicated that they had borrowed from family and/or friends. In comparison, only nine said that they had used their own savings. Five households had sold their assets (land, livestock, etc.) to fund their migration. These debts and lost assets are important to consider in the context of the respondents' eventual return and reintegration.

4.3 Respondents' expectations of migration

The respondents' expectations of migration reflected their motivations to migrate. All respondents expected in some way to resolve the problems they faced in Albania. Based on the information they had received through social networks – and, to a much lesser extent, based on news reports and radio broadcasts that Germany needed labour migrants – respondents expected to have access to better employment opportunities, salaries, housing, healthcare, education and social security.

Thirty-nine (78%) respondents migrated with hopes of staying permanently in the destination country, while 8 (16%) intended to stay only temporarily and 6 (12%) had no firm idea prior to migrating. Temporary migration was envisaged by those respondents who wanted to migrate in order to achieve a set goal – such as medical treatment or earning and saving some money – and then return to Albania. These respondents usually left behind their homes and family members to return to. Similarly, those who had no firm idea at the point of departure had goals that they wanted to achieve abroad, such as getting a job or ensuring a good education for their children, but were open to the idea of staying longer if conditions were favorable.

Expectations of the actual likelihood of obtaining residence through asylum varied across respondents. The majority of research participants reported that they had known about the risks of being returned from the country of destination. In most cases, this risk did not affect their decision-making. Some respondents said that they knew they might not be allowed to stay in the country of destination but that they preferred not to think about that risk, explaining that they hoped for 'luck', or left it in 'God's hands' (M114). Some respondents seemed to discount or to ignore the risk of a forced return because their living conditions (or acute health needs) prior to migrating were so poor that they were desperate for a way out. For example, as one ethnic Albanian man, who had been out-of-work for six months due to illness, explained:

We had heard many things such as some being returned by force, some voluntarily. My economic conditions here were so bad that I needed to go. I also had the loan at the bank for the house that we are living in. I needed to take the risk (M121).

A few respondents adjusted their migration strategies to the risk of being returned to Albania. These respondents left behind family members in order to look after their property or to maintain their employment, in order to have these to come back to in the case of return. Another strategy was to save money in the country of migration in order to have some resources to bring back to Albania in the case of return. For example, as one young Roma woman who migrated first to Germany explained:

Yes, because we had nothing in Albania, when we went there we saved so much money and we received some money for different problems that could come later. Because we were expecting that we might return one day (M108).

Some respondents who grew increasingly aware in Germany that Albanian asylum applicants were being returned to Albania also adopted this savings strategy to prepare for return if necessary. Others continued to believe that they would be allowed to stay (in a couple of cases, based on rumours that residence would be granted to those who demonstrated good behaviour and local integration) and so did not make these preparations. These hopes were perhaps motivated by the

existence of pathways to legal residence based on integration that Germany makes available under certain conditions to irregular migrants with tolerated status (see ADMIGOV deliverable 2.7 for a fuller discussion of these pathways: Gonzalez Beilfuss & Koopmans, 2021).

4.4 Experiences in the destination country

The majority of respondents included in this study had sought asylum in Germany; a smaller group had (also) sought asylum in France (and, in one case, in the Netherlands). Differences between these countries' asylum systems, as well as changes in the asylum system over time – which include policies introduced in Germany in response to the high influxes of asylum seekers received in 2015 – significantly shaped respondents' experiences in these destination countries.

4.4.1 German policy changes before and after 2015

As discussed in Section 2, Albania was added to Germany's list of 'safe countries of origin' on 15 October 2015 in an attempt to fast-track asylum procedures for Albanians (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). Since then, additional policies have been introduced to support the swift processing of asylum seekers from 'safe countries of origin' with the aim of reducing manifestly ill-founded applications and to facilitate returns. The inclusion of Albania into Germany's list of 'safe countries of origin' seems to have significantly impacted Albanian asylum seekers' experiences in Germany, by reducing their length of stay in Germany, increasing the proportion of time spent in reception facilities (rather than in follow-up accommodation, within local communities), and reducing opportunities for integration.

The effort to fast track asylum and return procedures for Albanian nationals was captured in this study. First, as shown in Table 3 (below), the amount of time that respondents spent in Germany before being returned to Albania decreased from 2015 onwards. For those who applied for asylum in 2014, the average time abroad was 25 months, while in 2016 it was more than halved to 10.8 months. Although the data collected on the average monthly state allowances received by respondents in Germany does not show a clear downwards trend between 2014 and 2018 (see Table 3), there was some indication that efforts were made to reduce cash assistance to asylum seekers. A Roma respondent who applied for asylum in Germany (in either 2015 or 2016 – the timelines discussed in his interview are somewhat unclear) and who stayed for approximately one year explained:

Interviewee: *At the beginning, I was given 1100 Euro. For the first six or seven months. As time was passing by, they started reducing the amount of money to the amount of 600 Euro.*

Interviewer: *Why did they reduce it?*

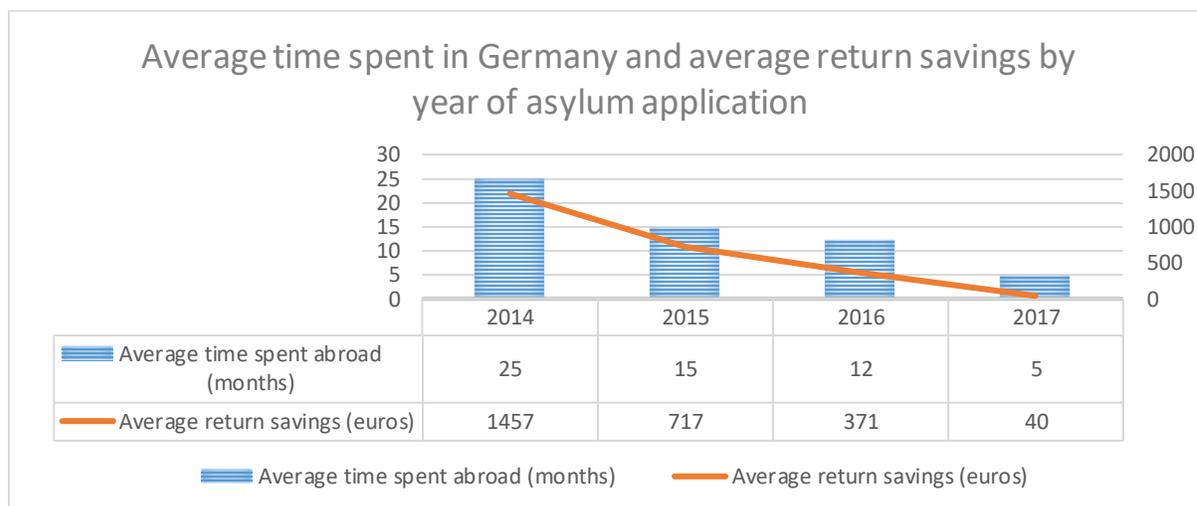
Interviewee: *More and more Albanians were coming and they could not afford to give all the same amount of money. They told us that our country was not at war, so you are here for something else, for a better life (M153).*

Table 3. Average time spent in Germany (months) and monthly allowance (EUR) by year of asylum application

| <i>Year respondent applied for asylum</i> | No. of respondents | Average time spent in Germany (mths) | Average monthly allowance (eur)* |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 2014 | 20 | 24.8 | 288.21 |
| 2015 | 19 | 12.6 | 265.85 |
| 2016 | 11 | 10.8 | 298.57 |
| 2017 | 2 | 4.5 | 250.00 |

*Average monthly allowance is calculated as the average per person within the household.

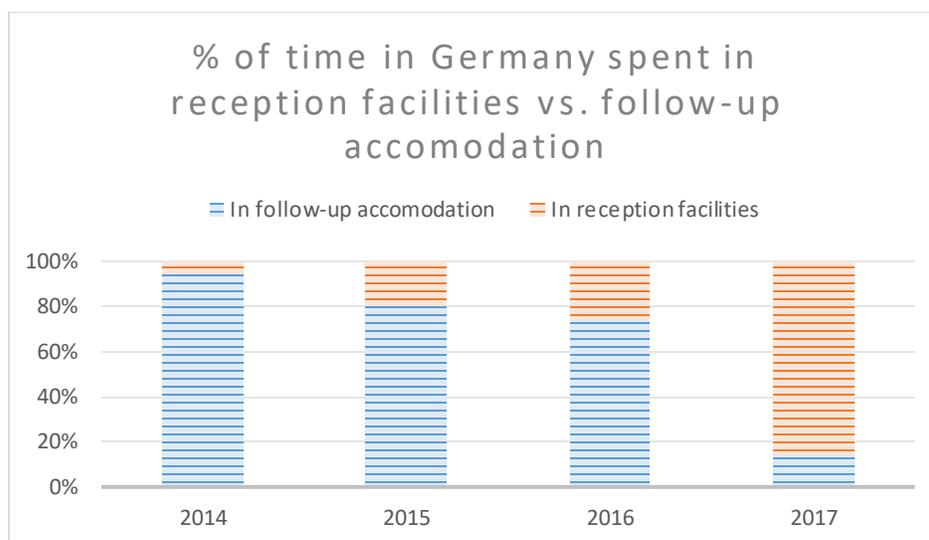
Access to work permits is limited for asylum seekers in Germany and – since the October 2015 ‘Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures’ – prohibited for asylum seekers from countries of origin deemed safe (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). The majority of respondents therefore relied on their monthly state allowance. A minority supplemented this with volunteer or informal work. Savings were accumulated, where possible, to pay off debts accrued in Albania and/or in order to have some resources for when they returned to Albania, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020). The decrease in the average time spent in Germany thus had a great influence on the amount of savings that respondents were able to accumulate and bring back to Albania with them. As Table 4 (below) shows, those respondents who applied for asylum in Germany in 2014 had accumulated an average of 1457 EUR in savings after an average stay of 25 months. By 2017, the amount fell to 40 EUR after an average of 5 months’ stay (although this average is based on the experiences of only two respondents).

Table 4. Average time abroad and average return savings, by year of asylum application in Germany (2014-2017)

The ‘Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures’ from October 2015 also sought to prolong accommodation in reception facilities for Albanian asylum seekers while accelerating their processing times (EMN/ BAMF, 2016). As a result, the proportion of time abroad that respondents spent in reception facilities increased, as the time spent living in the community in follow-up accommodation (e.g. in individual or shared apartments or houses) decreased (Figure 8, below).

Similarly, a study by INSTAT/CESS reports that, whereas between January 2014 and October 2015 Albanian asylum seekers in Germany generally spent only a few days or weeks in camps before being transferred to more formal accommodation (social housing, or hotels, schools or other public facilities adapted to the purpose), arrivals after October 2015 stayed less time in Germany, and mainly in camps. Those respondents who were accommodated in camps received less cash assistance, but were instead provided with food (INSTAT/CESS, 2020).

Figure 8. Percentage of time in destination country spent accommodated in asylum reception facilities, by year of asylum application (2014-2017)



4.4.2 Conditions in the country of destination

The research participants who migrated to Germany generally had a good impression of their time abroad, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020) and Vathi and Zajmi (2017). Many of them expressed happiness and satisfaction regarding their stay in Germany – in spite of their disappointed hopes of staying longer. Respondents often explained that in Germany they enjoyed financial security and a much-improved standard of living, access to high-quality public services including education and healthcare, and a sense of safety and order. Generally, respondents described their economic conditions in Germany as comfortable – although there were five respondents who said that it was still difficult to live off the monthly state allowance that they received, either because they judged it as being low relative to the cost of living in Germany, or because they were trying to set aside some money as savings or to pay off debts. Particularly those respondents who arrived in Germany earlier and stayed longer enjoyed opportunities for social integration which included language classes, church-going, volunteer work, and wider community activities such as their childrens' football matches. Children were generally able to attend German schools (except for the children of two families who were given return orders within a matter of months of their arrival).

In contrast, those who sought asylum in France generally had more negative experiences. One Roma single mother reported that '*people were nice and respectful*' and that her '*children were happy*' in France. However, this positive assessment likely relates to the fact that in Albania she

and her children had experienced extremely poor conditions: they had been living in an informal housing structure (described as a shack) in Albania, while in France they had access to social housing, food assistance and healthcare. Generally, those respondents who sought asylum in France reported that they struggled to support themselves for the duration of their asylum process. Two respondents and their families were given tents as accommodation while waiting for access to social housing – they lived in these tents for one and three months, respectively. Another respondent who sought asylum in France reported that he and other asylum seekers were sleeping rough until they accumulated enough from their state allowances to buy a tent – which took a month, in his case.

All three of these respondents who reported sleeping rough or living in tents in France were either Roma or Egyptian. Similar cases are reported by INSTAT/CESS (2020). An ethnic Albanian respondent who had sought asylum both in Germany and then in France discussed this situation, explaining that the majority of Albanians nationals who stayed in tents in France were of Roma ethnicity, while ethnic Albanians and asylum seekers from other countries often borrowed money to rent houses. This suggests that poorer asylum seekers in France were significantly disadvantaged by the lack of state support, as they had fewer resources to fall back on to support themselves in France. The relatively poorer conditions experienced in France perhaps explains why, of the seven respondents who migrated to France, six were either Roma (4) or Egyptian (2). Notably, the remaining respondent, an ethnic Albanian (cited above) had experienced particularly extreme precarity in Albania due to the impacts of his illness on his family's economic situation. It would therefore seem that the conditions for asylum seekers in France are generally considered tolerable only by those who are used to more extreme deprivation in Albania.

The prohibitions on access to the labour market for asylum seekers were a source of frustration for many respondents, as their main reason for migration was often to find work, resulting in disappointed expectations. Some respondents were able to find informal employment while abroad – these were mostly men. Some respondents (including women) did volunteer work in Germany within the asylum reception facilities, for which they received a very small remuneration (1-2 EUR per hour). Those respondents who found informal work outside of the reception facilities were able to earn much more, and to accumulate more savings prior to their return.

Nine of the 13 respondents who migrated primarily for healthcare reasons were able to access healthcare services abroad. A larger number (i.e. those who did not explicitly state healthcare reasons as a motivation for migrating) also benefitted from access to healthcare services abroad, for needs such as child delivery. Access to healthcare had very positive effects on respondents' well-being. A small number were able to complete their necessary treatment while abroad – such as child delivery or a short-term cancer treatment. However, most who migrated due to healthcare problems required longer-term treatment, which was therefore disrupted upon their return to Albania.

5. Return decision-making and experiences

Almost all the respondents who participated in this study returned to Albania having received at least one negative decision on their asylum application. The exceptions were four people who decided to return to Albania (via assisted voluntary return) whilst their initial asylum applications were still in process (i.e. before receiving a decision on their case). Three of these respondents explained that they were obliged to return to Albania at that time due to family reasons; the other respondent explained that he accepted assisted voluntary return because he was disappointed in the lack of access to legal work opportunities for asylum seekers and because he was made to understand that he would likely receive a negative decision and it was therefore better to avoid forced removal.

The process for facilitating or enforcing the return of rejected Albanian asylum seekers seemed to be that respondents firstly received a letter informing them of the negative decision on their asylum claim, and issuing a return order. They were then invited to an appointment where the relevant authorities explained that they could either take up the offer of assisted voluntary return, or would otherwise be forcibly removed by the police. Some respondents hired a lawyer in order to appeal the decision on their asylum claim. Some were allowed to stay some months longer if they had recently given birth or were undergoing healthcare treatments that they needed to finish or recover from. Respondents who did not accept assisted voluntary return, or who appealed their decision, were forcibly removed by police officers who would typically enter their housing in the early hours of the morning and give them a bit of time to pack their things before escorting them to the airport. Respondents who were forcibly removed to Albania were issued with an EU entry ban which prohibited their re-entry to the EU for a number of years (usually 2-3 years). In the sections below, we describe the decision-making factors that influenced respondents' decisions to accept assisted voluntary return or risk forced removal.

5.1 Anticipating return

It is firstly important to note that, in the context of a mass influx of Albanian asylum seekers to Germany, respondents were often able to observe the outcomes of other Albanians' asylum applications – either directly, if they had lived together in reception facilities, or indirectly through information received through their social networks. These informal networks and communications seemed to play a much bigger informational role than official communications. Respondents reported that, until they received the letter informing them of the negative decision on their asylum claim, they had received no official information or advice on the likely outcome of their asylum application or on the need to return to Albania. There were two potential exceptions to this. One respondent indicated that he was made aware during his asylum interview that '*asylum was just for Syrians and not for the Balkan countries*' (M133). The other reported that an Albanian Kosovar who worked at the reception centre where he was accommodated was encouraging him and others to accept assisted voluntary return even before they received their asylum decisions, in order not to risk forced removal. However, it is not clear whether the employee was communicating this information in an official or personal capacity.

Eighteen respondents stated that they were aware of the possibility of being returned to Albania prior to receiving their asylum decision. Nonetheless, these respondents often stated that they were hoping that their case would receive a positive decision. Around half of the respondents

were anticipating a positive decision on their claim up until the negative decision arrived, and/or until they were forcibly removed. For this group, receiving a negative decision on their asylum claim often came as a shock and contributed to distress at the prospect of having to return. It is unclear whether these respondents' optimism – in spite of the extremely low recognition rates for Albanian asylum seekers – was due to: i) their lack of information (either through informal social networks or official communications); ii) misleading information (for example, the circulation of “success stories” relating to Albanian nationals who were granted asylum); iii) the psychological need to continue hoping and to disregard information on the likelihood of return – or to a combination of these factors.

5.2 Assisted voluntary return

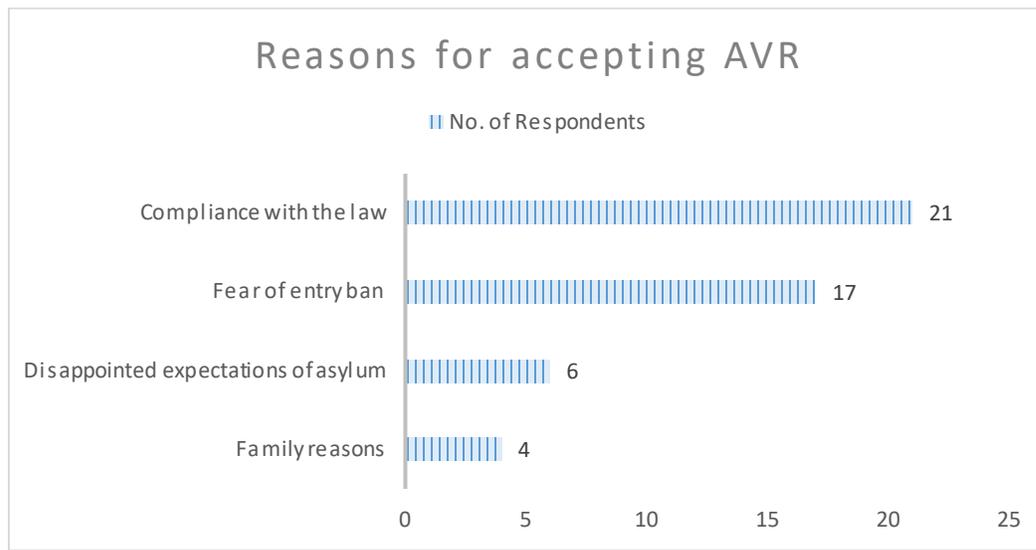
In this study, 40 respondents accepted assisted voluntary return while ten were forcibly removed to Albania. The choice of assisted voluntary return vs. forced removal was typically presented to respondents in the following way, as described by a young man who returned with his wife in 2018:

In the last two months the social worker came and told us that we had a negative decision. She told us we could either sign and leave voluntarily or the police would come at 2am in the morning and take us by force. In this case we would be officially deported and have no right to enter the EU for 5 years (M105).

The above account highlights the main factors determining the respondents' uptake of assisted voluntary return. As shown in Figure 9 (below), the most commonly given reasons were to comply with the law, and the fear of an EU entry ban. Assisted voluntary return was therefore perceived as the better of two bad options, given that these respondents would have strongly preferred to stay in Germany (or France). Compliance with the law encompassed a range of overlapping motivations which included feeling that there were no other alternatives, the wish to avoid confrontation with the authorities, or the distress and indignity of a sudden forced removal (particularly given the potential distress for respondents' children), as well as a perceived duty to respect the law and institutions of the state that had hosted them as asylum seekers. This latter concern was explicitly mentioned by three respondents, one of whom explained:

If you go to somebody as a guest and you stay some months and then the owners of the house want you to leave, you cannot wait for them to take you away by force, instead you go yourself (M147).

Figure 9. Respondents' reasons for accepting assisted voluntary return



The threat of an EU entry ban also had a determining influence on respondents' decisions to accept assisted voluntary return, as also emphasised by key stakeholder interviewees. As mentioned in Section 2, seasonal migration to Greece has been a necessary livelihood strategy for many Albanians, including some of the respondents who participated in this study, 14 of whom had prior experience of working in Greece. An EU entry ban would therefore constrain respondents' opportunities to support themselves upon their return through seasonal migration, as well as preventing them from taking advantage of future migration opportunities, including labour migration to Germany. For example, an Albanian woman explained:

Why do that? [risk forced removal] We thought that if we go back voluntarily we could also have a second chance to go back with a work contract (M145).

Less common reasons for accepting assisted voluntary return included dissatisfaction with the conditions and opportunities encountered in Germany, as well as family reasons (as also found by INSTAT/CESS, 2020). As previously mentioned, family reasons most often motivated the decision to return even before receiving a decision on their asylum application. Disappointed expectations of asylum related largely to respondents' realisation that they were unlikely to be given asylum and were not allowed to work as asylum seekers. For example, one man explained that he accepted assisted voluntary return because: *'I had no other opportunity. I was not allowed to work or to learn the language so that I could go to school or attend a course. What was I supposed to do there then? It was difficult to save money'* (M121). The acceptance of assisted voluntary return on the basis of disappointed expectations of asylum in Germany was reported mainly by ethnic Albanians. The exception was one Egyptian family who explained that they accepted to leave voluntarily because they experienced the conditions in the camp where they were accommodated as very challenging, particularly since they had a one-year old baby with them. The greater significance of disappointed expectations for ethnic Albanians likely relates to their lower willingness to re-migrate as asylum seekers, discussed in Section 6.

As for the role of reintegration assistance in respondents' decision-making, it is first important to note that the large majority of respondents were not offered, or did not receive, any form of reintegration assistance prior to leaving Germany. Some were offered a small amount of cash assistance immediately prior to their departure – although the most commonly reported amount was 50 euros, which suggests that this was intended only to facilitate their return, rather than as reintegration assistance (a few of the forcibly removed respondents also received 50 euros). However, other respondents received larger amounts of cash, between 100 and 3000 Euros. One family was also granted access to in-kind assistance via the IOM, likely through Germany's Starthilfplus programme. Overall, there were no clear patterns observed regarding the granting of cash or other reintegration assistance, which, in the case of return from Germany, likely relates to the variation in policies at the federal level. Once returned to Albania, a few other respondents were given access to reintegration support through the GIZ RE-IN-VEST project, but this support was not linked to the return assistance they were offered in Germany or France, and will be instead discussed in Section 7.3.

It therefore does not seem that the offer of reintegration assistance was generally used to incentivise uptake of assisted voluntary return. Often, those respondents who did receive something reported that they did not know that they would receive it before they were actually leaving, as in the case of a Roma family who returned from Germany in 2015:

Interviewer: *Did the offer of money, of the 3000 Euros influence your decision to take voluntary return or had you already decided to take voluntary return?*

Interviewee: *When I signed I didn't know they would offer money (M135).*

In some cases, respondents did indicate that they were aware that cash assistance was offered as an incentive for accepting assisted voluntary return. For example, one respondent said that there were rumors that migrants who accept assisted voluntary return would receive 500 EUR as a 'reward' for returning (M112). In other cases, they were told that the cash assistance was to help them reintegrate in Albania. Generally though, and as in the case of the family given 1200 EUR and cited above, rumours of reintegration assistance did not seem to impact respondents' decision-making. As discussed above, respondents were more concerned to comply with their return order and to avoid an EU entry ban, as similarly demonstrated in the following interview with an Albanian woman who returned from Germany with her husband and children in 2017:

Interviewer: *When they asked to sign to go voluntarily did they offer you any assistance for going back to Albania?*

Interviewee: *The tickets. We heard rumours that whoever signs the voluntary return would take 1000 Euro per person but that was not true.*

Interviewer: *Who did you hear that from?*

Interviewee: *From people. I signed because I didn't want to have the restriction in my passport.*

Interviewer: *Is that the only reason you went voluntarily, to avoid having the travel prohibition in your passport?*

Interviewee: *Yes (M144).*

Although the prospect of reintegration assistance did not seem to play a significant role in the decision to accept assisted voluntary return, the case of four respondents who reported that they had been told that they would receive reintegration assistance in Albania, but who did not receive such assistance, points to the need for more effective communication to help to avoid such disappointments. It is not clear what the situation was for each of these respondents, but one young Egyptian woman explained: *'They said that they had sent my papers to an organisation in Albania and they could help me but nobody helped me, I called all the offices. [...] I have called in GIZ, I called Arsis and I went to IOM'* (M108). She was eventually informed by IOM that she was not eligible for reintegration assistance, because she had spent less than two years in Germany, which suggests that the relevant authority with whom she had spoken in Germany mistakenly thought she was eligible for StarthilfePlus, when she was not.

Regarding the return journey for those respondents who accepted assisted voluntary return, they were generally satisfied with the time they were given to prepare for their return, and with the organisation of the return journey. Some had been given a choice of their preferred mode of transport. A frustration for a small number of respondents was that they had been unable to return with a part of their belongings due to restrictions on the amount of baggage allowed.

5.3 Forced removal

Generally, the respondents who were forcibly returned to Albania did not consciously refuse assisted voluntary return and accept the risk of forced removal. Only in one case did a respondent explain that she understood that she had been given a negative decision and was at risk of forced removal but nonetheless hoped for leniency. However, it was also the case that the authorities had already let her and her children stay longer after rejecting her asylum claim, because she had a medical operation scheduled – by the time she and her family were forcibly removed, they had stayed a further 18 months following the receipt of their negative decision. On the basis of other asylum seekers' experiences, she had been expecting a second warning (i.e. subsequent to the initial letter informing her of the negative decision) before they were forcibly removed. She was also volunteering every day at the local asylum centre and therefore expected to be informed by someone there that the period of leniency was 'over' and they had to leave.

Two respondents reported that they were not aware of their return order. One elderly Roma man explained that he was not aware of having received any decision on his asylum case and was surprised that no-one at the asylum centre where he and his wife were doing voluntary work had warned them that they would have to leave. A young ethnic Albanian man, who was an unaccompanied minor in Germany, said that *'No-one told me that I had a negative decision'* and that, moreover, he was under the impression that, as a minor, he would not be forcibly removed to Albania (102).

Another minor was forcibly removed to Albania even without having received a decision on his asylum claim. This young Egyptian boy, who was sixteen years old at the time of migrating, had applied for asylum in France alongside his mother and younger sibling, where they had been waiting for a decision on their application. However, he explained that they were struggling to cover their daily living expenses in France and so he, as the elder son, decided to go to Germany to work and send money to his mother. He was caught by police in France. He explained that his mother and younger sibling were in France, but was apparently told by the German authorities

that he was not allowed to return to them. He was instead detained in a pre-removal centre for two months and then forcibly removed to Albania. This case of forced removal is of particular concern given the clear neglect of the child's best interest which, according to Articles 5 and 10 of the EU Return Directive, Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and Objective 21 of the Global Compact on Migration, should be a primary consideration, including in any decision regarding the return of a child.

The other six cases of forced removal involved migrants who were appealing the negative decisions on their asylum cases, or otherwise hoping to postpone their return orders based on medical need. In four cases, respondents had hired a lawyer in order to appeal their negative decisions, and did not understand that they were at risk of deportation during this process. They often explained that, if they knew they were going to be forcibly removed at that point, they would have accepted assisted voluntary return instead, as in the following case of an ethnic Albanian woman:

I asked my lawyer whether the police would come and take me by force but he told me not to worry about it because they would not come. If I had known that I would have returned voluntarily (M123).

In the remaining two cases, the respondents' families had not hired a lawyer to appeal their negative decisions. Rather, they had family members undergoing healthcare treatments in Germany and France, respectively, and, on the basis of these acute medical needs, were being supported by their doctors, and, in the one case, by an NGO, to postpone their return. These findings reflect the decision-making reported in the INSTAT/CESS study, which found that many of the forcibly removed respondents 'were hoping to the very end to be able to prolong their stay in the host country' (2020, p. 88)

As mentioned above, respondents who were forcibly removed were apprehended by the police and were forced to leave the country immediately. As a result, they had much less time to prepare for their return, although they noted that the police officers usually treated them civilly and gave them a bit of time to gather their things. Three of these respondents reported that the police officers implementing their forced removal from Germany searched their belongings and confiscated their savings, which is also reported by respondents who participated in the INSTAT/CESS (2020) study.

6. Return and reintegration experiences

Arrival in Albania following the migration episode was experienced as distressing by many respondents, who, as discussed above, preferred to stay in the country of migration rather than return to Albania. High levels of stress and frustration were commonly felt, given respondents' disappointment at having failed to achieve their migration objectives in the destination country, and due to the conditions to which they returned in Albania. The case of an Egyptian man who returned to even less than he had before is particularly illustrative. This man had migrated largely in order to get a new prosthesis for his amputated leg, and had sold his business activity in order to finance his migration. This loss affected him materially and psychologically:

Coming back caused me more stress. We wasted our time. We needed to start over from the beginning. We had illusions that we would start life in Germany and then suddenly we just came back to Albania and had to start over. [...] we didn't have money, we didn't have a job or a business. I sold the activity here and I paid the lawyers there in Germany. So basically we went with money and we returned without money. The activity that I had here with a small kiosk would keep me motivated to go out and to live. I was more social, I brought food home and I felt useful for the family (M133).

Key stakeholder interviewees similarly highlighted the disappointment and despondency experienced by many return migrants. As one NGO representative explained 'they [returnees] have lost every sense of good feeling when they are returned here.' According to these key stakeholders, poor mental health, and the lack of mental health support for return migrants, further challenges their reintegration. According to these stakeholders, more assistance is required to support the general psychological well-being of returnees. This need is also emphasized by INSTAT/CESS (2020), who found that psychological stress was particularly apparent among returned women and children.

However, it is also the case that some respondents indicated that they and/or their children had benefitted from their migration experience in terms of mentality and perspective. Although they often struggled to define what exactly had changed, and the changes that they described did not seem to have necessarily had tangible impacts on their quality of life, respondents occasionally discussed the ways in which their migration experience had give them greater resilience and motivation to succeed, broadened horizons and a different way of thinking, and, in the case of their children, greater diligence and respect. Likewise, INSTAT/CESS(2020) find that many children are seen to benefit from their migration experience in terms of attitudinal changes, and the acquisition of new skills such as foreign language skills.

This rest of this section will explore respondents' reintegration in the economic, socio-cultural, and safety and security domains. Overall, reintegration was observed to be poor, which can largely be attributed to economic challenges. Respondents tended to return to the same conditions they had faced prior to migration and which had motivated their departure. Some respondents drew some benefits from their migration experience through access to healthcare, accumulated savings, and exposure to new environments abroad. However, others had not drawn any benefits from migration, and often returned to higher levels of debt that they had

accumulated to finance their migration and were unable to pay back. In some cases, respondents' economic and living conditions deteriorated over time for various reasons which included: the depletion of their return savings or cash-based reintegration assistance; the accumulation of further debt; loss of access to the economic aid they had received prior to migrating; as well as the cessation of medical treatment that they had been receiving abroad.

6.1 Economic reintegration

As discussed in Section 4, many respondents had borrowed money to finance their migration. A small number of respondents had managed to pay back these debts by the time that they arrived back in Albania, or upon their return, using savings accumulated in Germany. However, 23 of the 50 respondents still had debts when they returned.

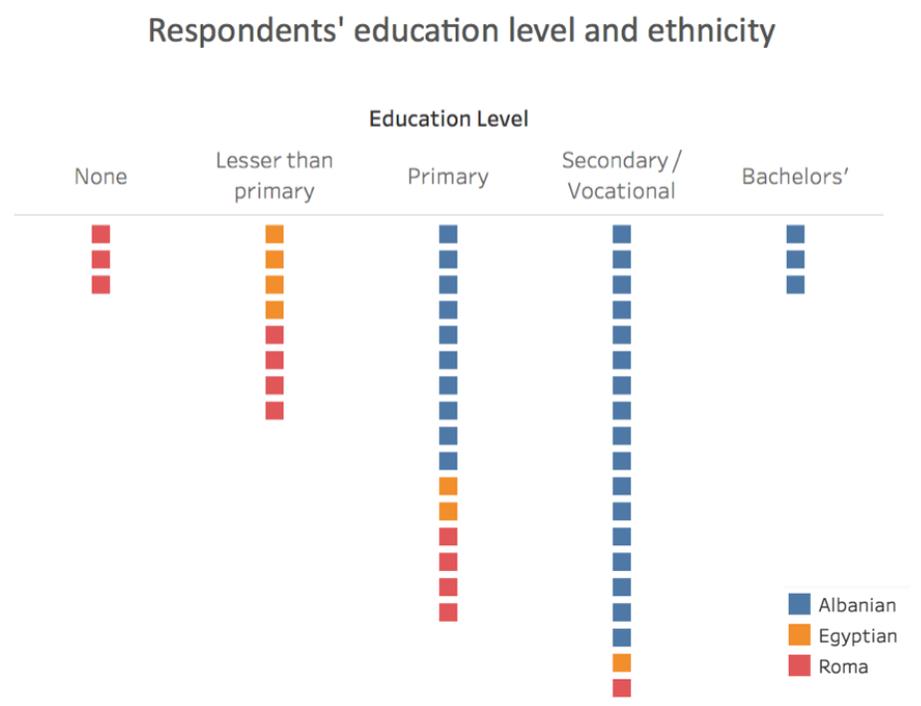
In terms of their employment, respondents tended to return to the same forms of economic activity (or lack thereof) that they had prior to migrating. Seven respondents had found new formal employment upon their return. On the other hand, two of the five respondents who had had formal work prior to migration had lost their jobs when they returned. As shown in Table 5 (below), the number of unemployed respondents remained very similar compared to their pre-migration situations – 38 compared to 39 pre-migration. Many respondents therefore continued to rely on casual, irregular jobs that provide very little income, and no income security. Vathi and Zajmi (2017) also report that return migrants face great difficulties in finding a job upon their return. Unemployment was particularly high among the Roma and Egyptian research participants included in this study: at 82% for Roma and 86% for Egyptians, compared to 71% for ethnic Albanians. NGO representatives similarly emphasised that Roma and Egyptian return migrants are commonly in a particularly precarious situation upon their return because they often do not have access to housing, and may need emergency assistance to cover basic expenses such as food.

Table 5. Employment status pre- and post-migration

| Employment status | Before migration | At the time of interview |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Formal work</i> | 5 | 10 |
| <i>No formal or regular employment</i> | 39 | 38 |
| <i>In education</i> | 6 | 2 |

A lack of employment was identified as the most significant barrier to return migrants' reintegration by all of the key stakeholders interviewed. Discussions of the employment situation for returnees highlighted that the reasons for unemployment post-return were largely the same as those that affected respondents' pre-migration situations. Multiple barriers to employment were discussed. First, key stakeholders highlighted that general education levels among return migrants are very low (also reported by INSTAT/CESS, 2020), and therefore the available jobs and salary levels open to them are also limited. As mentioned in Section 3, the majority of research participants in this study had only primary education or had not completed their primary education. Roma and Egyptian respondents had starkly fewer years of formal education than ethnic Albanians (Figure 10, below). Lower education levels among these groups likely contributes to their lower levels of employment overall, as well as their particularly strong motivations for migration.

Figure 10. Respondents' education level, by ethnicity



Second, economic stagnation contributes to the lack of job opportunities in the rural regions where return migrants usually come from and return to. Two key stakeholder interviewees suggested that the economic reintegration of returnees living in the South of Albania is easier than it is for those living in the North. According to these stakeholders, this is due to the lack of employment opportunities in the North and because the more severe poverty in the North creates a less favourable environment for business-creation. The director of the Employment Office in Shkodra similarly suggested that there needs to be more state support to facilitate internal migration for economic purposes due to large opportunity disparities across regions.

Third, low salaries, combined with poor working conditions and the lack of, or high costs of, transportation to workplaces make the net benefit of employment unattractively low, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020). A local NGO representative gave the example of a work opportunity that might pay a salary of 100 Euros per month, but for which the worker might have to spend 80 Euros on commuting costs. The perceived futility of taking up paid employment was similarly emphasised by return migrants who explained how their expected earnings would fall substantially short of their needs:

Interviewee: *I have heard of them [local factories with vacancies] but the work conditions are not that good. For instance, they want us to stay from 7 a.m. till 4 or 5 p.m. every day including weekends and then they pay you around 100 or 110 Euro per month. They are very strict and they have strict rules.*

Interviewer: *How much money would you need to have a normal life?*

Interviewee: Around 600 000 leke. Around 550 Euro or 600 Euro per month. I pay the rent so I need an income of at least 600 Euro per month. If my husband would be working every day, at the end of the month he would probably earn 300 or 350 Euro. If I would work in a factory for example I can have €100 per month. Together 450 Euro and we cannot cover our expenses with this money.

The lack of free and accessible childcare creates a further barrier to employment for mothers, as also found by Vathi and Zajmi (2017). Lastly, and also as before, physical health problems were often discussed by respondents as a primary barrier to employment, in some cases aggravated by the lack of access to healthcare. For example, one man who usually worked in manual labour but who suffered from back problems explained that *'I would like to work but the doctor says to me I shouldn't work because of my back'* (M144). Meanwhile he could not afford the medication prescribed to him by his doctor.

State economic aid contributed marginally to respondents' economic reintegration. Upon their return, a number of respondents lost access to the economic aid that they had received prior to migrating, despite being in a similar situation as before. The reasons for this were not clear, although a new system for determining eligibility has been introduced since 2018 (INSTAT/CESS, 2020). Three respondents had not managed to re-register for economic aid due to difficulties in obtaining the necessary documentation. Two others had applied but were reportedly told that they were not eligible. Such bureaucratic obstacles were also commonly reported by research participants in the INSTAT/CESS (2020) study. Nonetheless, as before, respondents emphasised that state economic aid would go very little way to covering their needs as a household. Other households had experienced difficulties re-registering for disability allowances. The Egyptian man cited above, who had one amputated leg, explained his frustration that:

The most ridiculous thing is that the Commission says that the disability allowance should be provided only to those people who have two disabled limbs. But what can I do? I only have one leg that doesn't work and I can't work with just one leg (M133).

It should finally be noted that, although many ethnic-Albanian respondents owned land as a result of the 1991 land reform that redistributed communal land to the rural population, this land contributed minimally to their economic conditions. Respondents that owned land cited many reasons for this, which included: the small size of the plot that they had inherited (creating poor economies of scale); the unfertile nature of their land; their need for agricultural inputs and irrigation; or simply that their household did not have able-bodied persons to work in the field. Therefore, land ownership did not facilitate economic reintegration, as productive agriculture would require better infrastructure, and economic and human capital that respondents did not have.

Regarding any changes in respondents' economic conditions upon return, some reported that they experienced greater difficulties after returning to Albania. This was usually due to increased family size and needs (as a result of having more children, or because their children had grown older), or because they returned to debts that they had incurred to finance their migration and were unable to pay back. As previously mentioned, 23 respondents had debts upon their return to Albania; by the time of the interview, 31 respondents reported being in debt. As before, poverty

and vulnerability seemed particularly acute among the Roma and Egyptian respondents included in this study.

The economic impact of savings accumulated abroad, or the cash assistance that some respondents received for their return to Albania, was limited. This money was mostly spent on day-to-day necessities in the absence of any regular or sufficient income. Some savings were used to improve respondents' housing – for example, by building additional rooms, or buying goods such as washing machines and televisions. Material improvements seemed to be particularly significant for Roma communities. However, the houses that some Roma families managed to build were visibly unfinished and lacking furniture or appliances. Although these investments in housing undoubtedly had some impact on the quality of these people's lives – particularly where new rooms or houses allowed household members greater space and privacy, thereby alleviating tensions and conflicts – they did not contribute to greater economic security. Having spent this money – whether on housing or day-to-day consumption, or both – return migrants were faced with a continuing lack of income, and standards of living therefore fell back to how they were before migrating, which often necessitated borrowing money to get by, as illustrated by the following quotes:

When I returned to Albania I had some savings and it was okay the first days and afterwards life was like it was before (M107).

I have a loan. I cannot afford many of the basic needs that my children have. I cannot pay most of the things. I want to be stable and work here. I am able to work. I am healthy but I cannot find a stable job. If I had work here I would not need to migrate (M120).

Only two respondents indicated improvements in their economic conditions as compared to prior to their migration. One of these respondents had opened a business upon returning, but this was not facilitated by his migration experience – he had financed this project with loans from friends. He was still in debt at the time of interview, but reported that his life was a little better compared to before his migration. The second participant, a Roma man, was able to save enough money in Germany (an undisclosed amount) to build a small grocery shop which he ran with his wife. Although this business provides some income, he emphasised that the turnover was low, and that this business could not, on its own, stimulate broader economic growth within the community:

Spring doesn't come with one flower [referring to his own business]. I am talking about the community. They are in great need. All the young people here are unemployed (M106).

6.2 Socio-cultural reintegration

There seems to be no stigma attached to the return of “failed” asylum seekers in Albania (see Lietaert, 2021, for similar findings in Armenia and Georgia). In this sense, respondents' socio-cultural reintegration was generally unproblematic. INSTAT/CESS likewise report that ‘social relations were quickly re-established and many of the community members showed an interest in the experience of the returnees in the host country’ (2020, p. 89). This was also the perception among key stakeholder interviewees, who explained that return migrants did not face prejudice

within their communities. A World Vision representative explained that migration attempts were so common that communities generally empathised with those whose asylum claims were rejected and had to return. Nonetheless, those respondents whose migration was motivated by community or family tensions or conflicts often faced these same problems upon their return, as they generally returned to the same communities and households. For example, a young Egyptian boy – whose abusive father motivated the mother’s decision to leave Albania – explained that he was afraid to come to the local town, due to threats made by his father and his father’s friends:

Well, I am in a bad economic situation. I am unemployed. I am afraid to come to the town and gather scrap metal, for example, because of the people that threaten and come fight me. I have done nothing to them but still I am afraid (M110).

Furthermore, although community reintegration was not regarded as a problem, it was observed that community ties and solidarity were often thin. This ambivalence is illustrated in the following explanation given by an ethnic-Albanian man:

Yes, yes. Everything is fine [in the community]. In the old system, I mean the Enver Hoxha's time, people used to go more to each other's houses and now they are colder in the sense that we do not hang out so much. [...] I have some friends that are also my colleagues but not others. I have just one friend that I respect him as a brother while the others are just fake, let's say, "interest" friends (M105).

Respondents often explained that, although they had friends and family, they could not count on these people for support, as everyone else was facing similar economic pressures. An ethnic-Albanian woman further explained that even those people with the resources to help were unlikely to do so:

Today there are no friends that can help you really. Even your relatives, even when it comes to brothers and sisters. If they are doing well they are only going to mind their own business. But they don't help. [...] People are afraid to give you money, to help you get your life together. [...] They are afraid, because they say "how are you going to pay me back? Even if I give to you, you have nothing" (M112).

Social inclusion was therefore affected by economic constraint. Respondents often explained that they did not participate in social activities such as wedding celebrations or funerals because they could not contribute financially to such events, which is the cultural expectation and norm.

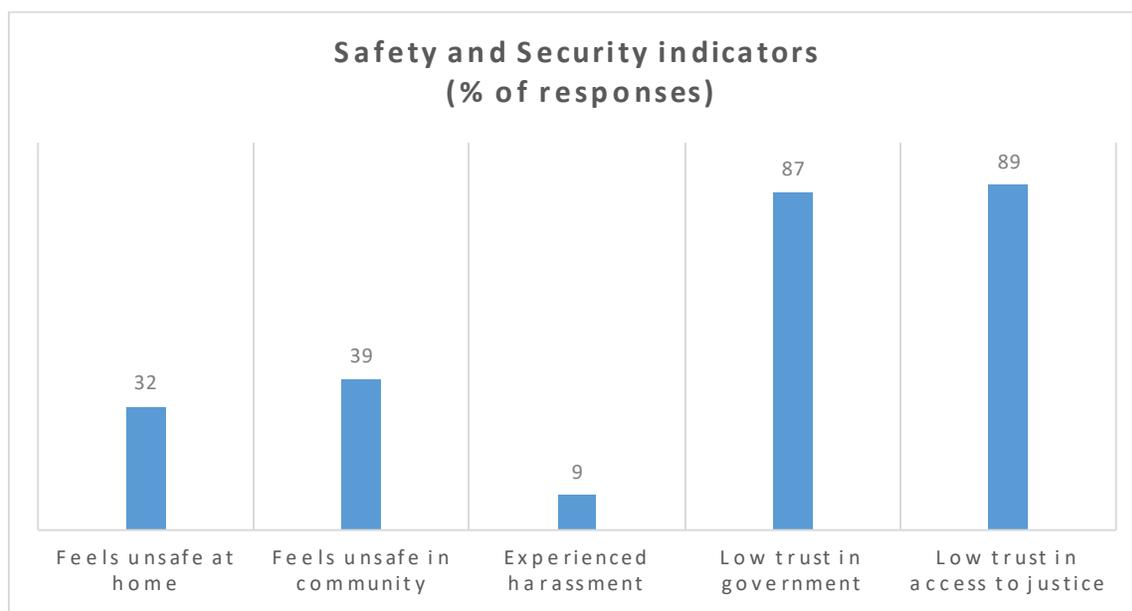
Although respondents did not face any particular problems with their own socio-cultural reintegration, those who returned with school-age children often observed that their children experienced difficulties adapting to life back in Albania (see also INSTAT/CESS, 2020; and Vathi & Zajmi, 2017, who report similar findings). Many of these children had to repeat an academic year upon their return, due to differences in the education system, or sometimes due to a lack of documentation to certify their education while abroad, which is required by the Albanian schools to which they return. Psychosocial and language difficulties were also common, as some children who spent significant periods of time abroad returned with less fluency in written or spoken Albanian – leading to marginalisation from their peers (see also Vathi & Zajmi, 2017). Key stakeholder interviewees highlighted that child returnees experience difficulties catching up with their peers in the Albanian language and maths, particularly. Although some CSOs such as Terre

des Hommes provide after-school classes for these children, stakeholders generally agreed that awareness and support for child reintegration problems were not sufficient within the education system.

6.3 Safety and security

The study's findings regarding respondents' safety and security upon their return were mixed. As Figure 11 shows, only a small number of respondents reported that they had experienced harassment since their return. Larger proportions reported that they felt unsafe at home (32%) or in their communities (39%). Large majorities reported low trust in the government (87%) and in their access to justice (89%) in Albania.

Figure 11. Respondents' perception of their own safety and security in Albania



Where respondents expressed safety concerns, these were usually due to perceptions of high levels of criminality, combined with low trust in the justice system. Four participants reported that they had previously been victim to crimes such as burglary. Although respondents often complained of the high crime rate, they did not expect or rely on the local police to intervene, but rather preferred recourse to community leaders as mediators of personal justice. Respondents cited corruption and ineffectiveness of police control as the main reasons for low trust in the justice system. A number of research participants expressed the view that only those with money would be able to access justice.

Finally, personal security was often conceptualised as economic insecurity. Respondents were often highly anxious about their futures, given the challenges they faced in finding work and earning a living. Their concerns were compounded by the lack of a state safety net. This was a source of particular anxiety for respondents who had already suffered a loss of income due to illness, and who had therefore migrated in order to address their economic and healthcare needs. For example, a man whose health problems prevented him from working for six months prior to his migration to Germany, and whose resulting financial difficulties largely motivated his family's decision to seek asylum, expressed his acute concern that he simply could not afford to fall ill

again: *'If we are sick only one month we cannot work and the bank will take the house'* (M121). Access to quality healthcare was also reported as one of the most urgent problems facing return migrants by Vathi and Zajmi (2017), and was found to motivate re-migration. This broader conceptualisation of safety and security among returned migrants has also been observed in the Armenian and Georgian contexts (Lietaert, 2021).

Reiterating the motivations for out-migration overviewed in Section 4, respondents were generally pessimistic that their futures would be any better, and had little trust in the government to make any significant changes. As one ethnic Albanian woman expressed: *'there is no state here'* (M140). A lack of trust in state support therefore exacerbated widespread feelings of hopelessness and the sense that they had no future in Albania.

6.4 Overall perceptions of return conditions

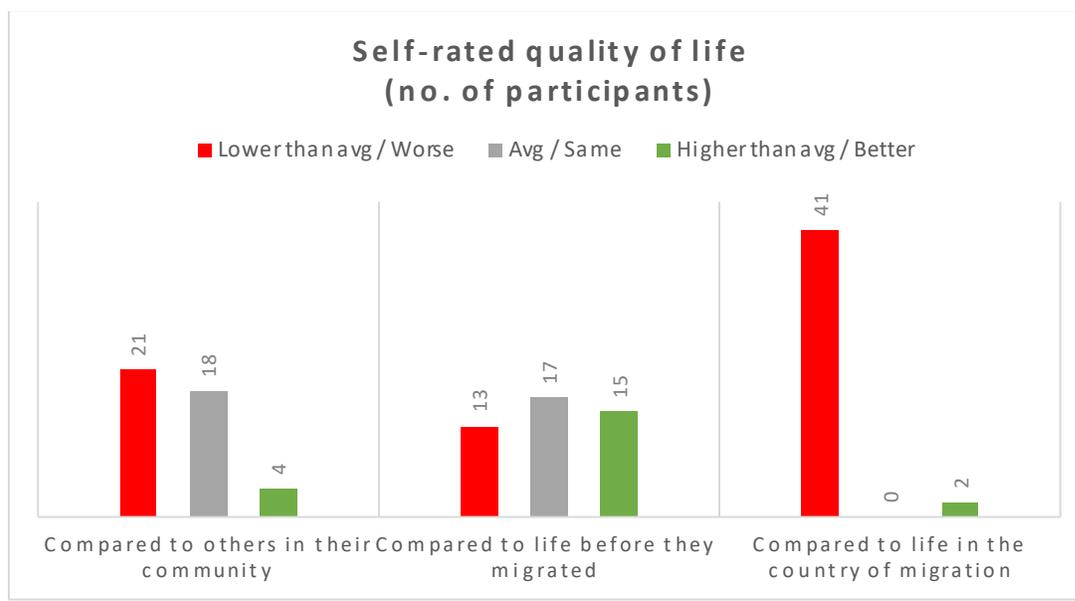
As indicated in the preceding sections, respondents largely returned to the same conditions as before migrating. As Figure 12 (below) shows, the largest number of respondents (38%) rated their quality of life upon return as the same as before they migrated. Fairly even numbers of respondents rated their lives as better than before they migrated (33%), and worse than before they migrated (29%), respectively. The fifteen respondents who reported that their quality of life had improved after migration generally attributed this improvement to the material or psychological benefits previously discussed: a few respondents had found formal employment that they did not have prior to migrating; a few had managed to pay off (some of) the debts that they had prior to migrating; a small number of respondents had been able to improve their housing; and others pointed to the new perspective that they – and their children – had gained. For example, a Roma man explained that his family had benefitted both materially and psychologically from their stay in Germany:

[Our experience in Germany had impacts] not only on the house but also many other things. It had a great impact on the culture and education my children had. I would never manage in Albania to build a room and a kitchen. [...] [The children] had a completely different culture. Such as laying the table themselves and not telling their mum to do it. They would make their own beds (M153).

Nonetheless, in spite of these reported improvements in their overall quality of life, almost all of these respondents were still struggling financially in terms of covering their daily expenses.

When asked to compare their current quality of life to the average in their community, 49% of respondents perceived themselves as worse-off, and 42% perceived themselves as having an average quality of life relative to their community. Nine percent perceived themselves as better off than the average in their community. When asked to compare their current quality of life to that which they experienced in the country of migration, the large majority (95%) considered their quality of life as lower in Albania, while the remaining 5% rated their quality of life as higher in Albania. These two respondents who assessed their quality of life as better in Albania explained that they were happier being at home and with their families.

Figure 12. Respondents' assessment of their quality of life as compared to prior to migrating, in the country of migration, and to the average in their community in Albania



Note: the total number of respondents for each question do not equal 50 as a few respondents were not asked these questions.

Key stakeholder interviewees suggested that, in some cases, exposure to a much higher standard of living abroad poses difficulties to reintegration by provoking a sense of despondency in return migrants who struggle to adapt to the conditions and prospects they return to in Albania. One NGO representative suggested that it was common for returnees to feel dissatisfied with local job conditions and salaries after knowing about conditions abroad. This impact was also described by a woman who explained that her experience of Germany strengthened her resolve to *'not stay even one more day here in Albania'* (M147).

6.5 Re-migration aspirations

As discussed above, respondents usually returned to the same conditions that had motivated their out-migration. After a period of time back in Albania, eight respondents left Albania again in order to seek asylum elsewhere (either back to Germany or France). The reasons they gave for their re-migration were similar to those that had motivated their initial asylum migration, which highlights that these challenges remained unaddressed and posed challenges to their sustainable return. These respondents were very despondent about their prospects in Albania, stating that they had *'nothing to do here'* (M107) or *'no reason to stay'* (M146).

Seven other respondents who had returned to Albania via assisted voluntary return had subsequently tried to migrate again but were stopped at the borders. In three of these cases, they had tried to enter Greece for labour migration; one respondent had tried to enter Germany for labour migration, and another for asylum (the other two respondents did not indicate their migration plans). These respondents reported that the border police had informed them that they had something in their passports which meant that they were not allowed to return to the EU. It would seem that these respondents were subject to an EU entry ban that the Federal Office in

Germany can apply to migrants whose asylum applications are rejected and who are considered to have come from ‘safe countries of origin’ – even if they leave Germany voluntarily (i.e. via assisted voluntary return) (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2018). However, one respondent was able to remove the entry ban with the help of a lawyer; and another received help from the German Embassy to resolve the problem, so it was not clear what the specific problem was in each of these cases.

When asked about their potential re-migration plans at the time of interview, 41 out of 50 respondents said that they aspired to migrate again. Only seven respondents planned to stay in Albania, and two were uncertain. These high levels of migration aspirations are also reflected in the interim findings from an unpublished CESS study which found that 69% of the returned rejected asylum seekers surveyed planned to migrate again from Albania.

The large majority of return migrants can therefore be considered involuntarily immobile. However, only 11 of the 41 research participants included in this study who expressed re-migration aspirations reported any concrete planning for their re-migration. Such plans included taking steps to find a job or work contract in Germany, for example through existing social connections or social connections made whilst in Germany – for this reason, some respondents stayed in touch with their former employers in Germany. However, most respondents explained that, due to financial or administrative barriers, they were not able to act on their desires to migrate again. They therefore seemed to be waiting and hoping for something to change, or for some labour migration opportunity to come their way, as illustrated in the following quote from an older Albanian man:

Interviewer: *And are you making any plans to migrate again?*

Interviewee: *Yes.*

Interviewer: *What kind of plans?*

Interviewee: *I will try.*

Interviewer: *Will you go there with a job contract, will you seek asylum?*

Interviewee: *I will go. I don't know how. It's up to God. Always hoping for better (M113).*

This interest in labour migration opportunities was reiterated by key stakeholder interviewees who reported that, in light of their disappointed expectations of asylum migration, and in response to the opening up of low-skilled legal migration opportunities to Germany under the Western Balkan Regulation, return (and potential) migrants were focusing their efforts on labour migration in Germany. Such efforts include investments in language-learning and vocational training in order to best position themselves to meet labour shortages in Germany, as also reported by INSTAT/CESS (2020). The director of the National Employment Office in Schkodra suggested that participation in state-sponsored vocational training programs is motivated less by employment prospects in Albania than by an understanding of sectoral skill shortages abroad: *‘through interviews we have learned that [participants enrol in training in order] to be able to go to Germany or France and find work with these certificates which are recognised [there]’*.

Aspirations for future migration therefore centred on labour migration opportunities. The majority of respondents preferred not to, or were unwilling to migrate again as asylum seekers, as also found by INSTAT/CESS (2020). Reasons for this included their understanding that they were

unlikely to be granted asylum, and were frustrated that they could not work as asylum seekers. Respondents often pointed to the boredom and indignity of life as an asylum seeker:

We don't want to experience the same thing. Just staying home and not being allowed to work (M121);

I cannot go through what I experienced the first time. I would like to live there but not in asylum. [...] [Because of] stress and you don't feel well or free there. They see you as an asylum seeker (M124);

In the asylum centre we are not allowed to work or anything. You can live there but you cannot have freedom (M129).

This change in perception or attitude was also discussed by key stakeholder interviewees who suggested that many return migrants have adopted the idea that asylum-seeking was the “wrong” way to achieve their migration objectives.

However, three respondents said that they would consider migrating as asylum seekers again only if they were unable to secure a work contract. A further six considered asylum-seeking as their primary strategy for future migration – these were all of Roma or Egyptian ethnicity. This trend is similarly reflected in the unpublished CESS survey reported above, which found that only 12% of the 491 respondents who reported intentions to re-migrate said that they would apply for asylum again. The greater willingness of Roma and Egyptian return migrants to migrate again as asylum seekers is also reported by INSTAT/CESS (2020) and likely relates to these groups’ poorer economic conditions and experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in Albania, and perhaps to the greater barriers to their integration into the labour market of either Albania or Germany. This suggests that, in the face of such conditions in Albania, asylum-seeking (even if it results only in a temporary stay) may still be considered worthwhile by Roma and Egyptian return migrants. This is also suggested by an NGO representative who reported that, most often, those return migrants who want to re-migrate as asylum seekers cannot clearly explain what they expect to achieve through asylum migration, but simply explain ‘*I don't know, but I just want a way to escape*’. It therefore seems that re-migration through asylum-seeking is perceived as the only available migration option open to severely vulnerable families who may lack the human and social capital necessary for labour migration. In this context, it is unclear what effect information campaigns might have on these return (or prospective) migrants’ decision-making.

Strong re-migration intentions were furthermore discussed by key stakeholders as inhibiting investments in reintegration processes, including in obtaining stable employment, in Albania. As a World Vision representative explained:

[...] if they [returnees] are planning to migrate again, they don't invest in themselves. Or they don't want to be engaged. They don't think about getting employed. They just want to get along... to work somewhere or get assistance somewhere, not necessarily getting a proper job, until they are getting ready to migrate again’.

It is finally worth noting that, in spite of the general sense of despondency and widespread re-migration aspirations, when asked whether they were considering re-migration, a number of respondents stated that their first wish would be to be able to stay in Albania. According to these respondents, being able to stay in Albania would depend on the creation of economic opportunities in Albania, as well as a stronger social security net, better education for their children, and better healthcare (reflecting the drivers of their initial migration). 18 respondents expressed the desire to stay in Albania, and to have future plans within the country – however, they still considered re-migration. Out of these 18, eight respondents elaborated that they would only consider re-migration if they could not satisfy their needs in Albania – by which they meant reasonably paid employment and access to quality healthcare. Thus, poverty and economic precarity were considered to compel the re-migration of return migrants who would otherwise prefer to stay. This suggests that some return migrants have a strong will to reintegrate in Albania, but consider re-migration a necessity given their perceived prospects in Albania.

7. Effects of policy on sustainable reintegration in Albania

7.1 Pre-Exit policy

Before considering the impacts of EU Exit policy, it is worth reflecting on the effects that reception policies in countries of destination have had on return migrants' reintegration processes.

Perhaps most significant is the access to quality healthcare that many asylum seekers greatly benefitted from. Although in some cases this treatment was disrupted and discontinued when the migrant was returned to Albania, a few respondents were able to get diagnoses or cures in Germany which had sustained positive impacts. This includes the Roma woman who was diagnosed with epilepsy in Germany and who, as a result of receiving the right medication for this diagnosis, was able to start working in Albania upon her return. Similarly, an ethnic Albanian man explained that:

I had an accident in a truck in Albania and broke my arm. For two years I couldn't work. So, I went to Germany to pay a visit to the doctor. I was cured there and then I was able to work again (M127).

However, it is also the case that, having benefitted from healthcare while abroad, some respondents were even more frustrated by the healthcare system in Albania. The following comparison of services in Germany and Albania is typical:

Interviewer: *How did it feel being back?*

Interviewee: *I felt lost. When I returned to Albania I wanted to visit a relative of mine in the hospital. Then I compared the hospital in Albania with a hospital in Germany where my wife had a surgical intervention. It was like a disaster (M101).*

Positive experiences in the destination country may therefore also contribute to an unwillingness to reintegrate in the country of origin, and may strengthen re-migration intentions – although, as discussed, these may be re-focussed on legal labour migration opportunities.

In terms of economic benefits, the lack of access to legal work opportunities was experienced as extremely frustrating by many research participants. In terms of their reintegration, those respondents who were able to save money through (informal) employment or through their state allowances seemed to benefit in a limited way, by paying off debts, covering necessary expenses upon their return, and by investing in better housing. As explained by a Roma interviewee:

[...] when I went there I liked Germany very much. There was such a a normal life, a quiet environment and a safe place. In 2014 the Roma community was living under plastic and aluminium roofs. Now, if you have a look they have all decent houses and this is all thanks to Germany, France and Netherlands (M106).

However, as discussed in section 6.1, these positive effects were usually limited and not necessarily sustainable, given the generally precarious conditions that these respondents lived in.

Exposure to new environments abroad had mixed effects on the respondents. As mentioned, a few respondents reported that their time abroad in Germany broadened their horizons and increased their motivation or resilience. On the other hand, exposure to a higher quality of life and better public services created or increased a sense of relative deprivation among some

respondents. The impacts of migration experiences and reception conditions on children merits particular consideration. Parents explained that their children had benefitted greatly from their opportunities to integrate and to experience a higher quality of education. It seems plausible that some of these impacts – such as foreign language acquisition, or a changed relationship to schooling and learning – might be sustained and may benefit these children in the longer-term. However, as discussed in section 6, adjusting back to the Albanian school system and curriculum was difficult for other children who struggled to ‘catch up’ with their peers, and who would therefore benefit from further support.

7.2 Exit policy: Return

In terms of return decision-making processes, uptake of assisted voluntary return was driven largely by Albanian asylum seekers’ wish to avoid forced removal and an EU entry ban. There was no evidence that expectations of reintegration assistance had a significant influence on the acceptance of assisted voluntary return. In accordance with the SDG, NYD and GCM objectives to facilitate the ‘orderly’, ‘safe’ and ‘dignified’ return of migrants who do not have the legal right to stay in the destination country, it would seem that, in the Albanian case, acceptance of the more orderly and dignified voluntary assisted return that respondents discussed largely relies on the real prospect of legal re-entry and, in particular, legal labour migration opportunities for these same migrants. Albanian migrants are therefore incentivised to comply with a return order in order to be able to take advantage of future legal labour migration opportunities in the EU.

Additionally, a more tentative conclusion is that compliance with return orders seems to have benefitted, in some cases, from the perceived legitimacy of the German asylum system (Leerkes et al., 2017) among Albanian asylum seekers who felt well-treated and respected by the German state, and who understood that their reasons for migrating did not make them eligible for asylum. This perceived legitimacy is suggested in a few cases such as the following:

Interviewee: *I received a negative response and I had to leave as soon as possible and not wait for the police to come get me.*

Interviewer: *Okay. In order not to break the law?*

Interviewee: *Since they were being nice to us, we didn’t have any reason to decline their request and accept immediately.[...] They respected us, they took in and gave us a home. They gave us money. They treated us well. That is respect. [...] Why would I break their law when they respected me? (M115).*

However, that is not to say that the perceived legitimacy of the German asylum system would necessarily deter future attempts to seek asylum by those facing more desperate conditions. As already discussed, Roma, Egyptian and poorer ethnic-Albanian respondents were more likely to say that they wanted to, or would consider, migrating as asylum seekers again. For example, in one interview with an ethnic Albanian family who experienced particularly precarious conditions upon their return, the husband insisted that the German asylum system was ‘fair’, but his wife (who suffered from health problems she could not afford to treat) nonetheless emphasised that, if they could afford to, they would go to seek asylum in Germany again: ‘*I have no one else left to go [to ask to borrow money]. I am left with nothing to sell. If I could, I would leave. Asylum is better than here.*’ (M116).

In terms of the effects of assisted voluntary return and forced removal on Albanian migrants' return and reintegration experiences, it is clear that forced removal can have a variety of more negative impacts. First, forcibly removed families experienced distress, shock and frustration at their sudden forced removal by police. Second, whereas migrants who accepted assisted voluntary return had time to prepare for their departure and organise in-country transportation back to their homes in Albania, usually with the help of friends or family, forcibly removed persons were unable to make these preparations. This is also emphasised by INSTAT/CESS (2020) who highlight that families who are forcibly returned are unable to bring with them the school documents necessary to facilitate their children's reintegration into the educational system.

Third, whereas migrants who returned via assisted voluntary return often returned with either their own savings or with some cash assistance to help meet their immediate needs upon return to Albania (or even to invest in housing, as discussed), forcibly removed persons had their savings confiscated from them, thereby making their return and reintegration experiences even more difficult. It is unclear what the policy rationale for the confiscation of migrants' cash savings is, and this practice would seem unnecessarily punitive. Fourth, forcibly removed respondents were subject to an EU entry ban prohibiting them from migrating to the EU again for usually 2-3 years. As mentioned, this barrier to their re-migration is particularly significant given the importance of migration as a livelihood strategy in Albania, whether circular or permanent. For example, this frustration was expressed by a single mother who had been actively researching labour migration opportunities in Germany, and understood that with a work contract she could migrate legally in Germany, but was prevented from doing so by her entry ban. When asked '*What kind of assistance do you think you would need in order to be more comfortable here?*' she responded '*To remove the entry ban in my passport and to migrate and work abroad*' (M123). However, migrants who accepted assisted voluntary return also seemed, in some cases, to be disadvantaged by a re-entry ban imposed by Germany – although, according to BAMF, these bans tend to be shorter in duration where a migrant complies with a return order (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, 2018).

Given the multiple and, often, sustained challenges caused by forced removal, it seems particularly unfortunate that, in so many of the cases of forced removal captured in this study, the migrants did not consciously risk forced removal, and would have strongly preferred to accept assisted voluntary return. From the accounts given, it seems that there is substantial scope to improve the communication of information regarding forced removal, with likely benefits for both the migrants themselves as well as destination countries, which could thereby avoid the need for forced removal in these cases. First, it seems that, in some cases, (rejected) asylum seekers expect relevant information to be communicated to them by the staff at the reception facilities where they may be accommodated or volunteer. Could these staff members play a greater role in helping rejected asylum seekers to understand that forced removal is likely imminent? Second, Albanian asylum seekers need to be better informed about the possibility of forced removal even during the appeals process. The role of lawyers in the communication of information during the appeals process needs to be urgently clarified. Respondents often felt misinformed or misled by their lawyers who did not warn them that they could or would be forcibly removed even while, in their understanding, they were waiting for the outcome of their appeals process.

Finally, the case of the Egyptian unaccompanied minor who was caught in Germany and forcibly removed to Albania while his mother and younger sibling were waiting for (and subsequently

received) asylum in France indicates the need for compliance with best interest determinations. The Global Compact on Migration requires that participating states *'Ensure that return and readmission processes involving children are carried out only after a determination of the best interests of the child and take into account the right to family life and family unity [...].'* This clearly did not happen in the case of this boy, who, at the time of interview, could not independently rejoin his mother in France since he was subject to a two-year EU entry ban.

7.3 Post-Exit policy: Reintegration

The impacts of reintegration assistance on return migrants' reintegration processes is somewhat difficult to assess given that few respondents included in this study received reintegration assistance. Only one family had been given an IOM reintegration package. This family seemed to have benefitted from Germany's Starthilfplus as they returned in 2019 and were offered 2000 Euros as a housing subsidy and up to 1000 Euros for necessary medical care. This family described their meeting with IOM as very useful, but were frustrated by the restrictions on the disbursement of housing assistance, which limited their options for finding a rental property (further discussed below), and would have preferred to receive the assistance as cash. They further explained: *'Our son got sick because of the damp in the house. We were obliged to leave the house for the sake of our son and we went back to my parents-in-law'* (M121).

Four respondents were participating in the RE-IN-VEST project and were therefore participating in a business start-up training course at the time of interview, which would also provide start-up finance for the most promising business-plans. Two of these participants had also received material support from the NGO implementing this programme, which included food assistance, sanitary products and a housing subsidy. In other cases, one woman was given one year's worth of medication for her son's chronic condition, prior to their departure from Germany. In Albania, two families had received occasional food assistance which seem to have been delivered by local NGOs (not necessarily targeting return migrants only). Another family reported that their son had been given 3,500 EUR by CARITAS in Albania.

Although undoubtedly helpful, the impacts of assistance on sustainable reintegration are limited. An IOM representative explained that, given the limitations of IOM assistance – in terms of sum or duration of support – it largely helps to meet return migrants' *'most immediate needs'*. However, he emphasised that this emergency assistance can nevertheless be crucial for facilitating the migrants' own efforts to sustainably reintegrate. For example, although a housing subsidy may be limited in duration, it can help to give the return migrant the security and stability necessary for them to focus their own efforts on their employment or self-employment prospects. If the return migrant secures a job or opens a business, it can also be very helpful that, with the housing subsidy, they do not need to spend a large proportion of their initial earnings on private rents, and can therefore use this money to cover their other needs, or put it aside for more productive use. However, the IOM interviewee also cautioned that the amount of assistance offered to help business start-up – typically 1000 or 1500 Euros – does not go very far in the Albanian context, although it may be more profitable in a rural context where it can be spent on livestock or other agricultural inputs: *'with 1000, to be realistic, you can't really do much. In the village, you can do something. You can buy sheep or one cow, maybe'*.

Other barriers to the effectiveness of reintegration support were discussed by both the IOM representative, as well as other governmental and NGO representatives interviewed for this study. First, these key stakeholders explained that the high degree of informality in Albanian markets can make it very difficult to disburse funds in accordance with donor requirements. This particularly affects the ability to disburse housing subsidies, as it can be difficult for a return migrant to find a rental property where the landlord is willing to officially register the rental contract. Informality also affects the ability of organisations to support job-matching, as support can only be given for employment where decent remuneration and working conditions can be guaranteed, despite formal employment opportunities being scarce.

Second, the effective delivery of assistance suffers from a lack of data on the returnee population and their needs. As previously mentioned, the Albanian government only obtains data on the number of citizens who have been forcibly removed from the EU and readmitted to Albania, and does not otherwise collect systematic data on migrant outflows or inflows (Vathi & Zajmi, 2017). Registration at the municipal migration counters is not mandatory. Key stakeholder interviewees suggested that the reasons for the seemingly low rates of registration at the Migration Counters include return migrants' lack of awareness of the benefits of registering (i.e. the support available for return migrants), as well as a general lack of trust in state institutions and services. NGOs have made efforts to identify return migrants through field workers and community centres, and through registration data from child protection services, education departments (through re-enrolment of child returnees), and employment counters. However, these stakeholders emphasise that resources for such work is limited. A World Vision representative explained the constraints on their identification efforts:

[...] so I think, we covered quite a lot in the shortest time possible, in terms of municipalities, towns, big towns, and villages surrounding the municipalities, but there are rural villages where there are still people that need our help, that we have not been able to properly assist or even trace. Because it is a lot of work, and it is a lot of time, and it is costly, and for them it is not easy to come and follow our projects and our activities.

The above quote also highlights that return migrants who live far away from urban centres often struggle to register or engage with support services. Transportation costs and opportunity costs – in terms of time that could be spent on informal economic activity – reduces motivations for rural return migrants to engage in CSO reintegration programmes. However, it is also the case that the return migrants interviewed for this study sometimes explained that they had contacted or registered with local aid organisations but had not received any follow-up assistance, which likely disincentivises their further engagement. For example, an ethnic Albanian woman living in a rural village explained: *'There are many organisations and they tell us to complete some papers and then, in the end, nothing'* (M146). A young Egyptian woman furthermore expressed particular frustration that, in comparison with her positive experiences of interacting with aid organisations in Germany, she had struggled to access assistance from organisations in Albania which, as she described it, were not really interested in understanding her needs or helping her.

In terms of the effectiveness and sustainability of reintegration support, all key stakeholders interviewed emphasised that the reintegration needs of returned migrants are multidimensional

and therefore need to be addressed through coordination between multiple stakeholders. These interviewees would like to see greater collaboration between NGOs, state employment offices, migration counters, other municipal authorities, border officers, and relevant institutions in countries of migration. According to the GIZ communications at the 2019 National Conference on Return to Albania, consultations between the Ministry of Finance (National Employment Service), Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health, GIZ, Terres des Hommes, World Vision, Dakonia Agapes, and SHKEJ are in process (GIZ, 2020). At this conference, GIZ also called for municipalities to take a bigger role in coordinating services and (economic and social) development within their regions (GIZ, 2020). Closer coordination and collaboration with governmental organisations were similarly viewed by the non-governmental stakeholders interviewed for this study as crucial for the sustainability of current reintegration programmes beyond their project lifecycles. These stakeholders hoped that relevant governmental services would be given the necessary funding and capabilities to take over reintegration services in the longer-term. Currently, the provisions put in place for return migrants by the national government do not seem to be sufficiently understood at the municipal level, which then contributes to low levels of awareness among return migrants themselves regarding what forms of assistance they are entitled to. One NGO representative explained that they had conducted capacity-building workshops with municipal staff in order to make them aware of what kinds of services and assistance they can offer to returned migrants, which includes health insurance, free vocational training, and support to cover childrens' school expenses.

Despite difficulties, stakeholders identified several successes in the implementation of reintegration programs. World Vision and GIZ staff members agreed that referral services were of particular value to returned migrants, which reiterates the problem of low awareness among return migrants of where to seek assistance or opportunities. These stakeholders also regarded their case-management approach as very promising. However, evaluative data on the impacts of these programmes was not available at the time of fieldwork, as the RE-IN-VEST project was not yet completed. Finally, an IOM representative cautioned that the disbursal of reintegration assistance to return migrants may fuel negative perceptions within communities of origin that irregular migrants are being rewarded undeservingly. In a context where, as discussed in Section 6, return migrants are often as poor as and facing similar conditions as non-migrant community members, assistance programming should pay due consideration to the needs of non-migrants.

7.4 The post-Exit monitoring process in Albania

As discussed above, monitoring efforts are impeded by the lack of systematic data collection on return migrants in Albania, rendering this population more or less invisible.

The NGOs interviewed for this study have developed their own monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The GIZ staff member interviewed explained that, for GIZ-funded CSO projects, internal monitoring and evaluation practices were built into project proposals and budgets. He further explained that the particular approach taken was determined within the framework of each project, but would generally end at the end of the project lifecycle. No longer-term follow-up was therefore foreseen. In the case of the GIZ-funded RE-IN-VEST project, baseline data had been collected across 13 municipalities at the beginning of the project, in order to build a better profile of the returnee population and their needs, and against which to measure the project's impacts at endline. Baseline data collection took the form of a survey of 449 households selected

based on convenience sampling.⁴ At the time of interview, the project's approach to their endline evaluation had not yet been finalised. Output indicators were also being monitored throughout the project lifecycle. Outside of GIZ programming, the IRMA project implemented by Terre des Hommes has a dedicated staff member for monitoring and evaluation, the results of which are shared with project donors. This project also takes a case management approach, and therefore conducts periodic assessments of each beneficiary family (every six months) in order to monitor their progress and assess current needs. Cases are only closed when it is deemed that the family's needs have been met.

Monitoring and evaluation of the assistance provided by IOM is determined by the country of migration from which the migrant returns. The IOM representative interviewed for this study explained that generally, monitoring of the return migrants' reintegration happens at three, six, or nine months, up to a maximum of 12 months (as required by the sending country mission). Reporting to the sending country focusses on whether or not the return migrant has achieved economic self-sufficiency, given the predominance of economic factors both as motivations for migration and as barriers to sustainable reintegration in Albania. Such monitoring seems to involve qualitative reports, rather than systematic data collection. This interviewee also noted that it can be difficult to determine whether someone's reintegration has been successful within a timeframe of a year – particularly if they used their reintegration grant to open a business, in which case profitability and sustainability may take longer to achieve. Sending missions may also conduct their own monitoring activities – for example by coming to Albania to visit beneficiaries. These visits can take place two to five years after the beneficiary has returned to Albania, thus yielding insights into longer-term reintegration outcomes, but typically only involve visits to a handful of people.

⁴ Project documentation shared via personal communications.

8. Concluding remarks

This study presents an in-depth examination of the out-migration and return migration of Albanians seeking asylum in the EU. The findings presented in this report confirm the findings of existing studies on the multiple reasons for Albanian asylum-seeking and the persistence of these factors upon return, thus challenging sustainable reintegration and motivating further migration movements (Hackaj & Shehaj, 2017; INSTAT/CESS, 2020; Vathi & Zajmi, 2017). This case study adds to a growing consensus that reintegration is best understood as a multi-dimensional process (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021). Although economic challenges were found to be most common and often most acute – both before and after migration – it is also clear that economic precarity is linked to, and often reinforced by, problems regarding healthcare, education, social and political exclusion – which may moreover act as reasons for migration in their own right. The severity of these conditions, and the barriers that they pose to sustainable reintegration upon return, also lend weight to current understandings of the complexity of the concept of sustainable reintegration (Lietaert & Kuschminder, 2021). First, this case study demonstrates that sustainable reintegration is often challenged by the same factors that motivated the initial migration. Second, the study illustrates the difficulty of conceptualising sustainable *re*-integration in a context where, arguably, many migrants (as well as non-migrants) are not “integrated” in their country of origin in the first place.

This study also offers particular insights into the decision-making of rejected asylum seekers faced with a “choice” of either assisted voluntary return or forced removal. Our analysis of EU migration governance also includes important observations on access to orderly, safe and dignified return. These conclusions regarding return decision-making, return experiences, processes of reintegration, and links to further migration are outlined below. These questions will be further developed in our forthcoming comparative report on return and reintegration in Albania, Iraq and Senegal (ADMIGOV deliverable 2.4).

8.1 Return decision-making

This study adds to the growing literature on return decision-making, offering particular insights into the decision-making of rejected asylum seekers. The findings from Albania coincide with the consensus in the broader literature that reintegration assistance is considered helpful by migrants who are already thinking of returning, but does not itself incentivise a return decision (see, for example, recent reviews by OECD, 2020; and Samuel Hall / University of Sussex, 2020). The key relevance of family relationships and obligations in the decision-making process is also confirmed by those few cases in which respondents decided to return even prior to receiving a decision on their asylum claim (OECD, 2020).

Particular to the Albanian context, however, is that acceptance of assisted voluntary return seems to be driven largely by the opportunities that Albanians have for legal re-entry to and labour migration opportunities in EU member states, due to their access to visa-free travel since 2010, and – since 2016 – to low-skilled labour migration opportunities through Germany’s Western Balkan Regulation. This emphasises the importance of legal labour migration opportunities with relatively low barriers to access (i.e. in terms of skills, administrative procedures and financial resources). Secondly, perceived legitimacy may also play a role in the orderly return of Albanian migrants (Leerkes et al., 2017), who were often grateful for the treatment they received in

Germany. Further research is needed to understand how reception conditions and the asylum process may affect perceived legitimacy and thereby impact compliance with return orders, particularly given recent policy changes in Germany which, as discussed in section 4.4.1, have reduced Albanian asylum seekers' length of stay, benefits and opportunities.

8.2 Return experiences

The findings from this study suggest that an 'orderly', 'safe' and 'dignified' return is generally available to Albanian migrants who do not have the legal right to stay in the country of migration. Respondents were broadly satisfied with the way in which their return journeys were organised. However, returns were nonetheless often experienced as highly distressing, and the safety and dignity of return should be questioned where respondents with complex conditions (often chronic health needs) were returning to precarious situations in which their food security and access to necessary medication or treatment could not be ensured. The discretionary funding that Belgium allocates for the return of particularly vulnerable migrants may be an example to follow (for example, extra support up to the equivalent value of six months' healthcare in Belgium may be given to returnees with healthcare needs, which is considered a cost-saving in such cases) (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that, even with this additional funding, return migrants may not be able to access the type or quality of healthcare that they would want in Albania, or may lose access to treatment for chronic conditions once this additional funding has been exhausted. In this way the initial motivation for migration may not be resolved.

Furthermore, the Albanian case highlights the substantial scope that still remains to ensure the dignified and orderly return of migrants who find themselves subject to forced removal, but who would have chosen to return voluntarily if they had better understood their situation. This includes the respondents who were forcibly removed when, in their understanding, they were in the middle of an appeals process, and seem to have received information from their lawyers which misled them. It is also the case for the Egyptian minor who was forcibly removed to Albania instead of reunited with his mother – which clearly contravenes the best interest of the child, the determination of which is necessary according to the EU Returns Directive, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the Global Compact on Migration. This case also highlights the need for greater accountability in return practices, as also called for in the Global Compact of Migration.

8.3 Reintegration experiences

It is difficult to conclude on the sustainable reintegration of the return migrants who participated in this study, in accordance with our working definition of sustainable reintegration:

The individual has reintegrated into the economic, social and cultural processes of the country of origin and feels that they are in an environment of safety and security upon return.

Upon their return, research participants faced poor – and often highly precarious – economic conditions. Their socio-cultural reintegration was experienced as unproblematic – and yet social support structures seemed weak and Roma and Egyptian respondents had returned to a country where they face discrimination and marginalisation. Respondents' own perceptions of their safety and security were mixed – but highlighted the insecurity that stems from poor economic prospects and the lack of a safety net. Nonetheless, respondents often rated their quality of life as average

in relation to their communities, indicating that they were not necessarily disadvantaged by their migration experience (except where debts had been incurred or assets sold; or in the cases where an EU entry ban posed barriers to re-migration). In this sense, migrants had returned to largely the same conditions that they left, and which are also faced by non-migrants. In a context where respondents had often never been able to rely on stable employment, a sufficient income, social security and healthcare, and where Roma and Egyptian minorities face social exclusion and discrimination, it is, as mentioned, difficult to conceptualise what *re-integration* would mean. This question will be further considered in ADMIGOV Deliverable 2.4.

Given the challenges to their sustainable reintegration in Albania, re-migration intentions remain high among return migrants. Return migrants can therefore be generally considered involuntarily immobile. However, some might also be considered *involuntary prospective migrants* in the sense that they would strongly prefer to stay in Albania if they had the means to: these return migrants have a strong will to reintegrate, but do not believe that structural conditions in Albania will allow them to. This study therefore reiterates the limitations of reintegration assistance in some origin country contexts, where structural changes need to be achieved in order to address the multi-dimensional and intersecting drivers of migration undertaken out of necessity, rather than choice. This conclusion aligns with recent calls to better align reintegration assistance with broader development interventions, including through strengthening public institutions, private sector and civil society capacities in the country of origin (see, for example, OECD, 2020).

8.4 Re-migration and links to EU Entry governance

The interactions between the EU Exit and Entry regimes in the case of Albania merit particular consideration. First, as mentioned above, the facilitated access that Albanians have to the EU and its labour market would seem to play a determining role in promoting compliance with return orders. Second, the experience of (failed) asylum-seeking may be observed to re-orientate return (and perhaps prospective) migrants towards legal labour opportunities.

On this first point, and with regard to migration from other countries of origin, it must be highlighted that legal pathways to the EU for low-skilled or low-wage workers are generally lacking, as confirmed by the analysis of EU Entry governance conducted within WP1 of the ADMIGOV project (Koopmans & Gonzales-Beilfuss, 2019). Moreover, Albanian asylum seekers face particular barriers to accessing employment contracts through the Western Balkan Regulation. As discussed in ADMIGOV Deliverable 3.4, migrants who have submitted an asylum application claim within the preceding two years are not eligible to apply for a visa under the Western Balkan Regulation (Doomernik et al., 2020). Furthermore, as the authors note, even besides this time-limited ban for asylum seekers, the kinds of migrants from the Western Balkans who have tended to apply for asylum in Germany (i.e. often disadvantaged ethnic minorities) find it more difficult to make use of the Western Balkan Regulation because they lack the social networks that typically facilitate access to the necessary work contracts (Doomernik et al., 2020). Particularly given that employers in the agricultural sector in Germany expect to need greater access to workers from the Balkan countries (Doomernik et al., 2020), it would seem important to facilitate access to work opportunities for those people who lack the necessary social networks to access the Western Balkan Regulation. For these people, asylum-seeking, by contrast, may remain relatively more accessible. Asylum-seeking may also have helped to overcome these barriers, by providing migrants with a relatively low-cost way to identify networks and potential employers in

Germany (at least in earlier years, when Albanian asylum seekers could stay longer and had greater opportunities to integrate).

Regarding this potential channel-shifting towards legal labour migration opportunities, it is important to note that asylum (re-)migration continues to be likely in cases where return or prospective migrants face particularly precarious conditions in Albania, for which they see no other solution. Further research should focus on the extent to which prospective asylum or irregular migrants are re-oriented towards and can access legal labour migration opportunities, and the extent to which information and awareness-raising (i.e. provided by GIZ's DIMAK centres, as well as through informal networks) influence migration decision-making. In particular, ethnic minority groups may be less likely to engage with official information sources, due to institutional discrimination, and may also lack the human, social or economic capabilities for legal labour migration.

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