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The quiet drain: A reflection on the growing migration of skilled workers in Albania

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Abstract

Albania is increasingly affected by the gradual departure of skilled professionals, a trend that has significant implications for the country's social and economic future. This ongoing migration is largely influenced by limited employment opportunities, low wages, institutional challenges, and the appeal of better living and working conditions abroad. Highly trained individuals, particularly in fields such as healthcare, education, and technology, are choosing to build their careers outside the country, leading to a loss of expertise and reduced capacity for national development. This paper explores the main factors behind this movement and examines its consequences for Albania's labor market, public services, and long-term growth. By reflecting on both individual motivations and structural shortcomings, the study emphasizes the need for targeted policies that support professional development, improve governance, and encourage skilled workers to remain or return. Addressing this issue is crucial to safeguarding Albania's human capital and ensuring sustainable progress.

Keywords: Skilled migration, Brain drain, Albania, Human capital, Labor market, Economic development.

1. Introduction

In recent years, Albania has been facing a steady departure of skilled professionals, a process that has gradually reshaped the country's workforce and development prospects. This movement is not marked by sudden mass migration but by a continuous flow of educated individuals who choose to seek opportunities beyond national borders. The loss of doctors, engineers, educators, and other specialists has become an increasingly visible challenge, raising concerns about the country's ability to sustain economic growth and maintain essential public services.

The reasons behind this migration are rooted in a combination of economic, social, and institutional factors. Limited career advancement, relatively low wages, and dissatisfaction with governance structures contribute to a growing sense of uncertainty

among skilled workers. While migration often represents personal ambition and the pursuit of a better quality of life, its broader impact extends beyond individual choices, affecting national productivity and social stability. This paper explores the underlying causes and consequences of Albania's skilled worker migration, emphasizing the long-term effects on human capital and development. By examining this issue, the discussion aims to highlight the importance of creating conditions that encourage professionals to build their futures within the country rather than abroad.

2. Analysis of reflection on the growing migration of skilled workers in Albania

The steady movement of skilled workers out of Albania has become one of the most defining features of the country's recent social and economic reality, a trend well-documented in regional labor mobility studies (Gëdeshi & King, 2021; OECD, 2023). It is not loud or sudden. It grows quietly, person by person, year after year, until whole communities start to feel lighter in a way that does not feel comforting, a pattern consistent with what the World Bank describes as "silent demographic erosion" in the Western Balkans (World Bank, 2023). This quiet drain touches the everyday lives of families, workplaces, hospitals, schools, and entire industries, much as identified by the European Training Foundation (ETF, 2023). The migration of trained workers has been present in Albania's history for many decades, but what we see today is different in its depth and in its long-term consequences (ILO, 2022).

Earlier waves of migration were shaped mainly by the search for survival, income and security after years of economic hardship, which aligns with historical migration cycles described in the scholarly literature (King & Gëdeshi, 2020). In recent years, however, the pattern has shifted. A rising number of well-educated workers such as nurses, doctors, teachers, engineers, IT workers, accountants, architects and skilled technicians are leaving, echoing findings from OECD reports on skill-selective migration (OECD, 2023). These are people who spent years learning, practicing, and building careers. Their skills took a long time to develop, and in many cases the government helped pay for their training, a concern also highlighted by the WHO regarding health workforce outflows in Europe (WHO, 2022). But now, much of that public investment benefits other countries instead of Albania (World Bank, 2023).

When speaking with those preparing to migrate, the reasons they give are often very personal and easy to understand, as also confirmed in qualitative migration studies in Albania (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). Many say they feel tired, that is, tired of long shifts, tired of the stress that comes with low wages, tired of the slow movement in their professions, tired of systems that feel heavy and disorganized, issues frequently cited in ILO reports on worker dissatisfaction in the region (ILO, 2022). A nurse who works long hours may barely earn enough to support her family. A young doctor may feel frustrated when he cannot access the tools he needs to provide good care, a systemic constraint described in WHO workforce assessments (WHO, 2022). A teacher in a rural area may face overcrowded classrooms, old teaching materials, and limited opportunities to grow (ETF, 2023). A software developer may see that

her skills could be rewarded more fairly abroad, reflecting EU-wide digital talent mobility trends (OECD, 2023). These daily realities shape the decision to leave, and each decision adds to the larger pattern (World Bank, 2023).

What makes the situation emotionally complex is that most of these workers do not leave because they want to abandon their country, a nuance highlighted in studies of migrant identity (King & Gëdeshi, 2020). Many are deeply attached to Albania. They love their towns, their relatives, their language, and the comfort of familiar places. But when the weight of economic uncertainty becomes heavy, and when career progress feels blocked or slow, migration starts to feel like a necessary step (OECD, 2023). It becomes a practical choice rather than a rejection of home, a distinction noted in contemporary migration theory (de Haas, 2021). People want a life where effort is rewarded and where their skills can grow, dynamics strongly emphasized in EU labor mobility analysis (ILO, 2022). If that life seems more reachable abroad, then the decision becomes clearer (World Bank, 2023).

There is also a strong cultural dimension behind this flow. Albanian families care deeply about creating better futures for their children, which aligns with long-term household migration strategies documented in Balkan research (Vullnetari, 2012). When parents see that their son or daughter's degree can open doors to stable work in Germany or Italy, they often encourage them to explore that path (OECD, 2023). Once one family member succeeds abroad, the movement becomes easier for the rest, a network effect described widely in migration literature (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). Support networks grow across borders, and the idea of leaving becomes less frightening (World Bank, 2023). In time, small groups turn into larger ones. Villages lose young professionals. Cities lose trained workers. And the country slowly feels the loss (INSTAT, 2023). This movement carries heavy consequences for essential services. One of the most visible areas is the health sector, which faces critical shortages according to WHO assessments (WHO, 2022). Many public hospitals operate with fewer nurses than they need. For instance, when nurses leave their job for greener pastures or for personal reasons, the workload for those who remain at post increases and becomes challenging, an impact confirmed in ILO monitoring reports (ILO, 2022). They cover more patients, fill more shifts and face more emotional strain, contributing to burnout—one of the leading predictors of nurse emigration (WHO, 2022). Some nurses then consider leaving as well. This is how a slow cycle forms, one that is very hard to reverse (World Bank, 2023). Albanian doctors also face similar pressures. It is not uncommon for young doctors to invest years in medical school only to leave soon after they gain experience (OECD, 2023).

Education faces similar challenges. Teachers, especially in small towns, are becoming harder to recruit, consistent with ETF research on teacher shortages in the Western Balkans (ETF, 2023). Young graduates often try teaching for a short time and then decide to migrate. They look for stronger support systems, better teaching materials, and more stable career paths, trends reinforced in UNESCO regional reviews (UNESCO, 2022). When teachers leave, children feel it immediately. Schools struggle to find replacements (INSTAT, 2023). The quality of learning drops, and the long-

term effects appear in weaker skills among students, a concern emphasized in World Bank education diagnostics (World Bank, 2022).

The private sector carries its own share of difficulties. A company is only as strong as the people who shape it, an observation supported by human capital theory (Becker, 1993). When skilled workers leave, businesses face rising costs because they must train new staff often (OECD, 2023). Some industries that depend heavily on experience such as finance, construction engineering, transport logistics and information technology feel the pressure even more, as documented in EU skills forecasts (Cedefop, 2022). Projects take longer to complete. Plans for expansion often slow down gradually (World Bank, 2023). Innovation becomes harder because the workers who would lead new ideas are no longer in the country (ILO, 2022). A company with constant turnover cannot maintain the stability needed for long-term creativity (OECD, 2023). Businesses try to solve this by hiring young graduates as soon as they finish school. But young workers, although energetic and eager, require mentoring and guidance, a mentoring gap described in organizational behavior literature (Hennekam, 2021). When senior workers leave, there are fewer mentors to teach the next generation (Cedefop, 2022). Knowledge that should pass from older experts to younger ones gets lost (World Bank, 2023). This creates a thin foundation that weakens the future of entire sectors (OECD, 2023).

Some people believe that returning migrants may help balance the loss. There are indeed stories of Albanians who return after many years abroad, bringing useful skills and new perspectives, which aligns with OECD findings on diaspora return potential (OECD, 2021). These individuals often start businesses, support community projects, or contribute to the training of younger workers (World Bank, 2023). Their return is valuable and meaningful. But the number of returnees is far smaller than the number leaving (INSTAT, 2023). Many migrants start families abroad. Their children enter new school systems, and their ties to Albania change (Vullnetari, 2012). Returning becomes less likely with each passing year, a pattern known as “diaspora settling” (de Haas et al., 2020). This makes it unrealistic to depend on large numbers of returnees to solve the problem (OECD, 2023).

Another part of the discussion focuses on remittances, which refers to the money that citizens abroad send to their families. These funds are important, accounting for a significant share of household income in Albania (World Bank, 2023). They help many households cover daily expenses, improve housing, pay school fees, and start small businesses (INSTAT, 2023). Remittances ease financial pressure, but they do not replace the need for skilled professionals inside the country, as confirmed by migration economists (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). Money alone cannot solve the gap created when trained workers leave (OECD, 2023). It cannot teach students, perform surgeries, design buildings, or manage digital systems. Albania needs human capital, not only financial transfers (ILO, 2022).

The impact of skilled migration is also felt in the emotional mood of the country. Many Albanians describe a sense of worry about the future, a sentiment identified in demographic perception studies (Vathi, 2020). They see how many young people

want to leave, and it creates a feeling of emptiness (OECD, 2023). Streets in some towns grow quieter. Celebrations feel smaller. Skilled workers who remain sometimes feel overused, underappreciated, or trapped in roles that carry heavy responsibilities without enough support (ILO, 2022). These small emotional shifts accumulate until they form a national temperament of discouragement (World Bank, 2023).

Even so, this situation does not have to define Albania's future. The problem is serious, but it is not irreversible, as emphasized in regional development strategies (OECD, 2023). Albania has the strength and talent to rebuild its systems in ways that encourage people to remain. This requires a wider understanding that the movement of skilled workers is not only about personal decisions, but it is also about social systems (de Haas et al., 2020). Better wages can help, but money alone does not fix everything (ILO, 2022). Workers want clear career paths, modern tools, fair evaluations, and supportive environments, desires consistent with global worker surveys (ILO, 2022). They want to believe that effort leads to progress. When systems are slow, unclear, or unfair, it becomes difficult to maintain hope (World Bank, 2023). A good place to begin addressing the challenge is in digital transformation. Albania has a growing group of young professionals with strong IT skills, consistent with EU digital talent assessments (OECD, 2023). Many would stay if they saw more stable career paths and stronger local opportunities (Cedefop, 2022). Supporting young tech firms, improving digital infrastructure, and encouraging partnerships between universities and businesses could strengthen the foundation of this sector (World Bank, 2023). If these workers feel supported, they become key drivers of national growth (OECD, 2023).

The health sector also needs attention. Nurses and doctors work in demanding environments, often with limited equipment and heavy patient loads (WHO, 2022). Modernizing hospitals can ease much of their stress. Updated facilities, digital patient systems, clear shift plans, counseling services, and continuous training can make local hospitals more attractive places to build a career (ILO, 2022). These changes help workers feel valued, and this sense of value is often stronger than salary alone (WHO, 2022).

In the education sector, teachers need smaller class sizes, better teaching materials, and regular training (UNESCO, 2022). A teacher who feels supported can stay longer, teach better, and inspire more students. Schools shape the attitudes of future workers, so supporting teachers becomes a long-term investment in slowing migration (World Bank, 2022).

Creative and flexible solutions can also make a difference. Albania could develop programs that invite skilled professionals abroad to contribute without requiring them to move back, a strategy used in many diaspora-engagement countries (OECD, 2021). Short-term research projects, online mentorship programs, guest lectures, and digital collaborations can connect the diaspora to the country (World Bank, 2023). These connections allow knowledge to flow back into Albania even when people cannot return permanently (Cedefop, 2022).

Another area needing attention is regional development. When small towns lack

opportunities, young professionals leave for Tirana (INSTAT, 2023). When Tirana cannot absorb everyone, they leave the country. Supporting jobs, education, and health services outside the capital can reduce this two-step migration, consistent with OECD territorial development recommendations (OECD, 2023). Balanced development helps people feel rooted in their home regions (World Bank, 2023). The private sector can also play a strong role by improving work culture. This means offering clear job descriptions, fair evaluations, and chances for employees to grow (ILO, 2022). Workers often leave not because of salary but because of poor management practices, a phenomenon supported by organizational research (Hennekam, 2021). Simple improvements in teamwork, respect, communication, and recognition can make people stay longer and feel more connected to their workplaces (OECD, 2023). Above all, Albania needs a clear and collective vision for the future of its workforce. Skilled migration is not only an economic challenge, but it is a reflection of how people see the direction of the country (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). When people feel that their skills matter and their future looks promising, they stay. When they see growth and fairness, they help build the nation (ILO, 2022). Albania's future depends on creating an environment where staying feels like a real choice, not a sacrifice (World Bank, 2023).

The quiet drain of skilled workers is a call for action. It shows what people want: stability, dignity, meaningful work, and a chance to grow (ILO, 2022). These desires are not unrealistic. They are natural hopes shared by individuals everywhere. Albania has the capacity to meet these hopes (OECD, 2023). The question now is whether it will take the steps needed to create a climate where skilled workers can imagine their future at home, contribute confidently and feel that their presence matters in shaping the country's path forward (World Bank, 2023).

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, looking at everything happening, the steady movement of skilled workers out of Albania feels less like a sudden crisis and more like a quiet shift that has slowly reshaped the country (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). It touches hospitals, classrooms, businesses, villages and family life in many ways (OECD, 2023). The loss of trained professionals is not just about numbers, it is about the gradual weakening of the systems that keep a society strong (World Bank, 2023). When people trained in health, education, engineering, finance, and technology leave, the country loses both their skills and the long-term value they could have created (ILO, 2022).

Even so, this situation should not be seen as a story without hope. Albania still has many young, talented people who want to build a stable life at home (OECD, 2023). The challenge is to make the environment strong enough to retain them. Better work systems, clearer career paths, updated equipment, fair workloads and modern management practices can make staying feel meaningful again (ILO, 2022). If government institutions, private companies, universities, and communities work together, Albania can build a future where skilled workers do not feel they must look

elsewhere to grow (World Bank, 2023).

What stands out most from this reflection is that people leave because they want dignity, fairness and the chance to use their abilities fully (Gëdeshi & King, 2021). These are not unreasonable desires but they are basic needs for any working person (ILO, 2022). When Albania strengthens these foundations, the quiet drain can slow down (OECD, 2023). Some who left may even return, not because of pressure, but because they feel their country is moving forward with purpose (World Bank, 2023). The road ahead requires patience, honest thinking, and steady action. But Albania has the talent, the spirit, and the determination to turn this challenge into a new beginning (OECD, 2023). The decision to act now will shape whether future generations see their home as a place to leave—or a place where they can truly build their lives (World Bank, 2023).

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