



Outmigration in rural Albania

Youth perspectives on Albanian society,
democracy and governance

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Outmigration in rural Albania. Youth perspectives on Albanian society, democracy and governance

Migrimi nga Shqipëria rurale. Perspektivat e të rinjëve mbi shoqërinë Shqipëtare, demokracinë dhe qeverisjen

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Abstract

Migration is a widespread phenomenon and at the heart of some of the most radical demographic and economic changes worldwide. For the last three decades, Albania too has been experiencing some drastic changes led by out-migration, especially in rural areas where most of the population resides. As Albanian economy continues to be predominantly rural the focus of this theses will be on young Albanians living and working in those areas.

This thesis intends to give an insight about youth's out-migration in rural Albania and their perception on life and future to investigate what part migration plays in their choices.

While many studies tackle migration patterns in Albania from a quantitative point of view little is done to analyse specific groups, for instance, youth living in Albanian rural areas. In contrast, this qualitative study, phenomenologically inspired, aims to understand the migration phenomenon in a subjective way. Its focus lies on people's perspectives and perceptions of the reality they live in. It focuses on their interpretation of the context, power, language and discourses about life and migration to explore possible constrains and solutions in order to understand how migration from rural areas can be challenged.

The result of the fieldwork carried out in two different areas in Albania during March-April 2019 indicate that the narratives embedded in the Albanian society conveyed by language and reinforced by weak institutions generate a discourse about migration radically influencing youth's choice towards migration. Change of those narratives and less static and more democratic institutions could be beneficial in reversing the trend of aspiring rural young migrants.

Keywords: Rural Albania, rural youth, migration

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Acronyms and abbreviations

FShZh	Fondi Shqipëtar i Zhvillimit (The Albanian Development Fund)
AKD	Agjensia Kombëtare e Diasporës (The Albanian national agency of the diaspora)
EU	European Union
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INSTAT	Instituti i Statistikës (Albanian Institute of Statistics)
PKVR	Plani Kombëtar i Veprimit për Rininë (National Plan for Youth Action)
VIS Albania	Volontariato Internazionale per lo Sviluppo - Albania (International Volunteering for the Development – Albania)
WB	World Bank

1. Introduction

1.1 The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the motives for migration among young people living in rural Albania. I chose Albania as it is my country of origin and because migration is still a significant phenomenon that has personally affected me and my family and that is drastically changing the Albanian society and young people's view of the future in the country.

Youth¹ in Albania represent a large portion of the population and although migration affects the society as a whole, young people are those most driven towards choosing it as an option for their future. Albania remains a predominantly rural country with a substantial part of the population living in rural areas and relying on subsistence agriculture (Mece, 2016 p. 229). This means that out-migration, especially youth migration, negatively affects not only rural life and development but the entire Albanian society. Moreover, large migration of young people drastically affects the Albanian state and its population not only because youth represent the workforce at its best, but also, at a moral level, its future and hopes. Several studies focus on migration patterns in Albania and among youth. However, few of those are qualitative studies and even less centre their attention on rural youth. The importance of qualitative studies is that they tend to go beyond the objective reasons regarding choices and instead try to analyse matters from the subjective point of view of the informants. Those studies are often crucial in tackling complex social problems from within as they unravel what people affected by those problems think the solution should be and how they could, and potentially would, be part of the solution. Moreover, the tendency to consider the priorities and desires of young people living in rural areas to be the same as the ones living in urban areas risks generating wrong presumptions that can mislead interventions meant to improve conditions without reaching the aim. That said, this research will

¹ Throughout this document youth is referring to the definition of Eurostat (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth/overview>) that considers young men and women between the age of 15-29

rather focus on the specifics of Albanian migration and therefore will not try to discuss migration in general terms.

My aspiration is to give a new perspective on young people's needs and hopes in rural Albania and investigate what would it take for them to not choose migration as a solution. As my master's programme focuses on rural development, my interest is to portray local people's perspectives by addressing and investigating on such development in Albania. Relevant literature such as national and international reports, papers and publications about youth and migration in Albania are generously used in writing this thesis.

Just like Abrams (1982) puts it when saying that "we study what is significant for us and we explain the problems we study in terms of their significance for us" (Abrams, 1982 see Misztal, 1992), this research can be considered as a personal acknowledgement towards my homeland, Albania. Having spent most of my life as a migrant, one of my life goals is to do something meaningful for my country of origin where I hope to return someday for good. I chose Albania also because I think very little is done towards understanding the needs and aspirations of people living in rural areas and especially the young generations.

1.2 The aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to explore the factors and perceptions that contribute to making migration a popular strategy to achieve a better life for rural youth of Albania. The following research questions are therefore to guide this study:

- Under which condition are young people willing to migrate rather than stay in rural Albania?
- What roles do discourses, and social and cultural context play for the informants' decision to migrate and how they perceive their lifeworld in Albania?
- How does youth's perceptions on democracy, governance and institutions affect migration?

1.3 Outline of the thesis

This thesis contains six main chapters of which this introduction is the first. The second chapter presents the methods and is followed by the third chapter where the theoretical approach is discussed. The fourth chapter introduces the reader to a historical background and the fifth presents the analyses of the empirical material. The sixth and last chapter is a short conclusion of the findings.

2. Methodology

A qualitative comparative approach gives insights from two rural areas and tries to understand if the same reasons apply between different areas, ages, genders, levels of education and life experiences. This approach was chosen as the most appropriate for this study as it focuses on the context of rural Albania and the discourses that contribute to maintain and increase out-migration of rural youth. Hence, the qualitative approach helps tackle elements that are not necessary analysed quantitatively, gathered in surveys and presented or compared statistically. It rather focuses on the interpretation of first-hand empirical material that is analysed in order to present a hypothesis.

The research focus is on young generations living in two rural areas in Albania: Hani i Hotit (northern Albania) and Përmet (southern Albania) in order to compare and look at similarities and differences among those two areas. Empirical material was gathered among five different groups: youngsters, elders, migrants, returned migrants and international organisations working with Albanian rural development. It combines personal and semi-structured interviews, informal talks, focus groups and direct observations as well as an extensive review of relevant literature in Albanian, Italian and English. Italian literature was considered as Italian foreign development agencies are working on rural development in both areas of interest and because as an Italian migrant myself, I was able to read and access literature in original language.

The direct and semi-structured interviews as well as informal talks are intended to gather information by paying special attention to create a sense of trust and genuine comfort with the informants while being able to compare results.

To present a proportionate and representative study, special regard was given to keeping gender balance. This was mainly done to assess any gender-related causes in migration. Studies about how migration has changed power relations within the families by overcoming tradition and social norms were used as valuable insight to the modern rural population in Albania. In this share of the society, where men are generally less educated than women, traditional family roles appear shaky and domestic violence is often present (Mece, 2016). Several studies show that women in rural areas are not only dedicating more time to their education, but they also have higher chances to get a (better) job than their partners (King and Vullnetari, 2012; INSTAT, 2017-2023; Gëdeshi *et al.*, 2018).

Focus groups were used to comprehend the relationship between different ages, genders, and strata. They were also important to convey an idea of how people interact in a community or reach consensus upon difficult and complex discussions.

Direct observation was used to understand and analyse the different dynamics and power relations within the different contexts of everyday life (private houses,

cafés, schools, buses, etc). Capturing experiences and perceptions of the participants in their natural environment rather than distributing questionnaires or other means of communication (like phone calls or online meetings) was crucial for the purpose of the study and the use of the theoretical framework.

Time constraint and therefore the option to select only two areas of research could be seen as study limitations together with the eventuality of a biased approach from my side as an Albanian young migrant myself, the last being nevertheless consciously tackled. It is therefore important to stress the fact that this research cannot be considered as representative of the whole Albanian rural youth population but rather as an introduction and insight through a rich pool of empirical material. Even my being Albanian and an emigrant myself was perceived as both weird and stimulating. Most people were surprisingly happy to hear that I was interested in rural development in Albania although studying and living abroad. This aspect rather helped create a genuine sense of trust, solidarity and often pride among informants - therefore I do not reckon my research to be flawed.

2.1 Context of the fieldwork

Field work was conducted in Albania during March-April 2019. My efforts went towards finding two rural areas offering two cases in an information-oriented selection (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The two chosen locations were: Hani i Hotit and Përmet.

Hani i Hotit

Hani i Hotit is a small village in northern Albania set in a wonderful landscape between the Albanian Alps and the Shkodra lake. It is also a well-known border checkpoint with good road infrastructure that connects the area to Montenegro. The area is not touristically developed, and people are mainly employed in agriculture production. Recently the village was included into the newly formed district, Malësi e Madhe, that has provided some job opportunities in administration.

Përmet

Përmet is located in southern Albania and in the country's administrative organisation is considered to be a city. This city is however very small and most important it is today mainly inhabited by "rural commuters" - migrants that live their lives working their plots of land during summer and working in the city during winter times. The city has in fact been largely abandoned by its original inhabitants that have mainly migrated either to Tirana or abroad. Përmet was chosen as the perfect counterpart to Hani i Hotit. Located in southern Albania it provides several characteristics that make it interesting to compare with northern Albania, and

especially, to Hani i Hotit. Përmet is relatively small and difficult to access. The area has always been referred to as a very prosperous agriculture zone blessed by a luscious nature and rich in water. Compared to Hani i Hotit, Përmet is touristically far more developed, and this means also that, at least during the touristic season, employment is not a problem. Përmet is well known throughout Albania for its women emancipation and freedom compared to other areas of the country. An element that describes this would be the fact that Përmet has an important female basketball team, while in Hani i Hotit there are no sport activities for female groups or individuals at all. Girls and women are often seen in cafés in Përmet while in Hani i Hotit this is considered highly inappropriate.

3. Theoretical approach

This chapter discusses the theoretical concepts used to analyse the empirical material. It aims to interpret how different discourses on everyday life in rural Albania help maintaining a vision of a better future to be searched abroad. A phenomenological perspective was expressly used to provide a qualitative perspective of “the individual as a collective creation” (Misztal, 1992) often lacking in existing research on Albanian youth (and rural Albanian youth) and migration. To do so, the study focuses mainly on the context and language of the informants, not only to comprehend their views on migration but also the role governance and trust have in their choices. By interpreting the meaning of recurrent words and phrases and the use of language to express power dynamics in social, cultural, and political context, I intend to provide a perspective, not particularly why rural youth migrate, but rather on how this desire arises while other options seem available. To understand this, the social memory concept is used to reinforce the discourse practise linked to the historical background and how certain discourses cannot be isolated or understood only with the interpretation of today’s conversations.

The main theories taken into consideration in this research are Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis and Foucault’s theories on governmentality and power relations. The critical discourse analyses (CDA) is used to analyse the implicit content of what is taken for granted, as common sense (Fairclough, 2001) and to address the sociocultural practices that strengthen the ideological struggles further addressed through Foucault’s governmentality theory. Governmentality is used to address what at a first sight might look like inability or laziness of the society, especially the younger generations, to deal with the system they live in. By combining critical discourse analyses with the concept of governmentality I intend to point out how language and its usage as a social practice inhibit the ability of rural youth to build a society they would feel part of and willing to engage in, in order to create the changes they want to see thus preventing migration.

Other concepts such as trust as analysed by Misztal (1992), Connerton’s social memory (1989) and Bourdieu’s theory on capitals (1992) are also used as complementary to give further insight on how the migration pattern is built and maintained in rural Albania. Analysing Bourdieu’s approach to “‘field’ as a set of given circumstances where the informants are living, experiencing, and acting” (Bourdieu, 1977) I try to understand and show my informants perceptions on rural life in Albania compared to their vision on what migration would mean and give them.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis on Migration

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework studies the connections between language, power and ideology. According to Fairclough, language can be used as a mean to understand how people perceive the world, how they see themselves as individuals and their position in the society and how they perceive power relations (Fairclough, 2001). This analytical framework was chosen to look at the migration phenomenon from a different perspective. Instead of looking at the general patterns such as pull and push factors that can otherwise be accessed through surveys and quantitative studies, this qualitative approach intends to gather insights on the "migration habitus or pattern" that is embedded in the Albanian society and especially in rural communities.

For Fairclough language is a social practice that apart from serving as means of communication, creates identities, context and social relationships and within them power dynamics, practices and beliefs that hold meaning for the society in which the communication takes place (Fairclough, 2001). Because of those elements, language is seen by Fairclough as a powerful tool in understanding how a certain person or community views different aspects of life and how the used language helps to constitute, reinforce or change certain ideologies or opinions. Language, according to Fairclough, could therefore be used to create change and this was important to look at to understand how migration is affected by the rural Albanian discourses. As CDA cannot be isolated from the analysis of social and institutional practises the study analyses not only the discourses of young people living in rural areas but also their relationship to other informants and institutions that influence the youth views on themselves, the reality they live in and migration.

In its CDA framework Fairclough looks at the discourse at different levels, yet this thesis focuses on the social practice of the language rather than the language in use aspect (Fairclough, 2001). Although the latter has also been considered it was left aside as it is difficult to render linguistic aspects in another language. In addition, as often language is not only verbal, attention was also given to the "not said" or implicit meaning of certain phrases that would resonate with me as Albanian who have full understanding of the culture and context. This can be seen, for instance, in the chapter called "Abroad, the meaning behind the words".

Important aspects of this research are the concepts of identity and ideology as elements strongly affected by language and discourse.

Identity was used to help understand youth's perception of their role and place in rural communities while ideology was used to understand the discourses around migration. The "migration habitus" is portrayed by O'Reilly (2015) as "a tendency towards migration that developed over generations and through socialization" (O'Reilly, 2015). I use this approach to identify patterns in the discourses about migration among different generations of my informants. According to Connerton (1989) "societies are self-interpreting communities". This means that societies

create, preserve and communicate an image of themselves as a whole while, at the same time, the “individuals’ consciousness is shaped by this image of the society” (Connerton, 1989). Following this theory, I therefore argue that individuals’ perceptions of who they are, what they ought to do and how they ought to act, are shaped within the image Albanian society has of itself. I use Connerton’s ideas on social memory as a sort of completion to Habermas’s theory on Communicative Action and his concept of lifeworld (Habermas, 1984) further explored in this chapter.

Ideology is seen as connected to the migration pattern in what Fairclough (2001) describes as those “ideological assumptions which aim to be taken as mere ‘common sense’ and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations” (Fairclough, 2001, p.64). The concept of ideology as presented by language is here seen as shaping and building a discourse rather than analysed in search of truth. Although CDA cannot ignore questions of truth, judging the “presented truth is not its focus” (Fairclough, 2001) nor is it relevant for this study. Common sense was described by Garfinkel as “the familiar common-sense world of everyday life, a world which is built entirely upon assumptions and expectations which control both the actions of members of a society and their interpretation of the actions of others” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 64). According to Fairclough, those assumptions are insolubly linked to “previous experience of the world and what aspects of the world it relates to as well as what conception of the world it presupposes. The producers of the discourse construct it as an interpretation of the world” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 65-67). “People produce and interpret discourse” (Connerton, 1989, p. 32), yet, because in discourse people can legitimize (or delegitimize) power relations without being conscious of doing so, people are generally unaware of the causes and consequences of their own discourse (ibid, p. 33-34). Ideologies can also be seen as “built up and refined to justify the system and they must offer a plausible interpretation of lived experience” (Armburster and Leasve, 2008 p. 232). This approach is therefore seen as resonating on what can be called as the “migration ideology” that justifies the migration phenomenon in Albania. The “migration ideology” is therefore not only the creation and the support of the idea that only by migrating one can achieve something in life, but migration is also perceived by Albanian rural youth as a somehow coercive way of the society to narrow and often determine the choices of younger generations.

To understand the decision of Albanian rural youth on migration matters, special attention was given to the interpretation of Bourdieu’s different forms of capitals. People inevitably make use of the capitals (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic) in every aspect of their lives (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This means that they can use them independently in building a future where they are or try to escape difficult situations. I also make use of Bourdieu’s concept of language as a

crucial part of the symbolic power and investigate power relationships as perceived and transmitted through discourse among informants (Lovell, 2003).

3.2 The importance of memory

According to Fairclough, discourses are product of specific social and cultural practices hence, analysing the historical context of those discourses is crucial in understanding their development and continuity (Fairclough, 2001). This means that in order to understand contemporary Albania, communism and its effects on the Albanian society were going to take a considerable place in explaining the perpetuation of the migration call. Aware of the fact that “it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem than to describe the symptoms” (Flyvbjerg, 2006 p. 229), I use the concept of social memory developed by Paul Connerton not only to understand the reasons why people migrate but rather why they don't see opportunities around them or what keeps them away from engaging in implementing the change they would like to see.

Connerton (1989) argues that there are three kinds of memory: personal memory (biography and personal experiences), cognitive memory (general knowledge about the world) and habit-memory (as embodied rather than cognitive). An *autopoietic* system is a system that produces and reproduces its own elements as well as its own structures (Connerton, 1989 see Luhmann, 2012, p. 32). Personal memory (Connerton, 1989) is partly analysed through history. New generations today were raised by people that lived in a totally different world. Those parents, relatives, teachers, and carers inevitably transmit their worldview, their hopes, and fears. Cognitive memory principally deals with the tales about a mythical wonderland abroad - wherever it happens to be - created and rekindled by the diaspora. The habit memory is used to show how rural communities try to perpetuate, often involuntary, habits (like migration) and mentalities (success can only be meaningful abroad) that end up by confining the world of the young generations within a dimension that cannot be compatible with today's world. In this case, “collective consciousness” mentioned by Emile Durkheim (Lukes, 2013), is often referred to, to describe the constraints and limits social and moral norms play in youth's everyday path towards building a more democratic future society. During the fieldwork it was evident how language and context have a powerful influence on the decision to migration. The language used is mainly generated by the historical background of the society they live in and the discourses of elders and migrants.

3.3 Governmentality

Governmentality is a concept derived from Michel Foucault that includes several governmental spheres: “how to govern oneself, how to be governed and govern others as well as by whom people are willing to accept to be governed and how to become a governor” (Foucault, 1982). Because “to analyse the government is to analyse those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize, and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups” (Foucault, 1982, p. 221; Callinicos, 1987, p. 20), I use this theory to dig deeper into what, apparently, it would take to make rural youth evaluate a future in the countryside if they are made to make changes in decision-making. I also rely on Foucault’s theory about auto-governance and ‘conduct of conducts’ to understand the power of relations between youth, institutions, and the government. In this thesis I focus on the processes of governing oneself and how to be governed because I find them relevant in understanding youth’s inability to find ways to make a satisfactory living in rural Albania while describing their struggle in understanding how they would like to be ruled. Through language, I try to understand people’s ability to trust and rely on institutions and institution’s ability to cope with the change of times and their adaptation and evolution into a democratic system. People’s ability to question institutions and their power and youth’s ability to act responsibly if given the power was a significant part of the research.

According to Foucault (1976) every society has its regime of truth and this “dominant discourse is felt almost arbitrary, in the sense of natural and legitimate because it is simply the way of it to be” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 76). Trust is a fundamental tool in building relationships, from personal ones to businesses and governance, as pointed out by Simmel (1978) “without the general trust that people have in each other, society itself would disintegrate” (Simmel, 1978 see Misztal, 1992). Trust was often present in informants’ discourses as they often shared concern about the impossibility of building a future in Albania and how collaboration was perceived as difficult and strongly impacted businesses and life in rural areas. Talking about trust, Misztal (1992) explains how destabilizing can be the process of radical change in societies that once “characterised by mutual dependence, familiarity, closeness and trust” change into “a new society characterised by individualism, rationality and distrust” (Misztal, 1992). In the Albanian context, it can be seen how the entrance into democracy meant a sort of radical social disintegration where law, order and cooperation, seen as “coercive powers exercised against the people's interests” (ibid, 1992) were to abolish for the society and most importantly, the individual, to be able to express itself ‘freely’. Nevertheless, this ‘liberation’ of the individual meant that the ‘collective order’ upon which common norms and values were built, fell apart and consequently “the absence of enforcement lead to distrust and social disintegration” (Misztal, 1992).

The concept of truth is also applied to closely look at youth engagement in politics. Because, especially during focus groups discussions, the commonsensical framework and procedure for treating the social problem – migration in this case – deflected attention away from the idea that could lead those into being questioned and challenged (Fairclough, 2001, p.71). This common sense can be challenged only with the rise of self-consciousness and social emancipation as well as education and further knowledge on different ways of leading oneself and willing to be lead in a constructive and trustworthy governmental environment. Social movements, as a way to politically engage and raise awareness, could be an attempt to create new conditions for trust by mediating the relationship between knowledge and society. Habermas argues that knowledge is a result of social interaction and dialogue on which people live and perceive their lifeworld (Habermas, 1984). Continuing with Habermas, in his idea about the revitalisation of the public sphere and emancipatory politics he points out the need for autonomy, truth and freedom (ibid, 1984). According to his rational choice theory, he argues that “a mixture of self-interests and normative commitment contributes to social stability and cooperation” (Misztal, 1992). This approach was used to see how a different discourse on trust and social participatory action could shape a different social world and drive action towards a better rural life for those who would rather stay. Understanding and questioning political claims in order to search for elements of political emancipation among rural youth was important to address people’s perception and complaints about what they would refer to as a “politically weak and unchangeable situation in decades” that often made them doubt living in a democratic state with democratically working institutions. Challenging local political organisations while demanding to be part of the decision making that could lead to bottom-up structural changes and not only rely on top-down solutions that might not represent, in this case, rural and agricultural needs were part of discussions and interviews.

Because “power in discourse is intrinsically embedded in any system of education that reproduces the existing system along with the knowledge and powers which they carry” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 54) and, as social norms and institutions depend on their reproduction (Butler, 1997 see Lovell, 2003), special attention was given in asking informants about possible ways for producing new social norms and institutions that are not a product of that past. This was especially important because the informants’ difficulty of trusting governmental institutions felt tangible as they perceive it as reproducing the same structures without new knowledge and with an old ideology that is hard to change from within.

4. Background

This chapter aims to provide a historical background compared to today's situation in Albania in order to give context to the empirical findings and guide the reader to the analyses that follows in chapter five.

Albania is a small country of about 28'000 sq.km situated in Western Balkans with a relatively young population with an average age of 42,5 (INSTAT, 2023 p.18). Youth under the age of 30 represents about 40% of the total Albanian population and more than half of this share lives in rural areas (Youth Bank Hub, 2017 p. 6) with agriculture as the main provider i.e. formal and informal occupation (Meçe, 2016; INSTAT, 2016). Yet, farming generally appears to be quite rudimentary and often covers only subsistence needs without producing relevant income, making Albania one of the poorest countries in Europe with about 25% of the population living in poverty while “about five percent live in extreme poverty” (World Bank, 2017 see Mema *et al.*, 2019 p. 19). Poor mechanisation and low farm productivity are considered as the main push factors in rural outmigration and cropland abandonment (Soto *et al.*, 2002; King, 2005; Sikor *et al.*, 2009). Further research shows that, “almost one third of the Albanian population has left the country during the last 30 years” (Gëdeshi *et al.*, 2018; INSTAT, 2019) with the country remaining an “unfavourable place for young people” (Williamson, 2010. p. 114) while recent studies from international organisations and NGOs show certain alarming levels of migration desires among Albanians (Gëdeshi *et al.*, 2018).

According to the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) publications regarding youth unemployment, young men aged between 18 and 30 generally present a higher unemployment rate than among young women (INSTAT, 2017-2023). This situation is often hard for men to accept and is felt as a strong motivation to migrate to re-establish their role as head of the family. This research, however, shows how young women are aware of this situation and, therefore, prefer to migrate themselves to escape a problematic marriage. Gender issues arise in relation to land inheritance too. In fact, about 90% of the land is owned by men (EBRD, 2016 see Youth Bank Hub, 2016 p.24) leaving women rarely with the possibility of looking at agriculture as a sector where they can invest for their own future. Important differences could be seen between Përmet, where women are traditionally seen as emancipated and Hani i Hotit, where the role of women in society, although improved in recent years, has still a long way to go. For instance, women in Hani i Hotit cannot attend the local café even if they want to meet among themselves, while in Përmet this was a common habit. These comparisons were important in order to understand if emancipation played a role in women's reasons and choices on migration.

4.1 Historical background

4.1.1 Communism

After centuries of occupation by the Ottoman Empire, Albania gained its independence and became a state only in 1912. The short periods of peace between the World Wars could not give time to the new state to come out from a dramatically underdeveloped society without a solid aristocracy nor middle class and an economy based on primitive agriculture. Given those premises, at the end of the Second World War, Albania found itself building one of the harshest communist dictatorships that would end only at the beginning of the 1990s. Along with repression, the regime built the country's state apparatus with strong institutions, schools, hospitals, roads, railways, and so on. Although following examples from - and being influenced by - other communist countries like the USSR and China, at the beginning of the '70s, Albanian rulers chose to end those diplomatic connections, and the country went into a total isolation from the rest of the world. This complete seclusion was not only ideological, but it also embraced every life sphere. Together with propaganda, censorship and terror, Albanians lived ignoring what was happening in the world for decades. When at the beginning of the 1990s, communism eventually ended, most people were literally starving, tested, and desperate for change.

4.1.2 Agriculture and rural development

Agriculture has always played a pivotal role in the Albanian economy. During communism "two-thirds of the population were kept in rural areas in order to provide labour for state-run farms" (King, 2005 p. 136) especially from the moment the country became an autarchy in mid '70s. Today, agriculture remains a sector of vital importance for the national economy and the livelihood of a large share of the population (Miluka *et al.*, 2010).

During communism private property did not exist as such and there were no specific laws to regulate it as everything was owned by the state. This changed with the transition into a democratic system when a new law, 7501/91, divided rural land. The law divided the land among people residing in rural Albania, but the division also entailed a partition of agricultural land into several different categories (agricultural, forestry, house land and four other categories). Therefore, almost all farmers have now small fragments of land that are often very distant from each other. Even though, "agriculture remains an important safety net for rural people" (Deininger, 2003; Mathijs et Noev, 2004, see Sikor *et al.*, 2009), this "land fragmentation prevents rural development and poses real difficulties for farmers to access bigger markets competitively" (FAO, 2002; Sikor *et al.*, 2009) even when "emigrants allow relatives and neighbours to use resources they leave behind like

land or a house” (Nicholson, 2004, p. 879-880). More difficulties arise when the land is inherited and further fragmented without being legally owned in the first place. “The division of inheritance is mainly based on words and rarely on legal wills” (EBRD, 2016 see Youth Bank Hub, 2017 p. 24). “With no possibility of land regulation already in their use, lack of economic possibility to invest in bigger machinery, destroyed irrigation systems, difficult access to credit and no good infrastructure, farmers find it hard to access even the local markets. This way they are easy to be into traders’ traps and speculators” (Mathijs & Noev, 2004 see Sikor *et al.*, 2009).

Infrastructure, largely developed during the communist era, is today lacking and therefore a big issue for people living in rural Albania, where the impossibility to reach certain areas by other means of transport apart from on foot or with the help of a donkey or a horse, creates isolation for both people and rural goods. Not less important is the poor or non-existent health and education structures that worsen with the continuous depopulation of rural areas and the concentration of the few professionals (doctors, teachers, engineers, etc.) into the cities.

Through the communist years, the government had the power to radically influence people’s lives in almost every aspect. Starting from who would get a certain type of education and continuing with where one was given a workplace. This extended in certain cases to whom one was supposed to hang out with and sometimes even by suggesting whom to marry. Education was rigid and propagandistic. It focused on socialist teachings and left no space for criticism other than when it involved capitalism or the “people’s enemies” such as other states, Party traitors or threats from the West. These teachings and this approach to governance have deeply affected Albanian people’s way of dealing with discipline, institutions and governance. Decades of oppression have generated a feeling of deep distrust in governance and justice, let alone the idea that those can be challenged. During the democratic years, while propaganda was taken away, little has been done to improve critical thinking and teach participatory democracy and how to challenge or change patterns. Here are the words of two informants:

“The youth are very keen on getting a good education. The older generations rarely have more than elementary education.”

Yllka, 29-year-old, Project manager of EU-funded rural projects in Përmet

“If education is not changed and enhanced there will not be a lot to wish for the future. Teachers get no updated education and are unable to teach in a new way with old-fashioned books and methods.”

Olti, 30-year-old, Natural and cultural guide working with EU development projects in Përmet

During communism the state was the only employer and with its population planning people would get a job placement by the Party wherever it had decided it was needed, also according to the educational plans put in action. At the beginning of the era of democracy most industries closed down and the population ended up without a job from one day to another. This memory of factories and the job they used to provide is still vivid on people's impressions. Today this situation has changed yet “permanent jobs are rare in rural Albania” (Mece, 2016).

Almost always, when asked about what they wanted from the government, young informants' answer was: “*to create jobs*”. It seemed that even younger generations who want to live in a democratic and capitalist society still rely on the old pattern of the state as the main job provider. While the state still offers many job opportunities, it is mainly private enterprises that would offer employment. Yet, those jobs are regarded with distrust and worry. Information gathered in the fieldwork and literature research clearly show how work regulations and labour unions are weak and the private sector is often neglected in the few regulations in place for governmental workers, leaving the door open for exploitation and power abuse. Information about rights is apparently not available as centres that would provide assistance are not many, especially in rural areas where people are not used to look for information digitally and often do not have any education to guide them.

With few employment alternatives apart from informal, seasonal and poorly regulated agricultural work, young generations find it hard to see agriculture as a profitable profession while migration, on the other hand, “provides a good deal for many as they would both escape the mess and increase the chances to own something someday” (Nicholson, 2004). “While large amounts of land are left fallow waiting to be legalized to be sold” (ibid, 2004) other issues arise, such as degradation of farmland with consequences in domestic economy and food security.

Today, “agriculture, which accounts for more than one fifth of GDP, is held back because of a lack of modern equipment, unclear property rights and the prevalence of small, inefficient plots of land” (Williamson, 2010 p.16). Yet, it “remains a sector of vital importance for the national economy and the livelihood of a large share of the population” (Miluka *et al.*, 2010). Nevertheless, because of little or no action in supporting agriculture and rural development, youth, is left with very few choices. “The labour market for agricultural work is very thin” (Miluka *et al.*, 2010) most of the agricultural work done by young people remain unpaid and not regulated making unofficial work not only a problem for the present but also for the future because of the impossibility to make savings or have a pension leaving young people concerned about future financial security. Consequently, migrating to earn a living or an education is often seen as the only option compared with a future of subsistence agriculture in Albania. As stated by Giovanni, 62-year-old, head of the Italian Rural Development Fund in Malësi e Madhe (Hani i Hotit):

“The reality is that there have been no good and precise measures for the youth in general and youth in rural areas even less. In 2013 and 2014 the government started to think for the first time about rural development.”

The widespread and “formally” accepted role of informal rural labour-market makes it difficult even for the INSTAT to provide statistics on how many people are involved in rural production and which is their average age. Often rural households engage in seasonal production of goods that are sold in unofficial ways and, although helping the households’ economy, do not provide a stable income nor a meaningful business that is officially registered as such. Yet, nationally, statistics show that about 60% of unemployment affects the age group between 16-34 years old (Economic Commission for Europe, 2002, p.5; Nicholson, 2004, p. 879).

Lack of genuine and relevant entrepreneurship and business education among small and medium-size businesses create other problems apart from an inappropriate job environment. In the chaos of those first years of pluralism the new landowners, with none or basic understanding of capitalism and market economy, were left without specific guidance. With no capital to invest and unstable incomes most of them were forced to migrate either to cities or abroad. The incapability of dealing with private property, inheritance regulations and a general distrust in cooperation, left from the collective economy of the dictatorship, often drove those farmers who decided to stay toward unsustainable choices or the impossibility to grow or become competitive. Furthermore, the lack of vision and knowledge of regional and international markets also influenced those who were committed to choose not to migrate.

Support is not given to rural entrepreneurs with no good connections to understand the paths through subsidy schemes and when they get to know what is needed to apply, often land regulations and ownership issues arise. Bureaucracy is difficult to overcome by those with low education and few economic means leaving behind those who would need help the most. This can relate to Bourdieu’s concept of capitals (Bourdieu, 1992) where residents in rural areas often lack adequate cultural, social and economic capitals that would give them the tools to navigate the new market economy allowing rural communities and businesses to flourish. Moreover, the lack of knowledge of the language and practices, let alone the use of the Internet or access to a computer, create unbalanced power structures that leave behind a large part of those in need. Knowledge of farm management and market is low and there are no possibilities in developing an education late in life and no specific courses in agriculture. “Without a real education or information about how to run a larger farm and invest, many farmers, whose level of education is among the lowest in the whole country, tend to be stuck in their poor economy and easy to

fall into trades' traps and speculators" (Mathijs & Noev, 2004; Sikor *et al.*, 2009). Yet, opportunities for those who know where to look and how to move in the system exist:

"There are a lot of grants and help from the government and international organisations. But you need to work hard and be honest. The EU have now invested 94 million Euro for the future 3 years in agriculture and tourism and this also helps."

Ndriçim, 28-year-old, dairy entrepreneur in Hani i Hotit

This is often perceived by informants as meant to be for manipulative reasons (corruption – only those chosen will access to resources) and as part of the larger discourse that translates into "situational struggle, an institutional struggle and a social struggle" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 58). Yet, although often thought to be an obsolete and labour-intensive job that brings no sufficient incomes and rather low social status (Levy and Smith, 2010; FAO, 2014a), my informants perceived farming as a valid employment option if it weren't for collateral issues regarding the lack of market access and the insecure type of investment also caused by very low governmental support.

4.1.3 The trouble with cooperation

Spread corruption existed during the communist regime, yet strong institutions provided somehow security. Today corruption, openly seen and largely accepted as normality, is hard to challenge. This can also be related to the fact that many cannot fight abusive employers as the latter hold the power of the certainty of finding others grateful to be offered an occupation among an otherwise dramatically unemployed population. The insecurity related to difficult work conditions meets the inability to rely on an unthreatened job position. It therefore creates economic insecurities for the future and psychological difficulties in handling it for breadwinners. Here is how Giovanni, 62-year-old working as head of the Italian Rural Development Fund in Malësi e Madhe (Hani i Hotit) sees unemployment:

"It is complicated. If you work for others you can try to keep your job by not complaining and accepting most of the tasks. If you work for the state, you must hope that in the next elections those that come in power will not replace you with some of their family members or acquaintances to whom they need to return a favour."

The communist legacy has made cooperation between people difficult and agricultural cooperatives continue to have a bad connotation in people's minds.

This reflects the “social memory” as analysed by Connerton (1989). As forced cooperation was the milestone of the regime, it is difficult nowadays to eradicate the bad connotation of cooperation, especially among those who lived and worked part of their lives in state-owned cooperatives. Younger generations are more oriented towards cooperation, yet, if cooperation should include “some degree of commitment to norms and moral values” (Misztal, 1992) those are felt to have been largely compromised together with the concept of “civic duty” which according to Misztal, “sets limits on economic rationality or egoistic individualism” (ibid, 1992). It can be argued that in other, more religious societies, cooperation is seen from a more positive angle. Among Albanians instead, that for decades were instructed against religious practices, cooperation, could be interpreted only as a survival or forced practice from higher spheres (religion or dictatorial regime). This brings me to say that distrust in cooperation is part of a larger discourse that would need further investigation. For instance, “the lack of coordination of work offers poses serious problems” (Mece, 2016 p. 350). Often people living in the same area cultivate the same cultivars or engage in the same rural activities. This situation not only produces competition within the same village but causes obvious difficulties for labour opportunities among inhabitants. It is therefore difficult to find workforce when needed in the countryside while when the fields require no attention, cities are filled with jobless people. Here is how the lack of trust in cooperation is portrayed out by two of my informants:

“Cooperation is the real problem here. We all see it but if you would ask me why and how it can be solved, I don’t have the answers. I guess we still need to digest the forced group labour of the communism...”

Ilir, 28-year-old, working for protected areas in Përmet

“It is very difficult to eradicate the fear of sharing. The past is a shadow that seems to cover people’s good intentions. The society needs extra time to overpass this. It’s nobody’s and everybody’s fault.”

Agron, 40-year-old, returned migrant and hotel owner in Përmet

Focus groups in both areas show not only a low engagement in cooperation and volunteering but also low interest in politics. Another inheritance from the past, politics is still seen as a rather dangerous and dirty occupation. Elder generations would not be happy for their children to get involved in it, although some see this as a good opportunity for young men to get a job in a good position. Today most of the youth involvement into decision making and democratic participation is to be attributed to the international organizations’ efforts to try to invert the negative influence from older generations. Government and politics structures and actions are not very clear, either. Few of the informants knew the role and specific powers

of local governance nor had they knowledge of forms of participation. Moreover, a weak and critical view of the political system was obvious when young people would not question their choices on political matters but rather follow in the steps of their family's voting decisions (e.g. the Socialist party as a symbol of communism), or vote according to their own concrete personal and immediate advantage (e.g. the lure of a job in the administration when the party of choice wins).

Tourism is largely seen as a good solution for integrating livelihoods incomes. Activities connected with tourism, although seasonal, represent a way to combine agriculture/tradition with tourism/modernity and agriculture/subsistence. Small farm holders could integrate their subsistence agriculture with jobs still connected with rural development by rising their interest both on the area they live and by not being forced to abandon the countryside to get a job in the city. Several informants from Përmet were happy to be able to combine the two occupations although in Hani i Hotit it was considered not possible as the tourism industry is not much developed. The different positions are made clear by two of my informants:

“Tourism gave me the possibility to think more about building my future here and not migrating. I am happy to have my job as a nature guide as it gave me the economic safety I needed.”

Olti, 23-year-old, rafting and hiking guide in Përmet

“I think that the only way to make young people stay here would be developing the tourism industry. Ski and alpinism would really bring a lot of people here, but those investments are too big for local people to develop on their own and it requires a lot of engagement that youth are not willing to do.”

Frederik, 29-year-old, municipality representative in Malësi e Madhe (Hani i Hotit)

4.1.4 Migration

Forbidden during the communist regime, migration has been an irresistible call for Albanians since the beginning of the transition started in 1992. Freed from almost half a century when attempted out-migration was punished by death, while rural-urban migration was very limited and controlled (King, 2005), people felt almost entitled to venture, see and experience the “abroad”. The total lack of information about the rest of the world or a censored and distorted version of it, only increased the interest in fleeing the country as soon as one could.

Although “migration has been a major element in Albania's transition to a more ‘modern’ economy and society” (Gedeshi *et al.*, 2028, p. 13) “during the first decade of the transition into democracy, there was a total lack of governmental interest to control migration. Consequently, at the beginning of year 2000, about 25% of the population, in other words about 35% of the working force, had

migrated” (AKD, 2020 p. 14). “By 2010, the World Bank reported that almost 1,4 million Albanians were living abroad (Mema *et al.*, 2019, p. 15) making Albania one of the countries with the highest rates of emigration in the world compared to its population (ibid. p. 16). Today, it is hardly found in Albania a family without at least one member who has migrated even for a short period of time (King, 2005). In rural areas, especially, where family relationships are even tighter than in urban areas, the use of power and power relations between generations and migrants play a crucial role in building a worldview of the younger generation and driving their attention towards escaping a reality described to them as hopeless.

Remittances, on the other hand, have been providing not only means of survival but also act as source of informal credit (Lawson & Saltmarshe, 2000; Nicholson, 2001; see Nicholson, 2004, p. 880) to rural enterprises. Yet, the lack of land development schemes creates a stagnation in rural investments. Moreover, “local communities are not included in shaping land policies” (van Dijk and Kopeva, 2006; Sikor *et al.*, 2009). What is being done is essentially not in touch with the reality of rural people as the access to forms of subsidies are not only complicated to access and comply with many farmers’ reality but also difficult to understand.

Seasonal migration is seen as a good opportunity, especially for those areas close to land borders with Macedonia, Greece, or Montenegro. Although inconsistent and occasional, almost always unregulated, and informal, labour abroad, when possible, give many rural families an extra, much needed liquidity. Nevertheless, the lack of official agreement on labour and seasonal work between Albania and other countries, make circular migration difficult for many, as often stated by my informants. This pushes many that would rather choose a temporary migration but remain resident in Albania, to migrate definitively to be able to have a work permit and a more secure job. Here is how one of the informants would put it:

“I am happy all my children are abroad and settled in well-positioned jobs. I did everything I could to secure them a different future. We were doomed to farming once and were poor as hell. Working all day in every weather condition for a piece of bread. No, I am happy I invested in their future outside agriculture and Albania. They are happier where they are, and I am proud over what I did for them.”

Gjin, in his 60s, ex-farmer in Hani i Hotit

5. Analysis

In this chapter I analyse the discourses young people in rural Albania use to express themselves about the reality in which they live, migration and themselves. I do so by analysing the language used in society, views older generations have on life in Albania and migration, and the discourses migrants purvey to Albanians on life abroad. I end this chapter by analysing the concepts of governance, truth, and trust among youth to see their possibilities in changing the perceived reality they live in.

Migration is a very complex social phenomenon, and it would be presumptuous to try to explain the reasons why many young Albanian people continue to migrate. Several studies have shed light on a series of reasons related to pull and push factors that continue to make migration a plausible alternative for many young Albanians. These factors, also present during my fieldwork, were not this thesis' focus but rather a starting point in looking at the perceptions of people regarding these factors and their approach towards them. The study's aim is therefore to look at some of the main issues rural youth living in the Albanian countryside are facing today and their attitude in these regards. It also pays special attention to the context by giving the reader a view on the reasons of some patterns while, on the other hand, questioning informants about what it would take for a change to take place.

Critical discourse analysis and Bourdieu's theory on capitals was therefore used as a framework to look at the way people talk about reality and how they shape or perpetuate this reality by their talks. For instance, the reality migrants and elders portray to young potential migrants living in rural Albania. In following this approach, I intend to show how two ways of understanding and talking about the present and the future take central stage in this study. On one hand the discourses of older generations regarding migration while on the other hand, the youth's interpretation of the reality in which they live.

5.1 Abroad, the meaning behind words

According to Bourdieu (1992) language is the vehicle we use to understand and navigate society. It gives us not only the power to express our thoughts, but it also has the power to create discourses around concepts through which we can navigate the reality. Moreover, the way we use language provides an idea of who we are and at the same time it impacts others (Bourdieu, 1992). I use language as a tool to understand the way people talk about themselves and their reality as well as how this reality is shaped by the discourses around them. By analysing language, I aim to provide insights into the way language and discourses about the reality in Albania

impact the choice to migrate among rural youth. In doing so, I would like to start with one word: “abroad”.

For many this word simply means ‘outside of ones’ country’s borders” and yes, “jashtë shtetit” (literally: ‘outside the state’ in Albanian) has the same meaning on a language dictionary, yet this is not the only interpretation of this/those word/s. What I would like to show you now is the connotation this word has for every Albanian, including myself. When I was a child living in communist Albania, those words signified everything that could not be done or found or thought to be possible in Albania. At large, “abroad”, still today refers to an idealistic land of freedom, modernity, and functionality. In a country where freedoms to express, contradict or choose were taken away and entire generations were raised on fear and total isolation, the dream of an “abroad” where freedom, abundance and modernity were, and still are, notions that must be verified to be able to believe in their existence. For many years, the only way to do so was to migrate. Albanians could not travel freely until up to 2010 when visa liberalisation gave them the possibility to travel in the EU without the need to ask for a visa.

“Old mentality” is another of those frequent expressions people can hear in Albania as well as “this country will never become... (a decent place to live in)”. If you are an Albanian like me, those assumptions have been a mantra for the last decades, “The Answer!” to any questioning about why things are not working for the better. Those have undoubtedly shaped Albanians vision of themselves and their future. Indeed, many aspects of today’s Albanian society can be understood if seen through the lenses of this phrase. My family and I used to think the same 25 years ago before migrating to Italy. Yet, life conditions have changed significantly since then and it fascinates me how my view of Albania is so different from the narratives I continue to hear every day, no matter if I am in Albania listening to a friend in a café or abroad sharing my thoughts with other Albanian migrants like me. “Abroad”, “old mentality” and “this country will never become...” can be used as stereotypes while analysing the migration pattern and might partly explain why the phenomenon is reproduced. This lack of the “methods of reasoning” (Garfinkel, 1967) is shared and found in Albania, both as a communist legacy and because of brain drain.

Language is therefore used to analyse how identity is built among young people in rural Albania. As identity is not only something we have but we also build it as an individual response to the society we live in (Frykman & Gilje, 2003 p. 9). If we think as Bourdieu that “certain things become meaningful for people with certain experiences” (ibid, p. 38) it is important to see how the experiences of different actors (parents, migrants, social media) influence young Albanians today. For instance, this is how society is portrayed by Ann, 26-year-old, American citizen working on rural development in the Municipality of Përmet for the USA Development Fund:

“There is a culture of pessimism and passivity here in Albania. Youth hear from their parents, teachers, and other sources that there are no opportunities here that they need to focus on going abroad. The elders are giving them one message that is very difficult for youth to fight back as young people are strongly influenced by their family and community”

It can be argued that many notions and new words, pertaining to the modern world Albanian people supposedly stepped into after the regime, are still unclear to many. For instance, “democracy” is largely understood as the opposite to “dictatorship”, while “freedom” is mainly used as contrary to “oppression”. If concepts, language, and experience are clear to everyone regarding dictatorship, the inexperience of democracy leads everyone to lend a different and very personal interpretation to what democracy entails. An example could be the fact that today for many people it is common to identify the Democratic Party with democracy and the Socialist Party with the previous communist regime, although both parties operate within a democratic system.

It is common for new or ‘foreign’ terms to be introduced in a language as a specific terminology; however, most of this terminology is connected to objects and functions, not to ideas or philosophies. Ideas are usually shaped by the reality that created them and although they need to be understood and integrated in thoughts and concepts, it is easier to do so if sharing the same reality that helped create them. According to Peter Winch (1958) “social life is constituted by language: as everything is filtered by language, so do the different concepts” (Winch, 1958). In Albania concepts like democracy or freedom are not a product of its social evolution. They are rather external and imported concepts that society wants to use to create a new reality which differs from the one they have experienced. Developing tools for understanding and integrating those concepts into, for instance, education create the prerequisites for new generations in Albania, to understand new terms and their relative meanings not shared before and not fully integrated in society. Without a clear language those concepts, even though existent in the society and expressed with words, cannot become part of the society itself without the right explanations and examples. Not creating ways of integrating and interpreting new terms into the Albanian language is therefore not to be considered only as a linguistic problem. Those concepts were pointed out in various ways mainly by return migrants and foreign actors working on rural development in Albania. Those discourses were mainly linked to education in rural areas but were also referred to the Albanian educational system in general. The disruptive effects of a “new” language combined with an old educational system are even more emphasized in rural areas, where the ability to critically assess those changes (or notice them) goes hand in hand with lower educational levels.

According to Fairclough (2001) language is not only used to interpret the reality, but also to define people and their actions. Language is also a crucial part of the symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1992) that occurs when the right words are spoken in the right context and from a source authorized from the listeners to express opinions (Lovell, 2003). This could be related, for instance, to the language used in the Albanian society to describe young generations as lazy, envious, and lacking a work culture. The view of youngster's habit to often spend their days in cafes instead of engaging in any other occupation is therefore only perceived to be their "fault" instead of looking at the broader picture on why this happens and the society's own responsibilities regarding this phenomenon. Here is one of the many examples of how people would generally portray Albanian youth:

"Who wants to work, can find something. Most people are lazy, and they just stay at the bar all day long."

Alessandro, 43-year-old, head coordinator for the Italian Development Fund on rural projects in Përmet

While young people would see staying in a café for hours as socialisation and a way to escape the misery of a life with very few choices, older generations would label this as a poor habit. Cultural or other initiatives are especially rare in rural areas where apart from agriculture there is not much more to do. Local businesspeople may express that in the following ways:

"Here people lack work culture and are not used to different speed of work. During summer it is hard for them to keep up with the high tourist flow... Another thing is the envy. If you engage an electrician for a job today and need another thing done in one week and he is busy, the other electrician will not come even though they are free because they would say: "well, you did not engage me the other time". So, you must wait for the one who worked for you to be free to get the job done. And this is counter-productive for everyone."

Agron, 40-year-old, returned migrant and hotel owner in Përmet

"I have worked and organised on my own expenses many youth activities, but people would talk and judge me therefore I stopped. I don't like to hear bad things about myself while I am doing what I can for the future of their children."

Yllka, 29-year-old, Project manager of EU-funded rural projects in Përmet

"Youth mostly don't know what they want. There are no people to help with project and new jobs connected with planning and thinking on a larger scale. Cooperation between youth is difficult. Local jobs are ok, but they cannot compare

with the opportunities given from other states. If no money comes from abroad here, there is no hope for domestic investments.”

Frederik, 29-year-old, municipality representative in Malësi e Madhe (Hani i Hotit)

Discourses around younger generation’s inability to cooperate or work hard, have also shaped a mentality young people feel hard to contest or fight against in a context where shortage in job opportunities is real. Finding themselves in this situation, young adults see migration not only as a way out of an unbearable situation but also to set free from those connotations. To prove, in a way, that it is the societies’ fault why they don’t engage in rural and agricultural activities in a situation where insecure and low incomes are often associated with generally absent health or social protection. Migration, in this context represents not only better life options but also a need for social and economic independence that would provide safety not only to migrants but also to their families, if in need. The decision to migrate, although representing many sacrifices and risks is, for many, better than the insecurity of rural labour in Albania where “three out of four working youth are in vulnerable employment as own-account workers or contributing family workers, predominantly in the agricultural sectors” (ILO, 2015a; AfDB, 2012). Studies show that “unemployment remains one of the main reasons for migration and especially youth migration, where the unemployment rate for the 16-34 age group (including women) is 60% (Economic Commission for Europe, 2002, p. 5; Nicholson, 2002, p. 879). In Albania youth suffers the highest rates of unemployment among all age groups (PKVR, 2005-2020, p. 8). Another research published by FES in 2015 suggests that “almost 60% of young Albanians would like to move from the countryside for migrating abroad” (Çela *et al.*, 2015, p. 97). Here what Agron states:

“The reality is that young people have too many costs to face and for young people that would like to build a family they need to go and build something elsewhere. Most of the people think about migration as long term.”

Agron, 40-year-old, returned migrant and hotel-owner in Përmet

The language analysis can be extended to terms like “future” or “work”. Their connotation has also changed with the advent of democracy. While future never related to movement in space in communist Albania, today future is often a compliment to migration. Here is what a teacher would state:

“Migration is the future. There is no future here. They (the government) didn’t make it in 30 years. They will never make it.”

Bardha, 43-year-old teacher from Hani i Hotit

It can perhaps be useful to address the fact that the interpretation of “work” is not related to an activity that, apart from providing an income should bring a purpose: work is only something you do to make money. If it is not enough, better not do it.

It could be argued that youth could engage in education, instead. Yet, according to FAO, rural areas lack special education on rural and agricultural value. At school the curricula are not relevant to rural needs and children are not encouraged to consider agriculture as a future career (FAO *et al.*, 2010). An out of date and structurally unchanged education system, seem not to provide better employment opportunities. Moreover, most would argue that change cannot happen in the educational system if educators themselves are not provided with new knowledge. Among ordinary rural people solutions are discussed:

“The school here teaches the same things and in the same way as 30 years ago. If education is not changed and enhanced there will be not a lot to hope for in the future.”

Fitim, 30-year-old, seasonal migrant working as a waiter in Përmet

“This mentality can be changed through education. Another system must be built that pushes you not to think to go abroad and look for better opportunities but focus on our country. Myself I think that I am missing credibility on the Albanian educational system and then working opportunities once I have finished my studies. That's why I wish to study abroad.”

Gëzim, 16-year-old, student in Përmet

“In Albania a culture of young professional development is definitively missing. It is difficult for young people to imagine a future here. There is a need for a culture that supports internships, mentorships, or part time job opportunities during high school.”

Ann, 26-year-old, American citizen working on rural development in the Municipality of Përmet for the USA Development Fund

To this, a feeling that abroad people work not only because they are better paid but also because they are controlled, adds to the picture.

“Abroad Albanians work because they are controlled. Here, in their own country they are overwhelmed by negativity, inertia, and laziness.”

Yllka, 29-year-old, Project manager of EU-funded rural projects in Përmet

Finding themselves in a difficult position where the reality in which they live is described as hopeless and they as lazy, many young Albanians see the opportunity

to migrate as an individual choice to show their worth and find an occupation that would show others that they can be better and successful if provided with a better context. Migration would give young adults more than the possibility to be economically independent, it would also “enable them to feel empowered and part of a society where, because of their contribution, their voices can be heard, and their actions seen” (Mece, 2016). In a way, migration provides a sort of coming of age, especially for young men that cannot feel or see themselves as perceived as fully adults as long as they depend only on resources that are not their own, like other family member’s income or sporadic remittances coming from the diaspora. Although many see the impact migration has in the community its result is largely seen as the society’s own fault. The concept that they themselves constitute the society, is not present like in Lara’s own words, a 14-year-old student in Përmet:

“I will go abroad to study and work. With time there will be less and less people living in my village but what to do? I would rather stay but the Albanian society gives no better choices. We cannot do much to change this situation. Maybe it will change in the future, but I don’t want to spend my life waiting for it to happen.”

Moreover, the generally accepted habit of migrating is felt as a justification to continuing the pattern.

“I would go abroad if I could have the opportunity as everyone is leaving and maybe for a better life.”

Durim, a 13-year-old student in Hani i Hotit

5.2 The society

5.2.1 The elderly

The Albanian society confers a strategic role to social relations and especially to family and kinship.

“I learned that family here in Albania has a different connotation than in western Europe. In Albania the family is very powerful and influential.”

Giovanni, 62-year-old working as head of the Italian Rural Development Fund in Malësi e Madhe (Hani i Hotit)

It is therefore important to take a closer look at the vision the elderly have of the reality they live in and the future they want for their children. When talking about the situation in Albania, older people lack hope and trust in the fact that it will change, at least in the near future. Those discourses can be related to Habermas’s

concept of lifeworld as “a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns” (Habermas, 1984). Such discourses are difficult to challenge for young people as today, after more than three decades of democracy and transition, hope and trust are still missing in the Albanian society. Unemployment and corruption continue to be at high levels while the condition that the state would provide jobs and institutions to fight corruption is not there as it was during communism. Migration in this case is placed as a good alternative, if not the only one. It can be argued that, in the specific case of Albanians, especially the older generation, the persuasion factor that somehow fills the gap between implicit assumptions of the discourse on migration as the best option could be seen as a way of coping with their interpretation of this sort of propaganda about how smooth and organized things are abroad. Although not the same as during communism, relying on what propaganda depicts is something they are very familiar with. Migration is also largely seen as a family choice, a long-term investment and income diversification (Stark and Levhari, 1982; Stark and Bloom 1985, see McCathy, 2009). The difficulty to see a stable future in rural areas push families to an increasing investment in children’s higher education in the hope of sparing them a hard and insecure life based on subsistence farming and sporadic income. Similar is the case of rural entrepreneurs that need to face the official requirements for a loan or try to apply for a governmental subsidy scheme, previously mentioned on farmers dealing with bureaucracy. The lack of knowledge of the language and practices, let alone the use of the Internet or access to a computer, create unbalanced power structures that leave behind a large portion of farmers, probably the ones most in need for support. This relates to what Bourdieu (1992) considers as symbolic or social capitals such as people’s ability to understand or access a certain network to receive certain benefits. The same could be said about corruption, as the general perception among people is that only those ‘chosen’ or with good connections will access resources. The government is therefore held responsible for keeping the system as it is mainly through not reinforcing state institutions like education and justice. The “driving class” in their eyes is either not able (as they too, did not have the possibility to learn under the communist regime), or unwilling (because they most likely are only interested in their own personal gain rather than the wellbeing of the population as a whole). Here is what Urim states:

“Bad politics is the worst thing in Albania. The society cannot do anything if politics don't change. The thing is that politics have created this idea that elsewhere is better and easier. It is a distorted vision.”

Urim, 67-year-old, retired basketball coach volunteering in Përmet

5.3 Migrants' tale (migration as an ideology)

The diaspora plays an important role in the country's economy, recently officially recognized by the Albanian government in creating in 2018 a National Strategy of Diaspora and Action Plan (AKD). Apart from trying to attract investments in Albania, AKD together with the Albanian Development Fund of the Diaspora (FShZh), also aim to generate concrete projects with special focus on the improvement of life conditions in Albania mainly in educational, health and rural development issues. This is thought to both reduce out-migration and attract migrants that would like to return.

Yet, the Albanian diaspora plays a pivotal role in shaping a discourse about life abroad that deeply impacts people living in Albania. Their tales and display of wealth when visiting in Albania have influenced many, including me and my family, to migrate. Such a narrative that continues up to today is intrinsically connected to what is regarded as "truth" where the real power behind this truth is held by narratives of migrants themselves (life is much better abroad), the elder generation (this country will never become a place worth living in) and the social media (that portray an unrealistic wealthy and happy life abroad). As such, those sources dominate the discourses on migration and hold a great power especially towards young people's choice to migrate. Just like in Fairclough's words, "most people, most of the times are unaware that their thinking has been shaped by particular discourses" (see Inglis, 2012) fieldwork interviews also confirmed the perception of "fight for justice and for honour within the system, which is controlled by nepotism and corruption, is felt to be impossible" (Mema *et al*, 2019 cit. Imelda Poole, p. 7).

Thus, the diaspora plays an important role - akin to that of the government - in reinforcing discourses on migration, because of their large economic means but also of their worldly-wise experience "abroad". The hidden symbolic power of their discourse about life outside Albania establishes and keeps fuelling what Fairclough explains as the "reproduction of social structures" (Fairclough, 2001). In Albania those narratives with their implications are difficult to eradicate and even more difficult it is to change the shared understanding and perception of the "impossible to make" Albanian democracy, heard as a mantra from everyone. Yet, the power to create certain discourses, for instance those of life abroad, is restricted to those who have experienced such life. This disables the possibilities of people living in Albania to contradict a discourse they have no knowledge of and therefore no power to influence. In this case the democracy according to Foucault should work in "ensuring that the people who are governed have the possibility of transforming the conditions under which they must live" (Barker, 1998, p. 44), rather than under the control of those who generate it (Foucault, 2000, p. 131), such as the diaspora, or the media. This was described by Fairclough as "ideological power: the power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense'" (Fairclough, 2001, p.27).

The level of underdevelopment and the feeling of the “lost time” diffused among the Albanian population, have created a sort of excuse for criminal and illegal actions. Those, bring wealth to some while, on the other hand, push many others to leave. Dishonesty and crime are not only common as the governmental structures seem to be unable to repress them but also because the widespread corruption in governmental institutions is somehow largely expected and accepted. Forms of local mafia are seen as normal and inevitable solutions of the severe lack of job opportunities and the rule of law.

“Here youth want the best of the best (Mercedes car, the last iPhone, etc) at the same time when they don't work. They just spend time at the bar. Those people are the worst of the society but what they do is show everyone that drug dealers have the coolest job. You earn money, you never get caught, you are very rich, and you do nothing all day long. Everyone respects you and you fear no law, no state, no police. Those people have the power, and this is showing everyone that there is no space for legality and no perspective for good people here.”

Dashmir, 37-year-old, visiting migrant in Hani I Hotit

In a way, migration is felt as an escape, a form of alienation from the past, a sort of redemption from lost possibilities and time. Migration seemingly offers new and endless opportunities as “people’s aspirations are modulated within their 'opportunity space', giving rise to expectations that reflect what is possible within their geographical, socio-economic and policy context, and given their own qualities and characteristics; people are rational agents, making sense of their own realities in line with their desires and ambitions” (Mece, 2016 p. 341-342).

For instance, when Sabri, a 38-year-old US visiting migrant in Hani i Hotit states: *“I would never come back to this country. There is too much corruption and illegality running free. The mentality here will never change!”* - he fuels the already existing image Albanians have of their home country. Reinforced nonetheless by a feeling of how much needs to be done and how long it would take to change the circumstances they live in. In this situation, a vicious circle is created between the idea that migration is an individual choice caused by a collective neglect and the collective responsibility that does not act towards improving the situation. While, on the other hand, those ‘individual’ migrating choices impact the collective consciousness and actions to do even less, as people would migrate anyway. The same could be said about the discourses that underrate the importance of successful realities by interpreting their success as somehow justified by chance (personal connections) or corruption (they had money in the first place to be able to access and corrupt the system itself).

It could be argued that this approach could eventually change only when part of the Albanian society will have the power of knowledge to critically think about the

discourses and ideologies and consequentially produce hope. Perhaps this could be possible when migrants will no longer sustain the “miracle of the western world” as many others will have been able to see it themselves or because of the shift in discourse brought by returnees.

5.4 Remittances

Research about remittances and their extent states that “in the mid-1990 over half of the migrants' earnings were sent back to Albania” and that they have so far not only exceeded the values of exports but also the foreign aid (Kule *et al.*, 2002, see Nicholson, 2004, p. 879). Yet, many would argue that, if from one side those remittances have been vital to the Albanian economy, they also might have increased the inequalities and although they have raised the overall consumption, they can be considered wasted instead of invested (King, 2005). Interesting is the fact that in rural areas remittances appear to decrease farming investment and/or its efficiency. A study on remittances to rural households showed how those remittances not only were not invested in agricultural activities but also tended to divert resources away from rural areas (Germenji and Swinnen, 2004; King, 2005). Evidence of this was indeed found in my own fieldwork where migrants, local organisations and elders seemed to perceive remittances as generators of negative effects among Albanian youth. According to the informants apparently “easy and not substantial money” would only encourage youngsters to leave to be able to make the money themselves and not to look as “beggars waiting for crumbs”. Yet, if any would invest the money, it would hardly finance any agricultural businesses where investment risks are perceived to be higher.

The low incomes generated by agriculture and the difficulties in investing and having a return in the field seem to be the main causes for this. In this sense, migration is “used as a pathway out of agriculture” (McCarthy *et al.*, 2009; Miluka *et al.*, 2010). This means that money coming from relatives living abroad is crucial for rural households in difficult times and serves as a safety net as “relatively few rural families depend only on agricultural income” (McCarthy *et al.*, 2010). But if remittances are vital to survival, they also have negative impacts on youth. A sense of easy, fast, and big money abroad allure youth towards an apparently easier life and draw them back from engaging in changing the reality they live in rural Albania (Lipton, 1980; McCathy, 2009). But although the total amount of remittances over years might seem high, their sporadic nature cannot compare to a steady income. Often, this money is used to buy objects or fulfil social needs like weddings, funerals, etc. Sometimes remittances are used to make small investments like buying a car or a van to start a small business but rarely invested in bigger business projects that would often require deeper knowledge in business management and larger future investments.

Migrants, on the other hand, seeing the political attitude have lost hope in Albanian future and continue to help others join them in migration as in the words of Ndriçim, 28-year-old, dairy entrepreneur in Hani i Hotit:

“...others that are not migrating or cannot and are supported financially by their relatives abroad with money that stops them from looking for a job here. This is very sad and dangerous as there are people that are over 30 and they have never really worked in their lives.”

While it can be argued that migrants portray a realistic vision of the world outside Albania, it nevertheless builds a discourse hard to challenge by those Albanians who have not experienced migration and feel powerless in changing their reality in Albania.

Most Albanians find it hard to accept to be seen as victims. This generates, amongst other things, for migrants to avoid complaining about the difficult situation and hard life abroad. This is also a way for not blaming anyone for the decision to migrate (maybe not to put in a bad position the people who lied about the job and life possibilities abroad) but also to fight the “uselessness” and often unbearable heartache of people who stay back in Albania. At the beginning of the ‘90s when the “exodus” phenomenon was at its peak, people would migrate also to support their families. Those migrants could not afford to complain. They had to fight hard and provide all their support to their families. It is therefore important to highlight that the informants willing to migrate had mostly a positive view on migration while the difficulties of such a choice were less evident. As in the following case:

“When it rains here young people say they are bored, yet, in Albania it hardly rains for longer periods and sun is always back in a few days. Those people that complain about the rain here have no idea how it is to live in Denver (USA) where you must live with rain and grey days for half a year.”

A 32-year-old migrant living in Greece and visiting his family in Përmet, discussing on public transport.

Yet, positive change can be seen. Many migrants have chosen to return to Albania and a good part of them have now established successful businesses and with their knowledge and experience are slowly changing the society’s perception of their own reality and worth. Although the general assumption about returnees is that: *“they have been sent back”* or *“were forced to return”* and the perception is that *“return migrants don't influence the youth”*, returnees nevertheless force people to see opportunities around them. If, it is true that young people lack the possibility to access or achieve an economic level to feel able to invest, as return migrants do, their presence nevertheless shows that *“they who have seen the world*

and know” have also seen advantages in returning. The reasons why people return and the challenges they face together with the change they want to be part of is another discourse that will need further investigation. Not only that but I would also argue that more focus on returnees’ needs would be more beneficial than working on diaspora collaboration. This because returnees show a genuine interest in engaging not only economically in Albania but also socially by returning and bringing back know-how while the larger diaspora that the plan aims to reach, are generally migrants that have established their lives abroad and might eventually invest in Albania but would hardly return for good.

5.5 Governance and trust

One of the pillars of democracy is freedom. By freedom I mean not only at an individual level but also freedom to act and change structures that don’t fit one’s needs. If, for many that lived most of their lives in communist Albania, freedom would often relate to the individual freedom of speech or act, another step needs to be taken to make part of the Albanian population believe that they have the power to change the structures that govern them. Political engagement is crucial in implementing structural changes to democratic societies while institutions are there to guide and regulate changes society wants and needs. Those structures can be individual constraints, social, economic or political. I analyse the concept of democratic participation in rural Albania to understand the change people want to see and their engagement in building this change as a potential remedy for out-migration.

Older generations have difficulties to see how dialogue and participatory action could change the Albanian society. For them, institutions have no power to influence the governing practices and therefore it is useless to try to change them. To put it in their words: “*Changes come only from above*”. If we consider how language is built in relation to society’s background, the same language shapes the way people think in the present in a sort of “social contract and construct” as mentioned by Fairclough (2001). Talking to a previously elected governmental representative in Hani i Hotit, it was evident from his discourse that he had no power to change anything locally. People often argue that if the state provides freedom and an open market it should also provide guidance and clarity about how to navigate those concepts and structures. As Williamson framed it, “institutions must be understood by the people involved and must be enforced by them” (Williamson, 2000). As “institutions structure social interactions” (Hodgson, 2006) trust and understanding of those institutions is fundamental in a changing process especially a radical one that happened in Albania. Blaming the state for not providing those tools reinforces their scepticism. They think transition into democracy was too quick and this, for many, translated into insecurities of being

left on their own. The society and state institutions became, and continue to be felt as such, dismantled and substituted by the individual that alone must navigate a system they were not used to neither prepared for. In a sense, it can be argued that even given the possibility to build and be ruled by democratic institutions, the society will still struggle if a guidance to understanding those new institutions and the resulting freedoms and responsibilities is lacking. Similar to what Louis Pasteur's referred to as "change only favours the prepared mind" it can be argued that although Albanians longed for a democratic and capitalistic state, the society missed (and some would insist, still does) the tools to fully understand and function in such a society.

Historically trust among Albanians has been family or tribal related. Trust in government and institutions could not be present during centuries of occupation. During the communist regime part of the trust was somehow restored but as personal security was threatened the notion of trust was somehow distorted. It can be argued that trust in Albania was built, for most of the time around one person, the dictator Enver Hoxha. Yet, the Communist Party was trusted but only because it was, he that lead it. With the political change into a democratic society, people continue to see the prime minister or the president of the nation as the one they should rely on and the one who can do something rather than relying on different institutions that should function independently from the government. This perception was often pointed out by migrants and returned migrants when asked why things don't change in the rural society.

According to the document released from the Albanian government on the "National Youth Action Plan 2015-2020" (Plani Kombëtar i Veprimit për Rininë – PKVR 2015-2020), it is clearly underlined how youth policy and involvement has not been a priority for the Albanian government in the last 25 years, therefore a strong need for action towards this very important and contingent population group needed to be finally taken (PKVR 2015-2020). The national plan's main objectives are to increase the participation of youth in decision making and volunteering, employment schemes, safeguarding youth's health, education, and social protection as well as the creation of a youth organisation. The power of people to govern themselves and take part in the solutions is lacking in most conversations. "*People want change, but they are not willing to change*" points out Ann, 26-year-old, American citizen working on rural development in the Municipality of Përmet for the USA Development Fund.

The lack of political culture and a functional democracy is felt as a difficult step to overcome mainly because the tools to auto-govern are missing in the educational system and further in the impossibility to act freely upon property. From my fieldwork, my research and my personal experience as an Albanian citizen, the government seems not to provide the tools for a more participatory citizenship.

Although projects are apparently there, it is often hard to understand and to unravel the requirements to apply.

During communism there was no power flowing from the masses towards the government, although theoretically this should have been its core. Today in Albania, people have the possibility to engage in politics and governance. It is however not an easy task to perform. The power although embedded in knowledge as Bourdieu argues (1992) needs also to be sustained by constructive and determined visions of change, for instance, that are not intrinsically embedded in knowledge but tools that ought to be learned, practiced and put to work effectively to be trusted and enter the social norm. As a matter of fact, the way people believe they should be governed is both shaped by the way they are taught, and inevitably shapes the way they expect to be governed. While not difficult to imagine and longed for during the dictatorship, those beliefs and thoughts, are almost impossible to be produced or shared in the same way by people that could only dream about them in isolation. Practices of shared and respectful democracy need to be taught and, in a population, where schools and society are shaped in a certain way it is difficult to imagine where those concepts could be exercised. Starting from the fact that the Albanian society relied on state decisions for almost every matter of their lives, it is interesting to see where and how new generations can build a critical way of political participation.

Corruption is very present in people's discourses when talking about the Albanian society and it is strongly linked to a spread distrust in others and institutions. More generally, it can be argued that corruption drives out-migration as much as economic reasons do. For instance, when Dashamir, 41-year-old, visiting migrant from Hani i Hotit states:

“First of all, I left because here the law and the rules are not equal for everyone. For instance, on the road at a stop sign everyone should stop. Here in Albania, the police that should teach the law and make people follow the example, pass without problems showing that power and position can overthrow the law. Therefore, you have this feeling of not being equal and that corruption is everywhere, and you cannot fight it.”

Or in the argumentation given to me by a young man on his way to migrate to Greece on a minivan:

“I am done with staying in this country! Here you can be fired only because the opposite party wins the elections, and they want to place their own people in your position. You have no rights. You cannot live a normal life where you fear to be fired every four years (every new election) with no reason.”

The bias taught by the communist system where the central government was responsible for everything and there was no room for self-governance seems hard to overcome. Moreover, it points out the general lack of knowledge and education regarding governance and more specifically, “how to be governed” as stated by Foucault (1976). For instance, the way most Albanian people expect to be governed is by demanding the state to create jobs and take care of their needs, as during communism. The centralized political power seems not to give real agency to local administration or if so, many have the perception that only the prime minister and the central government can make things happen. “*Only the state can create jobs*” states Klaudia, a 17-year-old from Hani I Hotit. This seems to demoralise local action and increases the feeling of abandonment by institutions especially in the north where people feel not taken into consideration and openly mocked:

“One of the ministers have said directly to my son, while working together, that he would never come to Hani I Hotit as there are only donkeys living there. There is nothing to do locally. Only the prime minister decides everything. He is the crucial person that can change everything.”

A 68-year-old, ex-rural governmental representative and decision-maker in Hani i Hotit.

This could be interpreted as the “property of reflexivity” that Garfinkel and Heritage (1984) describe as the action understood through interaction: acting in a certain way may result in no outcome (dismissal) or, worse, in a negative one (disparaging comments, mockery). While talking about morality, according to Parson (1970) as a necessary precondition of social order” it reflects his concept of “trust as a control mechanism, emanating from social norms and personal relations,” (Parson, 1970 see Misztal, 1992). It could be argued that, as the Albanian society was forced to abolish religion during the last period of the communist regime, it could have somehow weakened people’s ability to trust or to consider morality at a more individual level rather than a façade. Religion as a form of governance of self could be thought of as a first step towards seeing the society as more genuine and drive people towards a more positive and altruistic approach. Yet, from my fieldwork and experience I would argue that this approach is far from being relevant in Albania. Freedom of faith in the last decades of democracy seem not to have been able to rise the ability of trust, morality or self-governance outside the religious sphere. On the contrary, often religious institutions are perceived as structures that provide income and opportunities rather than spiritual growth. Here is what an informant would state:

“I know young girls that would accept to ‘become’ Muslim and cover themselves while going at the university. They get two or three hundred euros per month to do

that. Of course they do it. They want to finish their studies, and that money is very useful. What they really think of the religion is not the point. The point is to get the money to get an education and then who knows?"

Anisa, a young woman from Tirana would say on the minibus going to Përmet

Other people in the minivan agreed and even pointed out that they also knew other cases where the catholic church would provide interesting internships for young devotees abroad. Those practices, although seemingly fully understood to be obvious for informants not only provide no real help in forming a genuine trust but undermine people's ability to be part of community where they relate to each other without coercion from the state (during communism) or religion (today).

Questioning or trusting and seeing a higher value in what is done (i.e. work not only as a mean to make money) was something hard to find in my informants' discourses. The same could be said about constructive discourses and actions to change institutions that were totally lacking. This was obvious during the interviews and the focus groups where young people would not question their choices on political matters but rather follow in the steps of their family's voting decisions mainly connected to concrete personal and immediate advantage (e.g. the lure of a job in the administration when the party of choice wins). When asked about elections and if they looked at each party's plan for youth in focus groups no one could answer. They seemed surprised about the fact that a party might even have a specific plan for youth. This linked directly to how poor education on democracy and its structures influences people's perception on how to be governed as "institutions must be understood by the people involved and must be enforced by them" (Williamson, 2000).

If we think about the purpose of as that of ensuring that people who are administered and governed have the possibility of transforming the conditions under which they must live (Barker, 1998, p. 43-44), the evidence is that Albanian democratic governments during the last decades have hardly put any focus on teaching people about those pillars of democracy. This also means that people that would like the state to provide freedom, find it hard to manage potential failures and inevitably retaliate blaming the state for not providing the tools to navigate a free market. As "institutions structure social interactions" (Hodgson, 2006) trust and understanding of those institutions is fundamental in a changing process especially a radical one that happened in Albania. "The antithesis of trust is thus a state of mind which could best be summed up as existential angst and dread" (Giddens ,1990 p.100).

In rural areas the use of power and power relations between generations and migrants play a crucial role in building a discourse on backwardness that seem to drive youngsters and their attention towards escaping a reality described to them as

hopeless as in stories like this one, heard from Dashamir, 37-year-old, visiting migrant in Hani I Hotit:

“In Albania there is no civic sense. For instance, if you go into an office to ask for some papers, they don't even think that they are there to attend. They don't even say hello to you. What they say directly is: “What do you want?”. When I ask why they act like this, they answer: “Because here people need to be treated like this”. Or they say: “We have a very low wage”. When I travel back to USA at the airport, the police that checks my passport, looks at me and says to me: “Hello, sir, welcome home”. I come here in Albania and the first thing I hear is: “Where are you flying from? How long are you staying here?”

The question is therefore how to produce new social norms and institutions that are not a product of that past people would like to not continue reproducing. Informants' difficulty of trusting governmental institutions felt tangible as they perceive it as reproducing the same structures without new knowledge and with an old ideology that is hard to change from within. Because social norms and institutions depend on their reproduction (Butler, 1997 see Lovell, 2003), the fall of communism is not to be considered only a matter of government. It can rather be seen as a conflict between wanting a capitalistic society and seeing how the actual presence of the communist regime, inculcated for decades and present in every sphere of day-to-day life, is still present and strong. Like in Flora's words, a farmer in Hotovë, a village in Përmet surroundings, who is concerned about the fact that children are not introduced to small works to create interest and cooperation. The general feeling is that certain norms, for instance cooperation, is something to eradicate as it relates to the communist way of living and acting. Something Albanians want to distance themselves from and replace it with individualism, seen as a necessary step towards capitalism. For people who have lived their lives mostly during communism, volunteering is associated with bad memories of people being forced to “volunteer”. Years of forced collaboration and cooperative work during communism has led to a disturbing phenomenon of rejection of all forms of collective work and social engagement. Here is one example:

“There are a lot of national strategies for rural development but there are no local strategies. The central government doesn't know how people live in rural areas. The bottom-up strategies are just words. There is a need of people getting together and without making partnerships among businesses, civil society, and local institutions there are no possibilities for rural development.”

Fitim, 30-year-old, seasonal migrant working as a waiter in Përmet

The same thing could be seen in the political participation of youth in governance and activism. Having spent, if not all, a good part of their lives, in a context where their own interests were left behind for the common interest of society, the Albanian society seem to have developed a sense of repulsion against the idea of personal contribution to the society and its ‘motto’, after the fall of the regime, has become ‘individualism’. Political engagement is consequently often seen as something to avoid. The memory of fear about ‘messing with politics’ during the regime, that could and eventually would, transform into something negative when the Party did not feel you were needed any longer, continues today. While nowadays there is no political persecution, it has translated into fear of getting involved with illegal trafficking and corruption that could lead to intimidations or threats to people involved and their families. “*Do not mess up with politics*” was a mantra heard from many informants in both areas of fieldwork. Political participation was felt as “useless” or even non proper to Anisa, a 17-year-old student from Hani i Hotit:

“Politics? I am not interested as I am young. I think it is important, but I don't have too many interests in that.”

Others would express this as follows:

“We need a change from within. A change from people. The government should not invest in words and formal meetings. People don't need to know that it is bad to throw garbage on the streets and to cut trees. People need to see that the government have put street bins and give people other incomes rather than cutting trees to earn a living.”

Bledi, 23-year-old, farmer and B&B owner in Përmet

Although younger generations have not the same connotation, they are nevertheless influenced by elders who would often prevent them from getting involved in corrupted affairs. Moreover, dealing with politics is largely perceived as a dangerous occupation and not considered to be sufficiently profitable if one does not get involved in illegality.

“A crazy mentality praise those who have big money even though it comes illegally.”

Sabri, 38-year-old immigrant in USA visiting his family in Hani i Hotit

Evidence suggests that lack of political engagement is a consequence of multiple reasons. At a first sight, the portraying of youth as selfish hides a more complex reality where risk, mockery and exploitation are considered to be too much to

contrast the benefits of migration that would provide safety, merit and hopes for the future. Alessandro, 43-year-old, head coordinator for the Italian Development Fund on rural projects in Përmet states:

“For as far as I can tell, political engagement of youth is still at the level of personal interest. If there is something that would directly influence them or their families, people are willing to engage, otherwise, no. This is also a consequence of the fact that public institutions and organisations don't work properly. Those who engage are generally perceived as pursuing their own agenda and not acting for the society. The almost inexistent meritocracy pushes those who do something, to get disappointed in the long run. Of course, there are active peoples, but they are very few considering the whole population. On the other side the state and the institutions are not acting towards reinforcing their credibility so people are not active and believe that things will never change. There is a need to strengthen the idea of the state and to believe in the Albanian state to create a strong civil society that would be able to fight back the diffused corruption for instance.”

The widespread corruption in Albania leads to low levels of political participation (Youth Bank Hub Western Balkan and Turkey, 2016) and so does poor knowledge about political affairs. The two, together with the culturally constructed fear about getting involved in complex and unclear political structures, negatively influence youth's choice to get involved in local governance:

“There is no participation. People don't have the culture to ask for things by actively engaging in politics. Youth don't even know the local government's competences.”

Yllka, 29-year-old, Project manager of EU-funded rural projects in Përmet

Moreover, the feeling of distrust in the state is hard to challenge as direct experience of injustice is often reinforced by, for instance, seeing how elections are unfairly conducted:

“I vote. But our votes are not taken into consideration. They are not right. I have had personal experience in election organisation, and they were not correctly done.”

Eni, 36-year-old farmer and rural development activist from Hotovë, a village surrounding Përmet

6. Concluding remarks

Although this thesis' aim is not to provide suggestions to governance and policy makers, the following concluding observations, built on the empirical material collected from the fieldwork and reporting some of the informant's observations, could suggest steps that could possibly benefit Albanian rural development and reduce outmigration of youth.

Young people living in rural Albania are generally happy with rural life. In contrast to older generations, they do not perceive agriculture and rural businesses as a fallback. Young people involved in this research seem to value social relationships and networks as well as the pristine nature of the Albanian countryside. They seem to also be aware of the fact that migrating would entail sacrifice and challenges as well as take them away from the social and natural environment they appreciate. Hence, many would like to see a more inclusive and dynamic rural life in Albania rather than building a life abroad. Nevertheless, the conditions in which rural areas are found in and the low interest shown by the countries' governance towards rural development drive many towards migration. A better infrastructure as well as access to healthcare and education seem to lead many to start considering staying. Furthermore, the possibility of a simplified legislation regarding land property and accessible and regulated markets as well as subsidized credit could boost farming and agriculture production while at the same time provide job opportunities and reduce outmigration.

Yet, those structural changes are only part of the solution. The social context and collective discourses towards migration would also need to convert into a more positive view of life in Albania. Older generations' perceptions about a better life to be searched abroad and a seemingly helpless future for younger generations in rural Albania where change is seen as impossible overtly influence migration choices among youngsters without genuinely being challenged. A more optimistic perception on rural Albanian future and trust in the possibility that its younger share of the population could implement change would simultaneously bring faith and encourage such actions to take place.

Diffused nepotism and corruption undermine trust among younger generations that feel powerless towards out of date and rigid institutions that do not represent the reality they live in. Still, knowing how governance and institutions work and how to become part in decision making are often blurry or, where clear, discouraged by corruption or negative discourses regarding politics in rural context. This sort of vicious circle is perpetuated and reinforced because of a diffused lack of

cooperation that results in a weak civil society that has difficulties coming together to challenge the system. Actions such as local initiatives involving youth and innovation as well as a more accessible participation in local decision making could give both rural youth and their communities purpose and hope that change is possible. This could be crucial for a sustainable rural development in Albania that would eventually be able to provide a serene and promising environment for today's younger generations and those to come.

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