

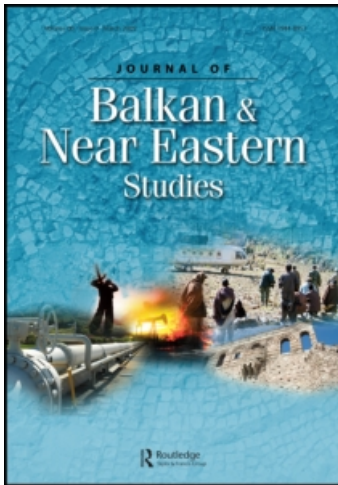
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Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713435906>

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Online Publication Date: 01 August 2005

To cite this Article Pratsinakis, Emmanouil(2005)'Aspirations and strategies of Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki',Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies,7:2,195 — 212

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14613190500133284

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14613190500133284>

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Aspirations and strategies of Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki

EMMANOUIL PRATSINAKIS

Introduction

The bulk of the literature in migration studies is written from a state perspective; very little research positions immigrants centre-stage. When that is the case, it is mostly in relation to the 'natives' or to the 'host society' in general. Probably this lack of research reflects the mainstream perception of migration, which is not in terms of the immigrants themselves, but is concerned with—some might say problematized by—the states involved. In that sense, although migration emblematically stems from immigrants as key actors, their motivations and dreams are commonly overlooked, and their voices silenced.

Furthermore, states set goals, which they attempt to achieve through policies, but rarely are the goals of immigrants taken into consideration. Instead immigrants are depicted in abstract, general terms; they are grouped into homogenous categories, far removed from any notion of immigrants' subjective goals and dreams. This definitely applies to the Greek context. The immigration policies of Greece are such that, not only are the aspirations of migrants ignored, but also their very real contribution to the country is not acknowledged. This perspective is also reflected in academia, where relevant literature fails to pose questions concerning migrants' initial and current aspirations.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of migrants' aspirations and strategies. The term *aspirations* refers to immigrants' wishes and goals, whereas *strategies* are the practices that they undertake to realize those wishes, but also to cope with everyday hardships. My focus will be on Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki. I seek to narrate the aspirations of Albanian migrants in Greece and the practices they pursue to materialize them, as well as to trace how these are reconsidered and negotiated through time. What were the pre-migration aspirations, initial expectations and motivations of Albanian immigrants in Greece? What strategies did they pursue, and under the influence of which factors? How did their strategies and aspirations develop through the passing of time and circumstance? How do immigrants evaluate their decision to migrate to Greece and how do they view their stay in the country? Is it conceptualized as a temporary move or as permanent residence? What are their plans for the future and an eventual return to Albania?

In my analysis, I acknowledge migration as an instrumental behaviour, as a strategy towards the materialization of aspirations. In that sense immigrants are heterogeneous subjects responding to different aspirations. Yet immigration is a major change that transgresses all aspects of the life-course and therefore

migrants' strategies are not mutually bound by their aspirations; immigrants who are constrained by severe hardships in the 'host' country have to undertake certain practices that are not directly connected to their aspirations, so as to cope with their new life circumstances.

Migrants' strategies and aspirations form in relation to space and time, in response to the effects of intervening obstacles and opportunities, social constraints, fluid changes in the life-course and unforeseeable consequences of the migration project. The scope of the research, then, is to discern and examine the formation and reformation of Albanian immigrants' aspirations and strategies by focusing on the interplay between their individual characteristics, personal migration experiences, and the structural constraints and opportunities that appear in specific space-time conditions.

The research was carried out during May and June 2004. The main methodological tool I used was narrative, open interviews. I sought information about five different phases of my interviewees' life-course: their pre-migration life, decision to migrate and the migration process, their first experiences in Greece, subsequent changes in the course of their post-migration lives, and finally their current life conditions and views on the future. I carried out 15 interviews with Albanian immigrants living and working in Thessaloniki. Almost all were conducted in the home of the informants. Twelve of the interviews were one-on-one, but two were with couples and one with four roommates. Aiming to achieve diversity in my sample, I avoided being restricted to one closed network by having three different entry points: my neighbourhood, an Albanian association and acquaintances of my friends and relatives. However, I make no claims that my survey is representative of the general Albanian immigrant population in Greece—it is too small a sample for such a generalization. I view my informants' life stories as unique entities, and aim to discern common patterns in the way their aspirations and strategies change through time.

My interview sample is comprised of 20 informants. Seven are women and 13 men. Four are aged from 20 to 29 years, seven between 30 and 39, seven between 40 and 49, and two are over 50. Only two are single. Of those married, only two are living in Greece separately from their families. Nine of them are Christian Orthodox and six are Muslim; the rest are not religious. The majority of them are from southern Albania and five of them profess ethnic-Greek origin. Eight of my informants immigrated before 1995, and 12 between 1996 and 1997.

The findings of the research are analysed in historical sequence and presented in four sections that describe four different phases, as far as their migration aspirations and strategies are concerned. The first phase refers to pre-immigration aspirations; the second to 'survival' strategies adopted during the first immigration years; the third to the reconsideration of aspirations and the strategies of renegotiation; and the final to the assessment of the present situation and future intentions and expectations. This sequence is sensitive to the changing dynamics of migrants' aspirations and strategies. Furthermore, it follows the way immigrants speak about the topic. However, this does not imply that all immigrants follow the same 'path of aspirations', from initial intention through reconsideration towards the final crystallization of goals and plans. On the contrary, some immigrants skip some phases, and others get stuck in a particular one. For instance, some immigrants have set aspirations from the beginning,

which they do not reconsider over time, while others constantly change their aspirations in the face of opportunities or constraints. The same holds in regard to their strategies; although in the beginning my informants mostly adopted 'survival' strategies to cope with extreme hardships, this does not mean that they had no opportunity to undertake purposive action. Moreover, the fact that in time they managed to renegotiate their position and turn more actively towards the materialization of their aspiration does not mean that 'survival' strategies are abandoned altogether.

Pre-immigration aspirations

The mostly young and male pioneer immigrants, who migrated shortly after the political transformation of the country, described Albania's social environment as one where emigration was extremely widespread. In many cases, emigration was represented as the only solution to a situation of economic desperation and an escape from poverty.

For these early pioneers, aspirations were initially uncertain—understandable given the socio-economic situation of Albania during this period, the migrants' lack of information about foreign destinations, and the fact that they were emigrating illegally. None of my informants who left shortly after the collapse of the regime had clear plans, beyond vague expectations such as 'to start a better life' or 'to save some money'. Their only wish was to leave the country; that was their first and most important plan. However, the majority said that they expected their stay in Greece would only last for a limited period of time.

Albanian migrants of Greek descent expressed somewhat different aspirations compared to those felt by migrants of 'true' Albanian descent. Such differences, which mark an analytical distinction between the two groups, seem to be related to two reasons. One is the fact that ethnic-Greek Albanians could more easily migrate to Greece and acquire a more favourable immigration status (but without full citizenship); the other is that Greece was a more familiar destination for them. However, the difference between them and Albanian immigrants was not in terms of the intended stay in Greece. Contrary to what Lazaridis postulates,¹ my findings do not support the hypothesis that 'true' Albanians came with a sojourning aspiration and that Greek-Albanians immigrated intending to settle permanently in the country. The picture was much more nuanced and the aspiration appeared to be influenced by the idiosyncrasy of the migrant rather than by their ethnic descent. However, what did appear to be different was that Albanians of Greek descent were more likely to emigrate with somewhat more specific aspirations, as their immigration project involved much less uncertainty compared to the other Albanians. For example, one immigrant moved to Greece with what I call a permanent lifetime-maximizing aspiration,² mostly for the future welfare of his children. Another

¹G. Lazaridis, 'The helots of the new millennium: ethnic-Greek Albanians and "other" Albanians in Greece', in F. Anthias and G. Lazaridis (eds), *Into the Margins: Migration and Exclusion in Southern Europe*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, pp. 105–121.

²The term *lifetime-maximizers* refers to those migrants who intend to settle abroad permanently in order to maximize their lifetime attainments in social and economic terms.

migrated with a target-earning aspiration,³ to earn some money to invest back in Albania. This was despite the fact that these ethnic-Greek immigrants had moved to Greece early on, just after the collapse of the communist regime. Their views were in contrast to the vague expectations described by virtually all of my other Albanian informants who had also migrated in the same period.

Whilst the 'first wave' of migrants were embarking, to some extent, on a trip into the unknown, later emigrants—what I call the 'second wave', who left Albania after the mid-1990s—had a greater range of sources of information, including the existence of migrant networks which had been formed in the meantime.⁴ Such networks triggered migratory behaviour for broader segments of the Albanian population, but also left space for clearer expectations and plans. Thus, the dynamics of the migration system between Greece and Albania not only influenced the massive development of migration between the two countries, but also impacted on the pre-migration aspirations and decisions of the migrants. All of my informants who migrated to Greece after 1996 had a close personal contact in Greece. As a result the level of uncertainty in the decision-making could be reduced for them compared to that of the pioneer migrants, and the possibility that they had developed more concrete aspirations about their migration plan was much higher.

Here are a few examples, from my portfolio of interview transcripts, of second-wave migrants who had rather concrete aspirations. The names are fictitious. Mirela immigrated in 1997 at the age of 19 in order to start her career as a violinist and musician. Maria and Arjan immigrated in 1996 with the set idea of staying permanently in Greece in order to 'live in a more democratic country with more opportunities' and for the future of their children. They sold their house in Albania in order to save money for their migration project. Besim came in 1997 just after finishing high school and vocational training so as to earn some money to return and open an electricity supply store. Nikos immigrated in 1997 to earn some money to open a tavern in his hometown. Sonila came in 1996 to Greece to join her husband and to help him return to Albania sooner.

The first immigration period: strategies of 'survival'

Building on the testimonies of my informants, we can appreciate that the life-world of the Albanian immigrants during their first period in Thessaloniki was characterized by social isolation, marginality and vulnerability. Being illegal immigrants and lacking any kind of support, fear and insecurity marked all aspects of their lives. In the light of their first experiences in Greece, my interviewees reassessed their expectations, and realized that in order to survive in such a hostile environment they had to react in a certain way. The strategies that they followed during the first years, which to a large extent entailed

³Target-earners are those who seek to migrate abroad for a limited period in order to achieve a specific goal, such as a sum of money for a particular purpose.

⁴On the concept of migrant networks see M. Boyd, 'Family and personal networks in international migration: recent developments and new agendas', *International Migration Review*, 23(3), 1989, pp. 638–670; D. Massey, 'Social structure, household strategies, and the cumulative causation of migration', *Population Index*, 56(1), 1990, pp. 3–26; G. Malmberg, 'Time and space in international migration', in T. Hammar *et al.* (eds), *International Migration, Immobility and Development*, Berg, Oxford, 1997, pp. 21–48; T. Faist, 'The crucial meso level', in T. Hammar *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 187–218.

tolerance of super-exploitation by local employers, should be understood as 'survival' strategies.

In the dominant host-country discourse there is a commonly held belief that immigrants are fortunate for having escaped from the 'terrible' conditions that prevail in their country, and for living in the 'host' society. Whilst it is true that, especially for the first-wave migrants, the economic and political situation in Albania was pretty desperate, later emigrants departed less tragic conditions. Indeed, some of my interviewees left a relatively good economic and social position in Albania, one that was surely better than the one they encountered during their first period in Greece. Why, then, did these immigrants remain in Greece, despite the fact that their first experiences in Greece did not meet with their expectations? This was for two reasons. First, the migration act entailed a certain social risk, so that to return home quickly would entail being branded a failure by relatives and friends. Secondly, and most importantly, they held to the belief that they could eventually achieve their goals. Here it is crucial to mention that this does not imply that all immigrants remained in Greece. Others tried to migrate onward to other destinations—notably Italy—because they were frustrated by the conditions in Greece.⁵ Others returned swiftly and permanently to Albania, either having changed their minds or due to unfortunate personal experiences. However, as I interviewed only immigrants who remained in Greece, my focus is restricted to the strategies of those who decided (and managed) to remain in the country.

Based on this information, one can discern three categories of immigrants as far as their *pre-immigration aspirations* were concerned: *lifetime-maximizers*, *target-earners* and *seasonal migrants*. To this typology, persons who migrated with only *vague expectations* could also be added, because they developed aspirations upon arrival in Greece, in most cases a target-earning one.

For all categories, the only 'opportunities' in Greece during their first period were connected with the availability of jobs. Despite being marginal, insecure and poorly rewarded, those jobs had much bigger economic returns compared to the wages provided by more skilled and prestigious jobs in Albania. Besides, for the target-earners and the seasonal migrants, remunerative work was the chief objective, whereas for the lifetime-maximizers, it was an essential step towards a better economic situation and the gradual materialization of their aspirations. Unsurprisingly, the first and most important plan for every migrant was to manage to hold on to some savings. This was done both by lowering everyday costs as much as possible and by working long hours and very hard. As Eda said:

I was working every day until late evening in the clothing factory and during the weekends I was cleaning houses. I knew neither what evening nor weekend meant. I had become a robot, a machine to pay everything... Only those who know the life of immigrants can understand this. The rest believe we are just lucky to be in Greece.

Along with hard work, acquiring Greek language skills was critical for survival in the country. Immigrants have to search for work and accommodation

⁵King and Mai found that many of the Albanian immigrants they interviewed in Italy had previously been in Greece. See R. King and N. Mai, 'Albanian immigrants in Lecce and Modena: narratives of rejection, survival and integration', *Population, Space and Place*, 10(6), 2004, pp. 455–477.

by themselves, and cope with everyday situations without any institutional support. This situation differs from that of an earlier generation of European migrations—the ‘guestworker’ programmes of the 1960s and early 1970s which took many Greek migrants to Germany—where bilateral agreements and specific recruitment quotas enabled an easier and more planned ‘integration’ into specific jobs in the destination country, often with accommodation and other services provided. Moreover, the bulk of the jobs offered to immigrants by the guestworker schemes concerned industrial or other manual jobs that did not necessitate language skills, whereas a significant number of jobs reserved for the ‘new immigrants’ in Greece require knowledge of the language. Therefore, the lack of language skills prevented many Albanians from having access to several jobs, rendering them unable to manage and negotiate everyday situations effectively, and depriving them of a sense of confidence and self-worth. Such a situation was only temporary. The impressive ability of Albanians to learn Greek once they are in the country should be understood as driven by their particularly high motivation to do so.⁶ All informants reported learning the language as a primary goal during their settling-in period; virtually all of them were self-taught through television and daily interaction with natives, the latter taking place mainly at work.

As already described, being an illegal immigrant, especially during the first years, entailed living in fear and social isolation. My informants’ avoidance of social interaction with local people—even with other Albanians—and self-restricted mobility in the city also has to be understood as a survival strategy: to be as ‘invisible’ as possible in order to avoid arrest and deportation. However, that does not mean that the Albanian immigrants did not have any networks at all. Although they did not develop coherent immigrant communities, they did rely on strong collective bonds with small and close-knit networks. Usually those networks were comprised by relatives and less often by friends, providing support and protection from everyday hardships. I hypothesize that Albanians were organized in close-knit groups rather than big communities not only because of their illegal status but also because of their widespread stigmatization. Small groups can provide personal support to immigrant Albanians, whilst being more flexible and less visible than big organized communities.

Apart from these close-knit networks, my informants gradually started cultivating ties with Greeks, especially their employers. The phrase ‘Afterwards, we made some acquaintances ...’ was echoed by many respondents in order to illustrate that, from a certain point onwards, they started to feel more secure about their standing in the country. Kostas said: ‘In the beginning we placed great importance on learning the language, and then we started getting to know local people ...’

Another widespread strategy was that of name-changing. This practice has been reported by many studies about Albanians in Greece.⁷ It is mainly analysed as a rational adaptive tactic, albeit one revealing the repressive and hegemonic

⁶The speed with which Albanians are able to learn Greek has been commented on by other researchers. For example, T. Iosofides and R. King, ‘Socio-spatial dynamics and exclusion of three immigrant groups in the Athens conurbation’, *South European Society and Politics*, 3(3), 1998, pp. 205–229; P. Hatziprokopiou, ‘Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki, Greece: processes of economic and social incorporation’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 29(6), 2003, pp. 1033–1057.

⁷For instance, G. Lazaridis, *op. cit.*, P. Hatziprokopiou, *op. cit.*

nature of Greek society. Most of my informants chose to introduce themselves with a Greek name in their everyday interactions with natives, and some had even had their name changed officially in their passport. The 'voluntary' change of a vital element of their identity signifies that the immigrants were conscious of the implications of visible ethnic difference, especially for a group so negatively stereotyped. It became apparent to my informants that other elements of their identity also marked a limiting boundary between them and the dominant society, such as their religion and ethnic descent.⁸ As Eda told me:

In the beginning you could not say that you were a Muslim, you would lose your job ... that was the first thing that they asked you. 'What is your religion?' not 'What is your name?'

Eda's words are indicative of the fact that Albanian immigrants did not have that much room to present themselves in a way that was congruent to their own self-conception. Therefore, identity 'hiding' and modification should be mainly understood as a survival strategy. Moreover, although most of my informants adopted this tactic in order to avoid mistreatment, for the majority of those who arrived in the early 1990s this practice was less a 'voluntary' decision than a forced one.⁹ This is vividly depicted in Gazmend's words:

We had our normal names. When I came here they told me 'I can not call you Gazmend so I will call you Vasili'. Another told me 'I will call you Petro'... Eh, if you cannot just give me my job and my daily wage and I do not care, call me as you want... Educated people—but they were claiming that they could not say my name!

The practice of name-changing concerned mostly those with Muslim names; all my Muslim informants used Greek ones in their interaction with Greeks, unlike those having non-Muslim names, who mostly retained theirs. This symbolically depicts and confirms the contested relation of Greece with Islam and the strong value of Christianity in contemporary Greek society. The Greek national identity sought justification not only in the alleged historic continuity of the Greek *ethnos*, but was also constructed in opposition to the Ottoman Empire, which in turn was correlated with the Muslim world. In this context, Muslim names are considered by the dominant Greek society as representatives of a hostile Other.

In all relevant studies, name-changing and religious encryption have been largely explored in relation to Albanian immigrants' baptism. Baptism is a vital and obligatory religious practice for the Orthodox Christian tradition. However, there are some good reasons for discerning the two former practices from the

⁸On the general concept of 'ethnic boundaries' see F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1969.

⁹Thus I disagree to some extent with the statement by Lazaridis and Koumandraki that 'Albanians have adopted a voluntary assimilation trying to fit in by changing their names to Greek ones, denying their Albanian identity ...' Moreover, the attempt to minimize difference in order to lessen cultural racism does not necessarily imply adopting 'Greekness' in order to assimilate. In their co-ethnic sphere Albanians retain their own names and identity markers. For the source of the above quote see G. Lazaridis and M. Koumandraki, 'Deconstructing naturalism: the racialization of ethnic minorities in Greece', in R. King (ed.), *The Mediterranean Passage: Migration and New Cultural Encounters in Southern Europe*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2001, pp. 279–301 (p. 295).

latter. Baptism was not that much of a widespread practice and in most cases should not be understood as a survival strategy. This is explained by Vagelis:

Greeks in the beginning called you by one name and they attributed it to you so that you could pass as Christian and because it was easier for them to call you that way... One old lady that I became acquainted with called me Vagelis because her husband, who had died two years before, was called Vagelis. The neighbours heard that and they also started calling me in that way. She also wanted to baptise me but I am a stubborn person. I did not come here in order to be baptised.

Albanian immigrants' decision to get baptized was therefore largely a voluntary one, following the informal change of names. This practice is also embedded in a paternalistic mentality. The migrant is conceived by the dominant society as a 'naughty' boy or girl who needs guidance and paternal protection.¹⁰ However, from the perspective of the Albanian immigrant it was either a tactic aimed at cementing relations with a native, or a symbolic verification of an already strong relation with a Greek person. Moreover, the immigrants who aspired to remain in the country internalized the mainstream Greek view that to be Greek is to be Christian Orthodox.

Here it should be also noted that the practices of name-changing and hiding the religion are not specific to the case of Albanians. According to Petronoti, the same strategy was also adopted by the Eritrean refugee community in Greece.¹¹ Yet what is specific to the case of Albanians is that this practice entails a certain blurring of the ethnic boundary between Greek and Albanian identity. Albanians with a Greek name who also spoke Greek can pass as Albanians of Greek origin in order to be treated better by the dominant society.¹² Generally, my informants denied having followed this strategy, except for Maria who told me:

When I went there to ask for work the forewoman asked me 'Are you Albanian or Greek-Albanian?' I saw in her eyes that she had a hatred [for Albanians]... I told her I was a Greek Albanian from Korçë ...

What was described by Maria should also be understood as a survival strategy. It might be that this strategy was more widespread than my informants suggested. Maybe my informants avoided referring to it because it is a practice that in retrospect has been heavily stigmatized both by the dominant society and by the Albanian community.¹³

¹⁰I. Psimmenos, *Migration from the Balkans: Social Exclusion in Athens*, Papazisis, Athens, 1995 (in Greek).

¹¹M. Petronoti, *Portrait of an Intercultural Relationship*, UNESCO—National Centre for Social Research, Athens, 1998, p. 178 (in Greek).

¹²A. Triandafyllidou and M. Veikou, 'The hierarchy of Greekness: ethnic and national identity considerations in Greek immigration policy', *Ethnicities*, 2(2), 2002, pp. 189–208.

¹³On the other hand, evidence from villages in southern Albania shows that villagers were quite willing to 'manipulate' a Greek-Albanian identity in order to gain easier access to Greece and better privileges once there. See G. de Rapper, 'Better than Muslims, not as good as Greeks: emigration as experienced and imagined by the Albanian Christians of Lunxhëri', in R. King, N. Mai and S. Schwandner-Sievers (eds), *The New Albanian Migration*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2005, pp. 173–194; also G. Kretsi, 'The uses of origin: migration, power-struggle and memory in southern Albania', in the same book, pp. 195–212.

Life changes: renegotiation and reconsideration of aspirations

From the previous section, we have seen that Albanians in Thessaloniki have reacted to their socio-economic and political exclusion by following several strategies, involving name and religion encryption, tolerating exploitative work conditions and enduring paternalistic relations with natives, in order to 'survive' in the host country. Taking these into account, and considering also the illegal status of the Albanian immigrants, several studies have drawn on empirical material from research carried out during the first years of immigration: such studies depict Albanian immigrants as 'almost powerless to escape from the multiple forms of exploitation and marginalization they suffer in Greece'.¹⁴

And yet my field data show that the great majority of Albanians *have* taken advantage of certain opportunities that arose. They draw support from their own networks and interpersonal relations with local Greeks, managing to secure an upward socio-economic mobility and organize their lives in increasingly better terms. This observation should neither lead to an idealization of their conditions in Greece nor imply that their adaptation be likened to a straightforward evolutionary process. Full incorporation is a process that entails the dissolution of exclusionary social boundaries constructed by the dominant society, and the attainment of parity in all domains of social life. My research shows that Albanians' incorporation is far from being a reality, given the persistence of stigmatization, institutional discrimination and political exclusion. Furthermore, although my informants saw an improvement in their life conditions in some domains, they also constantly encounter new difficulties and problems. However, I argue that the metaphor of the underclass, which implies a permanent socio-economic stagnation,¹⁵ and the depiction of Albanian immigrants as powerless subjects without agency, are inappropriate descriptions of the dynamics of their trajectories. Moreover, this deflects attention from the diversity of their experiences and of the strategies they adopt to overcome their subordinate status.

As soon as Albanian immigrants managed to secure their stay in Greece and became more familiar with the country's social environment, they developed active strategies¹⁶ to enhance their financial and social position. My findings, which are in accordance with those of Hatziprokopiou, suggest that Albanian immigrants soon 'become aware of employment conditions in the host country, obtain skills, self-respect and confidence, and the power to negotiate with employers, or at least to leave a job when not satisfied'.¹⁷ Moreover, they were eventually granted access to welfare services. Despite the difficulties they faced, the immigrants became informed about their rights and how to fight for them. Many of my informants told me that they took legal action or threatened the authorities and their employers that they would do so in order to overcome

¹⁴For example, G. Lazaridis and I. Psimmenos, 'Migrant flows from Albania to Greece: economic, social and spatial exclusion', in R. King, G. Lazaridis and C. Tsardanidis (eds), *Eldorado or Fortress? Migration in Southern Europe*, Macmillan, London, 2000, pp. 170–185 (p. 183); also I. Psimmenos, *op. cit.*

¹⁵W. J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The Work of the New Urban Poor*, Vintage Books, New York, 1987.

¹⁶As opposed to re-active strategies, which they pursued during their first years in Greece.

¹⁷P. Hatziprokopiou, *op. cit.*, p. 1053.

certain difficulties. This coincided with the period where they became more visible and involved in the society, and renegotiated their relations with local people.

As they gradually enhanced their socio-economic position in Greek society, they retrieved their dignity and self-respect, which is reflected in the way they speak about themselves. According to the discourse of my informants, Albanian immigrants safeguard their self-esteem through incorporating and presenting a working ethos as part of their identity, by stressing similarities with Greeks, and taking pride in the achievements of other Albanian immigrants in Greece. Albanian migrants attribute great social and ethical value to work, regardless of occupation. Mirela, who is currently working as a violinist in a music school and in an orchestra, told me:

If I do not have money in the future I will go again to work [as a cleaner or industrial worker]. I do not have any problem with that.

Interviewees also expressed a belief that 'with work you can manage everything'. As Vagelis said:

We faced many difficulties ... but we overcame them by working, not by doing harm to other people. We were working, then managing something and the same again. We obtained a house in Albania, a car here. Normal life. We face difficulties as all the others.

The above quote raises the issue of socio-economic upward mobility and stresses the belief that Albanian immigrants' lives currently do not differ from those of Greeks. Some of my informants made references to the cultural proximity between Albanians and Greeks, and many told me stories about Albanian immigrants who had 'made it'. Others denied that Albanian immigrants nowadays only take on jobs that Greeks reject.

The interviewees also re-narrate their *collective* identity, ascribing to the group of Albanian immigrants the virtue of being hard-working, honest and trustworthy; this ethnic identification, which counters the negative stereotyping against them, does not always refer to the entire Albanian immigrant community. Informants who live with their families in Greece construct a collective 'we', referring to 'Albanian family people', in order to differentiate themselves from the stereotype of the 'dangerous Albanian'.

On the whole it seems that Albanian immigrants have started to renegotiate their ethnicity in their relations with natives, at least in their relatively closed social circle.¹⁸ Informants told me that they were no longer afraid or ashamed to reveal their origin. This signifies an important shift in the way the Albanian immigrants view themselves and their position in Greece, which reflects upon their strategies. These can be understood as strategies of renegotiation. However, this does not imply that they completely abandoned survival strategies. For

¹⁸The same does not hold for religious identification, which remains, for most, an unimportant aspect of their identity. The Orthodox Christians stress their religion somewhat more, but this should be partly seen as a strategy to gain acceptance in Greek society. It should be remembered that most Albanians who are now mature adults grew up in a social environment where religion was ruthlessly suppressed.

instance, it seems that identity encryption is rather widespread among Albanian children. Sonila told me her child does not want to speak Albanian in public. Maria told me that 'Steve', the child of an Albanian friend, pretends that he is from America. Such anecdotes show that Albanian children are sensitive to ethnic difference and provide evidence about the still-widespread stigmatization of Albanians.

In addition to renegotiating their individual and collective identities in Greece, nearly half of those interviewed had reconsidered their pre-migration aspirations. For most, this entailed a shift from an intended temporary stay towards a more permanent orientation. Various factors influenced this shift; the most important by far was the presence of children in the household. Clearly, aspirations are not only shaped by considerations about immigrants' own future welfare, but also by concerns about the future of their children. Therefore, the presence of children has an important dampening effect on the propensity to return. This is the result both of children being adapted to Greek society and therefore resisting a potential return, and of parents' belief in a more hopeful future for their children in the host country. The Greek-born children, especially, are apprehensive and in some cases absolutely opposed to 'returning' to Albania. Parents readily admit that their children have few ties with Albania and that they are fully integrated in Greece. In Enver's words:

What we miss the most is our homeland, this is not our home . . . however it is the home of Olsi and Holti [his children].

Albanian families in Greece recognize that their children have started their education in Greece and that it would be very difficult for them to continue their studies in Albania. Of the households with children that I interviewed, only one family is still considering return. The child of that specific household has just started going to school. It seems that the period before their children enter the Greek educational system is critical for the parents' decision about whether to return or not.

Another reason that influenced aspirations towards a more permanent stay in Greece was the supposed opportunities provided by the regularization programme.¹⁹ Enver, who initially came to Greece twice as a seasonal agricultural migrant, finally arrived in 1997 intending to stay, attracted by the opportunity of obtaining legal status in Greece. In many cases the move from rural areas to urban centres was indicative of a wider shift in aspirations. Some immigrants with initial seasonal aspirations were pulled by the opportunities for more remunerative work, and so changed their seasonal migration mentality mostly in favour of a target-earning one. On the other hand, many who originally had target-earner aspirations changed because of the obstacles that they encountered in their attempt to materialize their goals back in Albania. Two of the interviewees had made an attempt to return to Albania. One had built a house there. However, he faced problems with unemployment and returned to Greece.

¹⁹This programme, eventually put into operation in 1998, had been much discussed over the previous two years, so for some time Albanian migrants and would-be migrants had been aware of the possibilities of becoming regularized. Further regularization initiatives followed after 2001. For details see R. Fakiolas, 'Regularising undocumented immigrants in Greece: procedures and effects', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 29(3), 2003, pp. 535–561.

The other reconsidered his aim due to political problems in Albania. In his words:

In 1997 I was about to return because I have a house and a plot of land in Durrës. If you can build a shop or a motel it would be very good because it is near the sea. But there was no stability in order to do something legal there. If you do something you have problems with the mafia.

The renewed economic and political chaos that ensued in Albania in 1997 was not only a strong barrier in terms of the practical ability to return, but also seems to have been a turning point in migrants' conceptualization of a potential return to the country.

Another pattern that emerged in my informants' discourse on the reconsideration of aspirations was one of a *transnational entrepreneur* mentality. Two of my informants, prompted by the economic success of co-ethnics who had developed small transnational businesses, considered acting on economic opportunities in both their countries of origin and settlement. This option, however, concerned only the Albanians of Greek descent. The other Albanian immigrants generally do not have the ability to develop transnational economic ties between the two countries; they are hindered by their institutional status and the inconsistencies of the Greek bureaucracy, which prevent them from moving easily between the two countries.

The interviewees' accounts therefore suggest a revised threefold typology of migrants according to their *current aspirations*: those intending to *remain in Greece*,²⁰ the *target-earners*, and those who have a *transnational entrepreneur* mentality. This typology reflects the data of my interviews, and does not imply that all Albanian immigrants in Greece can be placed in the three categories. According to the survey findings of Gedeshi,²¹ we can safely assume that there is still a minority of immigrants who aspire towards seasonal immigration. However, this typology provides a schematic picture of the current aspirations of Albanian immigrants who reside in Greek cities.

Finally in this section of the paper I recount two brief examples which demonstrate that, although migrants' aspirations result from specific and structured space-time conditions, they are also highly idiosyncratic. Some immigrants adhere to their pre-migration aspirations regardless of constraints and opportunities that confound the migration project. This can be vividly illustrated by outlining the trajectories of Mirela and Besim. Both immigrants came to Greece illegally in 1997, shortly after having finished high school. Mirela studied music in Albania and had a diploma as a musician. As noted earlier, she immigrated to Greece with the aspiration to stay permanently in the country and embark on a career as a violinist, whereas Besim, who had trained as an electrician before migrating, aspired to save money in order to open an electricity supply store in Albania.

²⁰This category comprises both the 'lifetime-maximizers' described earlier, and those who revised their aspirations in the light of opportunities and unintended outcomes of their original migration project.

²¹I. Gedeshi, 'The role of remittances from Albanian emigrants and their influence on the country's economy', *Eastern European Economics*, 40(5), 2002, pp. 49–72.

Mirela moved directly to Thessaloniki, where she initially stayed at a friend's house. Gradually, she learned the language. She worked in a clothing factory for a short period and then started working as a cleaner. During this period, she adopted the Greek name Maria. Two years later she moved to another apartment to live with her sister and brother-in-law, who came to the city in 1999. At that time, those two people were her only company. In 2001 she obtained legal status and enrolled in a private conservatory the same year. She continued working as a cleaner. The reason for enrolling was not to study the violin, as she already had the diploma, but to meet people and to create a useful social network. In 2002, five years after she immigrated to Greece, she managed to buy a new violin. That same year she managed to find a job as a music teacher. Currently she works both as a music teacher and as a violinist in an orchestra. She also moved to another apartment where she lives alone. Her parents visit her regularly, whereas she rarely goes to Albania. She now has many Greek friends and definitely sees herself remaining in the country. Maria feels that she has managed to achieve her goals, and her future plans are to get married. She also intends to get baptized.

Besim firstly immigrated to a rural area where his brother was already settled. He stayed there for two years working in various agricultural jobs and learning Greek. He was rather isolated and had to present himself as Kostas. In 1999, after having saved some money he returned to Albania for six months to visit his parents and friends. Then he re-migrated to Thessaloniki where he was hosted by this uncle. Afterwards his brother came to Thessaloniki too. They moved into a place together with another relative. He initially worked in a factory. Then he managed to find a job as an electrician. He was paid very low wages and no security stamps. In 2001 he managed to obtain legal status, but spent much of his savings on the procedure.²² He is still working as an electrician. His new boss pays him regular wages as well as his social security. Their other relative moved out of the house. His friends are almost exclusively Albanian and he visits Albania at least three times every year. He considers his life conditions to have improved substantially, but finds it more difficult to save money, partly because of the increasing cost of living in Greece. He expects that in three to four years' time he will have gathered a sufficient amount of money to return to Albania.

Unsurprisingly, the immigrants who seriously consider remaining in Greece are more oriented towards Greek society. They attempt to create networks with natives and, as a result, have more contact with Greeks. Close friendships with natives are also more common. In contrast, the social circle of target-earners is more restricted to Albanians. Accordingly, baptism is a practice only of the permanent immigrants. They tend to invest their savings and spend more in Greece, whereas target-earners are willing to tolerate poorer living conditions so as to save more money. From my fieldwork, I saw that those who intend to stay permanently generally have better housing conditions. Finally, none of my informants sent their children to the Albanian language courses offered by the Albanian association in Thessaloniki. Only Valbona, who is planning to establish a transnational business, had sent her daughter for a spell in a school in Albania so

²²The 2001 regularization was an expensive procedure for many Albanian migrants as they had to 'buy' social security stamps retrospectively and pay for other documentation required. For details, Fakiolas, op. cit.

that she will be able to integrate into the Albanian educational system if they return.

Intentions for the future

Having traced the ways in which the life-course changes of my informants influenced their strategies and aspirations, I now focus on their future intentions and expectations. Considering that future plans are shaped through the kaleidoscope of the present, I will try to explore them by keeping a close analytical track on how my informants assess and describe their current life conditions. I will use the typology introduced above, which suggests an analytical categorization of my informants according to their current aspirations. This migrant typology provides a link between my informants' narratives about their present situations on the one hand, and their future intentions on the other.

The great majority of the 'permanent' immigrants whom I interviewed have experienced a considerable improvement in life conditions in the course of their stay in Greece. Most of them expressed general satisfaction about their present situation and maintained they had adapted to living in Thessaloniki rather well. This was especially the case with the lifetime-maximizer group. Some said that they did not feel like immigrants in the city any more. Those who had shifted their aspiration towards a more permanent stay in the country had ambivalent feelings. They told me that, on the one hand, they certainly miss their homeland but, on the other hand, they are now used to living in Greece. In fact, during their trips back to their homeland they feel unfamiliar with the new reality there and consequently feel like strangers in both countries.

For these migrants, interaction with the local society is increasing and the majority have developed close relations with Greeks. Yet, considering the still-prevailing negative stereotyping of Albanian immigrants in Greek society, it appears that their life-world is divided into two social entities: a narrow and mainly kin-based one, which includes 'known people' who are friendly or at least respectful towards them; and a broader one, their encounters with officials and others in the city, which is experienced as a potentially hostile social environment in which they are reminded time and again of the prejudicial stereotypes about 'the Albanian immigrant'.

The most significant obstacles are connected with the malfunctions of the Greek public sector, lack of support from the Greek state, and the implications of their institutional position. Furthermore, they all lamented the fact that their status is still characterized by insecurity and vulnerability, which is a major barrier to their efforts to establish homes and working lives in Greece. They particularly focused on the legalization process, characterizing it as unfair, time-consuming, expensive, and not conducive to long-term planning and investment. What Vagelis says is typical of many other accounts:

The Greek state forces us to continuously renew our papers... I am here so many years. It is not about the money but about the trouble of the procedure. You have to go from one office to another, and wait for hours ... extra costs ... you also lose days from your work and by the time you get your papers they have already expired and you still cannot go back to Albania if you wish. These are my complaints. I am for the state, my obligations and stuff... Ask me for 1000, even

1500 Euros and I will give it to the state, provided that I am sure that I will stay here let's say for five years. For instance I want to buy a new car, I am still young ... however, I do not know what is going to happen tomorrow, I mean with the state. When my card expires are we going to be sent out of the country? It is not only me but thousands of people like me, I speak about family people ... we have relatives in Albania, my father ... if one day something happens to him, what shall I do?

Although the majority of my informants who aspire to remain in Greece expect that 'things will get better', insecurity and uncertainty still pervade their lives, making them very cautious about investing in the country. Many of my informants told me that buying a house or a new car are their dreams for the future, and that they would be willing to take out a loan to do so; yet they are still apprehensive, given their precarious legal status.

As far as their work is concerned, almost all expressed general satisfaction about their relations with employers and co-workers, and referred to a growing convergence in wages and working conditions with natives. However, most of them are doing jobs that neither reflected their qualifications nor fulfilled their job aspirations. Those with children channelled their blocked ambitions onto their children's future; they were very focused on jobs of higher social status for their children. They view the schooling of their children as the vehicle that will lead to upward socio-economic mobility and parity with the living conditions of native children. In that sense, they have projected their dreams onto their children and have put all their effort into providing them with educational opportunities and additional training.

Interviewees were very critical about the implications of discrimination, claiming that their children should be provided with equal rights with Greeks in all fields, along with the right to naturalize. This is a significant demand of the immigrants wishing to stay in the country, who are frustrated by the fact that their children are excluded from tenured positions in the public sector, and most importantly by the fact that they have to pay to renew their papers from the age of 16. A father said:

My son is training in the local football team. Initially they told us he cannot play in this team because it is a team that competes in the National League. Then they told us 'OK, let's try him', and because he was good they kept him. He was also selected to play in the junior national training team. Because he was Albanian they rejected him. Although officially he cannot play, the trainer, who was a good person, kept him in the team. I do not want those things to happen by chance, I want legal procedures. Why do you reject him because of his Albanian origin?

And a mother:

They should give our children papers so that they can continue with their studies... My son has a girlfriend who is Greek, the years pass by, one day he will get married, he might marry a Greek girl ... they put barriers to the freedom of our children, to their dreams, to all nice things in their lives.

This interviewee raises the topic of intermarriage, an issue that needs to be explored further by researchers. We may assume that attitudes towards intermarriage have changed on the part of the Albanians. What remains to be

seen, though, especially for second-generation Albanians, is to what degree the negative stigmatization of Albanians will influence the potential for mixed marriages. None of my informants is married to a Greek. All of those who came to Greece as single people got married to an Albanian, mostly while back in Albania. However, two of my informants who were single when the research was carried out told me that they wanted to marry a Greek. Mirela told me that she aspired to do so because she sees herself staying permanently in Greece. However, they both expressed their belief that a mixed marriage would not be easily accepted by Greek society. Mirela said that she does not think her origin will be a problem for her future husband, if he is Greek; however, she was certain that his relatives would object.

Finally, most of the group of informants who intend to remain in Greece said that they leave open the issue of returning back to their homeland when they retire. A minority told me that they would return earlier, when their children have 'started their life in Greece', that is, reached adulthood.

Present situations, as well as future plans, are described differently by the target-earners. According to my fieldwork data, living conditions are considerably lower for them, and consequently their level of satisfaction is lower too. As remunerative work and saving money are their primary concerns, the majority of them reported the difficulty of making ends meet as their major problem at the moment. According to them, it was only partly due to growing needs on their part; mostly it was the outcome of the introduction of the euro and the expenses of the legalization process. They also expressed complaints about the latter, focusing mainly on its high costs, exclusionary provisions about family reunification, and the fact that it still does not provide them with the opportunity to freely visit their country.

Here we should draw a distinction between the target-earners who support families back home by sending remittances and those who migrated so as to save money in order to achieve an economic goal. The former usually cannot look forward to family reunification; in most cases their families have to stay in Albania for various reasons such as studies or taking care of parents. The latter in most cases do aspire to family reunification, but sometimes are unable to fulfil the legal requirements to invite their family. As has been illustrated, family reunification is a critical point of the immigration project, as it may lead to a reconsideration of initial aspirations due to its often unforeseen consequences. An interesting finding concerns target-earners who are single and who had immigrated when they were very young. If for various reasons their stay in Greece was prolonged, it seems that travelling in between the two countries becomes for them a way of life. In that sense, they have to live between two social worlds that are equally important for them, without having a clear idea about future plans.

Finally, as far as immigrants with a transnational entrepreneur aspiration are concerned, we can assume that, due to the barriers posed by their legal standing, they currently constitute a small minority of the Albanian population. From my evidence, admittedly based on a small sample, they seemed to be limited to ethnic-Greek Albanians.

Conclusions

Migrants' aspirations tend to be neglected in the field of migration studies. In the context of the prevailing theoretical paradigm of 'push' and 'pull' factors, immigrants are commonly portrayed as homogenous and passive entities with identical goals and dreams: escaping from poverty, unemployment and political instability, and pulled by the 'virtues of the West'. The same also holds true for theories exploring immigrants' trajectories in the 'host' countries; the only diversity postulated for immigrants refers to diversity in terms of ethnic groups. Yet, as Waldinger argues, this 'assume(s) that immigrants comprise a group right from the start, a view that presumes stability and homogeneity in the structures of immigrants' affiliations, when in fact migration destabilizes those relationships'.²³ Treating immigrants as homogeneous is the outcome of approaching migration through the eyes of either the 'host' country or the country of origin, and is thus an over-simplistic view of the complexity of the migration phenomenon.

From the point of view of the key actors—the immigrants—migration is a strategy towards the materialization of diverse goals and aspirations, which can vary greatly from vague and abstract expectations to specific aims. Yet even in cases where migration is more the outcome of coercion rather than of choice, from the migrant's perspective it is still a project of life-making and should be understood as such.²⁴ Approaching migration thus, one should also consider the unforeseeable consequences that the process entails. Migrants' aspirations are not to be conceived as static, but as continuously negotiated in the light of the opportunities and constraints that evolve during the course of the migration project. Moreover, given the structural and institutional barriers of receiving societies, immigrants have limited space for purposive action in the 'host' country. To understand the choices that migrants make, we must also therefore imagine the *lack* of choices which they may be confronted with.

Broadly speaking, my qualitative research among Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki provides evidence of a considerable heterogeneity of pre-migration aspirations as an outcome of the varying characteristics of migrants and their immediate environment: individual traits, gender, age, and the influence of kin and local community at the time they decided to migrate. My informants acted in Greece with reference to these aspirations; however, their practices and aspirations are not completely mutually bound. Constrained by severe and partially unforeseeable hardships in the host country, migrants reassess their expectations and have to undertake certain practices to cope with the realities of their new life. The strategies of immigrants during the first years of immigration

²³R. Waldinger, 'The sociology of immigration: second thoughts and reconsiderations', in J. G. Reitz (ed.), *Host Societies and the Reception of Immigrants*, Center for Immigration Studies, San Diego, 2003, pp. 21–43 (p. 22).

²⁴J. Carling, 'Migration in the age of involuntary mobility: theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(1), 2002, pp. 5–42. Carling structures his analysis around the distinction between the *aspiration* to migrate and the *ability* to do so, an analytical distinction which resonates to some extent with my own emphasis on strategies and aspirations in this paper. Carling's empirical data from Cape Verde might not seem very comparable with the Albanian case; but in fact the two countries have both been deeply affected by emigration, albeit across different time periods.

depend on their legal status, and the structure and attitudes of the local host society. According to my findings, the practices of the Albanian immigrants in Greece during their first years in the country can be described as 'survival' strategies; being 'illegal' in an extremely exclusionary social environment and lacking much community organization, they undertook practices including name and religious encryption, and accepted exploitative work conditions and paternalistic domination by their employers.

Yet the great majority of my informants took advantage of certain opportunities that emerged and, drawing support from their close networks, they succeeded in organizing their lives on better terms, achieving a measure of upward socio-economic mobility. This process is reflected in their strategies, and signifies an important shift in the way they view themselves and their position in the host country. As we saw, they adopted strategies of 'renegotiation' to reconstruct their status and relationships in the host society. Moreover, they engaged more actively in materializing their aspirations and consequently followed different trajectories towards different goals. This pattern of strategies is schematic; there is definitely an overlap in time between 'survival' strategies, strategies of 'renegotiation', and aspiration-specific strategies. However, the pattern serves well to depict the dynamics of Albanian migrants' practices in Greece.

Finally, migrants' aspirations, like their strategies, are not firm and set, but resultant of specific space-time conditions. Immigrants reconsider their pre-migration aspirations in the light of changes in their life conditions, unintended consequences of the migration project, and intervening opportunities and obstacles. As already described, nearly half my informants changed their aspirations. In that sense, not only do migrants' aspirations influence their trajectories, but aspirations are also shaped by migration experiences and migrants' choices and strategies. This is a multi-level process, that shapes their life-making projects as well as their adaptation to the host country; these dynamics of immigrants' trajectories deserve to be further explored in future research.

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