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Title page

The (big) Role of Family Constellations in Return Migration and Transnationalism

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Abstract

Purpose

The Albanian migration has always reflected a family character, be that before 1945 when Albania was not yet completely isolated, as well as after 1990 when borders were reopened. This feature characterized all types of movement, internal or international, permanent or seasonal migration, return migration or transnational movements, and remigration. The role of the family has been very important in making decisions regarding migration and answering questions from why to how to migrate, from when to where, whom to ask for help or how to invest remittances.

Design/methodology/approach

Based on the case study of a rural area in Northern Albania, The Administrative Unit of Dajç, this article explores in detail the roles of family and kinship on decisions regarding return migration, the re-adjustment process, remigration or transnational life.

Findings

By exploring the role of the family context in remigration and vice-versa the article reflects that the family biography – including the lifestyle, plans for the future or expectations - has changed due to previous migration experiences or challenges and difficulties when returning to the home country.

Originality/value

It demonstrates how individual decisions to migrate or to ‘return home’ are negotiated and supported within families making transnational life a family project. The article adopts a new approach in the Albanian Migration Studies which may be implied on broader areas for further research in the future.

Keywords: Albania, family, migration, return, transnationalism

1. Introduction

The decision to migrate or to return is not based only on the critical evaluation of economic advantages and disadvantages. Social networks, cultural environments or political factors in the host or home country also interfere in this decision-making process. The new economics of labour migration pioneered by Stark and Bloom (1985) considers people's ability to make independent choices constrained by other structures such as family, community, networks and culture. The wellbeing of the family sets a co-dependency between non-migrant and migrant family members while considering migration as a strategy to diversify family income especially in rural households (De Haas, 2021). Return migration can be also analysed also through the lenses of a way to achieve different family goals. According to Gmelch (1980) "there are several studies reporting noneconomic factors as the primary reasons for return migration, such as strong family ties and the desire to be in the company of one's own kin and long-time friends. Ailing or elderly parents obligate some migrants, particularly the eldest children, to return. They go back to look after a sick relative and to run the family business or farm" (p.139). The impact of family and kinship connections is very important not only at the moment of return, but also in determining the continuity and type of migration experience in service of the family's financial and social well-being. The process of migration within a family thus often seems endless as its members may be simultaneously involved in different types of migration: a one family member migrates, the other returns, parents stay home and move temporarily, all the family moves or comes back etc. Albania provides a unique case study for the phenomenon of migration and the impact exercised by family in this process. "The setting of Albania – intensive post-1990 internal and international migration, persistence of patriarchal relations, and strong cultural meanings of 'family' and 'home'... – provides fertile ground for such analysis" (Vullnetari, 2015, p. 2) The role played by family is also reflected in the new rural landscapes created after 1990.

These landscapes are characterized by the presence of large, multi-storey houses, built through the emigrants' remittances. Some are occupied by family members, many are empty, a few are inhabited only for some months, and in others live the elderly who are visited by their children's families over the summer. Building such homes in the country of origin, referred to as remittances houses (Lopez, 2010; Boccagni & Erdal 2020), and represents not only the myth of return, but also a safe shelter for emigrant family members in any predicted or unpredicted scenario. Family members, migrants or not, come and go between the origin and destination countries for family visits, holidays, festivals, events or ceremonies, or business reasons. Thus takes place the creation of transnational social spaces between the countries of origin and destination, with the participation of nuclear and extended families as well as the broader community. According to Kivisto and Faist (2009), these transnational social spaces require the sustainability of various types of ties: kinship groups, predicated on ties of reciprocity, as can be seen in the form of remittances; or transnational circuits, that in contrast, require instrumental exchange ties such as those structuring trading networks. The sustainability of these ties depends on the frequency of movements and communications, which are both well into physical and social spheres. The facilitations shaped by the Schengen Visa Liberalization, by the improvement of transport and communication infrastructure, and by the increased intensity of trade through social networks have enabled the creation of transnational social spaces.

This paper explores the role of the family in the process of migration, return, transnationalism and remigration. It explores the way decisions regarding migration are taken based on the three-level basis: community, kinship and the nuclear family. The case study at hand, a village-scale study, investigates the Administrative Unit of Dajç that lies in the north-western part of Albania, close to the city of Shkodra. The population of this area has been through

multiple phases of migration, from the first emigrations in 1991¹, to the return phase in 2006-2015, and more recently to the almost complete abandonment of the village due to remigration. This article stresses the notion that the role of the family, kinship or community has been part and parcel of every step in the migration process, from the decision to migrate to the re-adaptation process and the following remigration. We argue that every decision regarding migration is taken by the migrant after carefully considering not only their own situation but that of the extended family as well. This is not simply an economic strategy, since the migrants and their families are involved as much economically as emotionally and psychologically. Family constellation is also an actor that affects how and where the remittances are invested. The future of the village's existence is however questioned precisely due to the fading of these connections with the creation of new generations of emigrants in the country of destination, who then gradually detach from the roots of their country of origin.

The paper is organized as follows. First it gives a framework of the relationship between family and migration in the Albanian context, according to existing literature on migration in Albania. Following is the description of the fieldwork and a background of the out migration from the Commune of Dajç to Western Europe and to the USA, a typical chain migration model. The role of the family inside the remigration process is divided analytically in decision to return, in the re-adaptation process and in the remigration or transnational practices. The article concludes with some main results drawn from the theoretical background and the in-depth interviews.

¹ Due to Dajç being near the Albanian-Montenegrin border, this area has seen cases of fleeing from the monist regime in 1945-1990, but which were sporadic due to the strict border regulation. Those that made it across the border settled in the USA or were lost track of.

2. Setting the context: Albanian migration and family

After the overthrow of the communist regime, one of the most effective ways out of the collapse has been migration, a phenomenon in which the family constellations played an important role. The relationship between migration and family composes a fertile study ground due to the fact that the institution of family presents a character of continuity and strength in the Albanian culture and society as a whole (Vullnetari, 2007). Despite the existence of a broad literature studying migration in Albania, its causes and consequences (Gedeshi, 2002; Konica & Filer, 2009; Göler, 2017), the traits of internal and international migration, return migration (Çaro, 2016; Duci et. al., 2019; Gemi & Tryandafillidou, 2021) and potential migration (King & Gedeshi, 2018), there appear to be fewer studies focusing on the role that family plays in decision-making related to the migration experience, from the moment of departure to the return, transnationalism or remittances' investments. In the context of Albanian migration, the connection within the family – considered both nuclear and extended – is noticeable in certain traits that this phenomenon has adopted during these years of mass migration. When deciding to emigrate, potential migrants needed to consider the wellbeing of their parents back home as much as the difficulties of managing travel expenses and the very risks of travel. Even though the decision to migrate by the young unmarried men was taken individually, the family consultation was part of the household strategy (Nicholson, 2004). The change in gender structure of the emigrants, from men dominating in the early-mid 1990s to a more gender balanced picture after the early 2000s, arose mainly as a consequence of family reunions when the migrants were stabilized in their destination countries as well as of regularization schemes implemented in the two main host countries (King et. al., 2013a). Community and family networks compose one of the main support structures through which the Albanian migration phenomenon is organized. Chain migration, which also characterizes Albanian migration, is based on family, kin and

community connections. This migration typology is reflected in the creation of Albanian communities with members originating from the same region that settle in the same locality in their destination country. In the Albanian context of the high unemployment level, of the informal market and of the adjustment difficulties as a returned migrant, return migration and transnationalism become life strategies for the entire family as opposed to the individual migrant (Kopliku, 2016b). These household strategies include not only a definitive out migration or return but also the creation of transnational families with the intention to optimize the economic, career and educational opportunities of various family members. (King et. al., 2013/b).

In the Albanian case, ‘family dynamics cannot be separated from the socio-economic dimensions when trying to understand the main forces behind the migration and transnational practices nexus’ (Gemi, 2014, p.6). The role of translocal families with a strong sense of belonging to a common community and as pillars of solidarity during out migration, return and adaptation has been unfolded mainly in the Albanian-Greece context, but also in the Albanian-Italy one (Vullnetari, 2007; Vullnetari, 2012; Leutloff-Grandits & Pichler, 2014; Gemi 2014, Mai & Paladini 2013; Gemi & Tryandafillou 2021). Geographic proximity, as well as better knowledge of the culture of these two main destination countries has led to an increase in the number of cases of transnational migrants. Lawson, Mc Gregor and Saltmarshe (2000) define that the nexus of social institutions we call community, ranging from kin connections to village organizations and even wider social relations has had a critical impact on the household economy in North Albania. This impact has been also evident in every step of the migration process - providing financial support, shelter and employment information in the host country and employment possibilities in the village after returning not only in a family level, but at a community one as well. Support from the non-migrant community in the country of origin further facilitates the process of house building as

a form of home belonging, the conception and maintenance of businesses in the country of origin, and frequent business or vacation related visits to the country of origin (Kopliku, 2019).

3. Methodology

This is a qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and focus group meetings. The interviews and meetings were conducted mainly in the fieldwork, Administrative Unit of Dajç, and were carried out with the help of a key informant who is very familiar with the area. 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with returnees in the Administrative Unit of Dajç. Informal conversations were also carried out with some of their parents and relatives. The interviewees, ten (10) men and two (2) women represented different typologies of migrants – emigrants, permanent and temporary returnees and transnational migrants. In addition, three (3) focus meetings were completed with entrepreneur returnees from different activities such as decorative plants farmers, dairy products businessmen and restaurant owners.

The interviewees were identified with the help of the key informant who is an inhabitant of Dajç, and who knows the area and its co-habitants very well. He has been an emigrant in Greece and Italy himself and is now living in between Shkodra and Dajç. Ten of the interviews were conducted in the Administrative Unit of Dajç where they did return: five in their houses and five in their farms and little enterprises. 2 of the interviews were on the other hand conducted in the city of Shkodra, where the returnees settled after they came back to Albania. Eleven (11) of the interviewees have lived in Italy while only one (1) in Greece. They all returned after 2006 except one who returned in 1995, and all the interviewees were between 30 and 55 years old. The interviews were transcribed and then coded to preserve the total anonymity of the interviewees. Their names have been changed.

The focus group meetings were instead held in the premises of the administrative offices of the commune. Local residents, some of whom returned migrants, participated in these meetings together with family members that had their children or siblings abroad. We led the meetings ourselves with open questions prepared ahead of time. The conversations were recorded and subsequently analyzed later.

4. Findings

4.1. Family inside the remigration process

4.1.1. The Administrative Unit of Dajç

The Administrative Unit of Dajç is situated in Shkodër County and lies south-west of the city of Shkodra at a 24-km distance from the city center. The total surface area of Dajç is 36.5 km². This rural area has a total population of over 9083 inhabitants distributed in 11 villages. The main economic activity of the area is agriculture, especially stockbreeding, and the commerce of decorative plants; the first one representing the main economic activity of this unit since the country's communism period, while the last is a new economic activity. Before 1990, Dajç was one of the most successful agricultural cooperatives at the national level, owing this to its climate, the quality of fertile land and a long-standing tradition of agriculture among its inhabitants. The Dajç area has many important natural, aquatic and environmental resources that have aided these activities (Strategic Development Plan of Dajç Commune, DLDP 2009).

Approximately 6000 inhabitants, divided in 3030 males and 2970 females and 1400 families, have out migrated since 1990. They were part of the international migration towards the countries of the West, as well as of the internal migration toward the capital city Tirana, and to Shkodra as the main city of North Albania. Nearly 36 per cent of rural households have at least one family member who is currently in a permanent or seasonal migration (Commune of

Dajç, 2015). The first emigrant leaving Dajç belongs to the year 1965. He was fulfilling his military service in an area of southern Albania, and escaped to Corfu (Greece) and later the USA. The years 1989-1990, right before the collapse of the regime, saw more getaways, some successful and some not, through the river Buna to then-Yugoslavia and later the USA. In 1992, the first emigrant after the fall of the communist regime settled in Pistoia, near Florence of Italy (Kopliku 2016/a). This is how the main destination countries, Italy and the USA, were determined due to how chain emigration continued by taking advantage of family members and acquaintances settled in these countries. The largest number of emigrants is currently located in Italy, which can be explained primarily by the fact that Italy is geographically close to Albania, but also by their religious links. In the recent years, especially after the economic crisis that engulfed Italy in 2008, the USA has taken priority as a destination country. The majority of the population of Dajç is catholic, and that is one of the reasons why the Catholic Church has been so important for them in providing help and support when in the destination countries, both Italy and the USA. According to data collected by the commune there are 1050 inhabitants from Dajç settled in Italy, 245 in USA, 45 in Canada and we find the rest in a limited number in Australia (32), Germany (20), Greece (18), Montenegro (16), Macedonia (14) and Belgium (10).

Dajç today looks like a ghost village, devoid of people but full of houses and villas. These structures can be considered investments of financial remittances – money deliveries managed in many cases by the parents living in the village – as well as social remittances, in the form of reflections of cultural influences in their shapes and construction techniques from the destination countries (Boccagni & Erdal 2020). The very building of these houses exemplifies the myth of return, which became a reality for many villagers in 2006-2015, after the economic crises in Italy and Greece. This wave of return didn't result in stability however, as it was soon followed by many remigrations especially after 2016.

4.1.2. Out migration to Italy – reflecting chain migration

International migration from Dajç is a typical form of family reunion and kinship-based chain migration. The first to leave the country from this rural area in 1992 was a young man, following his dream to become a priest who settled in Pistoia, Italy². He was sheltered in a parish and was helped by a vicar. The young man that today has the title “Dom”, together with the priest that helped him since the first days of migration, were the first people setting the basis of chain migration from the Dajç community to Pistoia³.

Valentin (30, M) *...we have to stress out that being Catholics and subsequently the help of the priest were very important for us in the first years when we (Albanians) had a negative image in Italy, an image that was nonetheless reinforced by the media...*

In the early ‘90s young men from Dajç started migrating toward Italy, mostly to Tuscany: Pistoia, Modena, Florence, Lucca, etc. As they settled in Tuscany, they became the initial base for the chain migration that would follow in the years to come. The province of Pistoia alone accounts for 9660 registered Albanians today, which is the highest percentage of Albanians compared to other provinces of Tuscany⁴. The majority of them are precisely from Shkodra and its surrounding villages, and especially from the Administrative Unit of Dajç. Some years later, during 1996-1997 and 2011-2015, other migrants left towards the USA and Canada where people from Dajç had managed to settle and integrate since 1965⁵. In a focus group discussion, Gjovalin was explaining his own migration experience and when we asked

² This is the background of migration after 1990, because inhabitants from Dajç who managed to escape the communist regime, had left since 1965 and were settled in USA and less in Canada.

³ In Pistoia Province there are 11.077 Albanians concerning 40,3% of the foreigners in this province. The number of Albanians in Italy is 490. 483 (<http://www.tuttitalia.it/toscana/provincia-di-pistoia/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/albania/>)

⁴ <https://www.tuttitalia.it/toscana/statistiche/cittadini-stranieri/albania/>

⁵ A part of the Administrative Unit of Dajç borders with Montenegro. Before 1990, when free movement of people was banned from the regime, different people managed to escape to ex-Yugoslavia from where they could get easier to USA.

“Where did you settle?”, all of them laughed and in one voice answered: In Pistoia, of course...

Gjovalin (32, M) (laughing) *If you ever meet an Albanian in Pistoia, he is for sure from Dajç...*

In this chain migration the roles played by family and social networks have been crucial, since decision-making related to the process of emigration is based on family and kin connections. These decisions are not taken in an individual level, but in family, kin and community ones. Such a broad network of support is functional both in the destination countries, as well as in the countries of origin for the people left behind, be they the elderly or spouses with little children remaining there until a family reunion (Vullnetari, 2007). Almost all the interviewees followed the same pathway of migrating toward a family or community member already abroad in the specified route (Dajç/Albania-Pistoia/Italy): by boat (initially), by overstaying their touristic visa (until 2010) or the three-month residency permit (after 2010).

Xhani (50, M) *...I left in 1994...by boat (shivers) and went to my first cousin, my uncle's son...after 4 years I got married and my wife came there... we decided to return in 2008 during our vacation in August here in Dajç...we came for a wedding and someone here in the village offered us a job...*

Following the trend of international migration characterizing especially rural areas of Albania, most of the 1990s' emigration was dominated by male migrants, which was reflected in their general absence. In the late '90s, as a result of family reunifications, the number of women out-migrating increased thus almost establishing an equal gender balance. The period after 2000 saw an increase in the number of old people migrating as well. The

continued community and kinship support was manifested when a sibling would come from Dajç and would seek shelter in the same way they the migrant themselves had done years ago.

This form of chain migration was evident in Italy as well as in USA.

According to the interviewees, parents have played a key role in the decision to out-migrate, to return and to readapt. Their financial, health and emotional wellbeing is mentioned from all the interviewees. If they are physically strong, the decision to migrate does not depend on them; if they can't handle being alone, then one of the sons has to stay with them or they have to go in Italy to the boy/s⁶.

Leonard (45, M) *...me and my big brother left first, in 1995...my uncle's son waited for us in Pistoia, he had left 6 months before us...then we took the little brother, who was 15 years old...my parents didn't come because our grandparents were alive and they needed someone to take care of them...today we have all Italian Papers, (Passports or residential permissions - Permesso di soggiorno) and we all came back to open our activities... We have however kept the house that we have in Italy...*

4.2. Family inside decision to return

There are 776 returnees in Dajç Commune. They came back mainly from Italy and only a few of them from Greece. They admit that they returned because of the decreasing incomes as a consequence of the financial crises in these two destination countries, but that wasn't the only

⁶ According to the Albanian patriarchal custom, sons are responsible to maintain their parents. While daughters 'belong' to the family of their husbands and have to take care for their parents – in law. When emigrants originate from the north, the 'traditional' gendered and patriarchally controlled patterns are found to be replicated more or less throughout the migration and remittance cycle (Codesal, et al., 2011).

factor. Some of them instead returned before the crisis began. Migrating for some years to get a job, earn some money and then going back to Albania and invest them has been a living strategy for many Albanians after 1990.

Our interview with Eduard begins with the history of a picture, an old picture of three teenagers (now over 30 years old). Eduard went to Italy and returned to open a big market, while the other two migrated to the USA.

Eduard (35, M): *...I earned some money in Italy and decided to open a market in the commune...I came back and my brother went to Italy...It was not a studied plan (laughs)... the only goal was not to stay on the road but to have a roof and a meal in a foreign country, and we have many people there so that was doable... I turned all the money into concrete and bricks (sighs)...we don't have much work here, only during August when migrants visit home does it seem like something is moving...*

While working and saving in Italy, the migrant people from this commune, which is known to be hard-working, used to send money to their families at home which were received and kept mainly by their parents. Having the intention to return but also not being very familiar with the banking system, they preferred to transfer money through relatives and friends. The first goal was to build a house, a big one, like abroad. As highlighted by Leutloff & Pichler (2014) “For a long time migrant families built huge and modern houses in their home-village – even if the house remained empty for most of the year. In this way houses become symbols for the longing for a home, an incarnation of those who are absent but still part of the (translocal) community, as well as a symbol of success abroad that transcends into status “at home” and in the translocal community” (p. 180).

Ermir (M, 47): *Ever since we were in Italy (me and my two brothers), we began to build our homes, three big, equal ones... We took the project of the house from there... My intention has always been to come back, from the very first day I left... after 12 years of migration the three of us indeed returned, first me, later on the other two brothers and their families... My girl was growing up and I wanted her to keep our values... teenagers there are different...*

Many migrants have houses in both places as if the detachment from the host country is not complete. Having an Italian citizenship and a house there is like having another option of living if something goes wrong in Albania. They consider it also as a good investment for the future if their children will want to live there. In the same line of rationality is the strategy of the migrants living abroad, which are the majority, and want to return home when they reach retirement age. The majority of them during their emigration time have constructed big houses reflecting the intention to return after a certain period. According to our key informant, 80% of the houses in the village are built from the migration incomes while only 33% of them are inhabited.

Establishing a financial capital, having a good house and gaining a good experience which might be of worth in the home country seem like milestones in the process of returning.

Cassarino (2008) refers to this process as return preparedness. The procurement of a satisfactory financial capital as well as a social one are also part of such preparation. This process depends on the circumstances created in the country of destination, in that of origin, by personal experiences or contextual factors. Besides constructing houses in the place of origin and putting money aside, migrants that planned their return had as well planned how to make a living once they would be back in Albania.

Martin (M, 33): *In Italy I used to work for a wood processing factory ...it exported wood products to different parts of Europe...After 15 years of work, the owner of the firm decided to replace all the machinery...I purchased the older ones from him for only 5 000 Euros... We (Martin and his brother) opened a workshop here and it is going very well...I feel happy that I chose to return.*

In all the interviews and narrations of life stories, the interviewees never failed to mention family members in their explanations of why they chose to return. Caring for their parents, helping their siblings and the financial stability of the greater family (parents and siblings and their families), as well as the future of their children and the importance of nurturing them with the values of the community of origin are elements that need to be considered a priori in the decision to return.

4.3. Family inside decision to return

2006 brought with it an increased interest of the emigrants to return. The number of houses built increased, and they became fancier, with at least two storeys such that the elderly parents and the siblings with their families could live there. The construction of these houses also reflected the desire to return in a near future. Today however these villas are empty, making Dajç look like a ghost village. From 2006 to 2010 the village seemed to be revitalizing with newer buildings and modern infrastructure built through self-financing and cooperation of the emigrating and non-emigrating communities. Newer businesses also opened their doors in the spheres of decorative plant cultivation, livestock farming, and wood processing workshops, often organized and managed on a family or kin basis.

The newer economic activities generally started by following the same experience of employment of the emigrants in their destination countries. Besides the financial remittances,

a role has been played by social remittances such as experience and knowledge gained abroad. The social capital of knowledge was often shared with family members especially in cases of co-management of the started businesses, which maximized income on an individual as well as a family basis. Return and re-adaptation however result to be neither easy nor sustainable.

‘Return migration is not as easy as it seems, it is not simply coming “home”’ (Davids & Van Houte 2008, p.172). Setting up their own businesses and working with family and kin members or very close friends has been the goal of the returnees, even though not all of them succeeded. The main activities that returnees have entrepreneurially engaged in are the cultivation of decorative plants, because most of them have worked in this sector in Italy; the trade of construction materials and wood products; starting catering services, small markets, car services, greenhouses and metal construction, livestock breeding, food industry (meat and dairy) etc. The majority of businesses have been started in the area of Dajç, but there are also others, mainly hotels and restaurants, opened in Shkodër and Velipojë (coastal region). Almost all of these economic activities have been managed by the returnees themselves, or through their close family members (brother, father). The staff employed in such activities are mainly from Dajç. Trust is an essential element in combating economic risk, and family offers this trust.

Kola (M, 48) *We (meaning the three brothers) are running three businesses: agricultural machine trade, cultivating and transporting decorative plants...many economic activities create the sense of safety: if we fail at one of them we still have the others...some of our cousins work as employers with us...*

But many return migrants are unhappy and disillusioned. Even though they are often economically better off than their neighbors, they seem disappointed and sometimes feel nostalgia for their moments abroad. This is the case of Bruno who, talking about his activity, expresses his regret that he came back, while his friend tries to emphasize from quite positive point of view his friend's achievements after returning.

Bruno (37, M): *It's very difficult here: the health service is really bad, the schools are almost empty, the houses are doll houses, with nobody living in them. It is very difficult to find someone that likes work, my market is empty during all the year...so few people coming in... I would like for my children to go and live elsewhere... not in Albania. God bless them, they are all free to go, except the little one, he has to stay with us because we need someone when we get old...*

The returnees strive to show that despite how much they appreciate their homeland values, now they feel different from the other villagers.

Francesco (30, M): *My way of thinking has changed... All the activities that returnees have opened are according to the rules. During these ten years we have paid all the taxes because we are used abroad to being regular responsible citizens... if it was up to me, I would send all the people from here to go to Italy, work for some months and see what hard work means, then come back again...*

4.4. Re-emigration and transnational movements

After 2015 the residents of Dajç began reconsidering emigration. A very impactful factor that led to this decision was related to the floods of 2010, which devastated many of the sprouting

businesses (Pazzi et. al, 2015). Emigrants from Dajç visited their home country periodically, mainly in August and December when family members, siblings, relatives and friends had pre-planned their important celebrations (weddings, engagements, gatherings etc); built their big houses in Dajç by actively taking parts from the project of the house to the investment and construction process; sent remittances on a regular basis which were bigger when a member of the family had an important event (wedding, funeral, education, health problems etc); participated in important family decisions and continuously kept in touch via phone or the internet. Emigrants had an important voice in decision-making in the homeland and vice-versa. Thus, a transnational field was created which relied mainly on family relations, but kin and blood relationships were still important.

In the meantime proximity continued to count as a factor, as the 'Italian' group closer to Dajç was the most likely candidate for establishing transnational ties. The geographical proximity to Italy and the reduced cost of travelling has promoted the free movement of inhabitants to each other's' places, to children, parents, relatives. Being so close has also facilitated the establishment of transnational ties especially in the business activities. Actually both, return migration and transnationalism exist in the interplay between the personal and the social (Carling & Erdal 2014; Dahinden, 2010). Meanwhile in the case of visits, sometimes long-term ones, the importance of proximity has faded and the role of family constellation is highlighted. Older people are involved as well in this transnationalism either as migrants themselves, or through the effects of the migration of their family members (Vullnetari, 2015). This is obvious when financial stability exists and parents and relatives subsequently move to Italy or to the USA, to a son and then to the other. The preservation of familiar connections between the country of origin and that of destination also depends on the level of social capital earned abroad. Those with higher levels of social capital would be more likely to forge transnational links than those with less capital (Kivisto & Faist 2009).

The impact of the distance between the destination and origin countries appears weaker when compared to that of the family. In the case of the rural area of Dajç, independent of the destination place, links with the family remain strong. When financially healthy, old people move in Italy, USA or other places, from one child to the other...

Angjelin (M, 50): *For some years I stayed in the USA with my big brother. I tried to work there, but working all day with long hours was not the case for me... so I considered moving to the other brother in Italy. With the start of the financial crisis there I judged it more convenient to stay in Albania. I move less, but my parents continuously move from one brother to the other despite their old age ...*

Gjovalin (brother of A. N., 32): *My parents spend the summer in the USA, with my little brother... plak (the father) likes to come here in September because the raki⁷ season starts and he wants to be present for its duration... and then they (the parents) move to Italy to stay with the other brother's family...he mostly lives there and they like to spend the winters in Italy. It is warmer in their Italian apartment than in our big house here...this is how they lead their life...*

But the parents are not the only ones involved in such frequent visits. Relatives and friends are also involved in similar double-sided movements in the host and the home country, thus emphasizing the importance of return visits in the establishment and continuity (and occasionally the disruption) of transnational ties. These visits often condition the type of

⁷ Raki – traditional alcoholic beverage made mainly from grape.

wider exchanges that take place within transnational social fields, not least because they consist of meetings of groups that have different perceptions and experiences of mobility (Vathi & King 2011). In the case of this small rural community, these visits, often long ones in terms of time duration, also reflect the solidarity with relatives.

Kristian (M, 45): *We came back since 2007. My son, the eldest, 15 years old, goes every summer to Italy to attend a summer school. He stays with my brother's family who got my job after I left. He couldn't come back because his children are older than mine and they want to stay in Italy...I don't blame them, I want my children to go there again as well when they grow up...*

Solidarity is also revealed in material terms. Returnees talk about the way they managed the household, land or agriculture when they were abroad. This confirms the framework described by Leutloff-Grandits & Pichler (2014) 'Often enough, migrants abroad and villagers at home still constitute a single household, meaning that the property of a father has not been divided among his sons and the latter invest jointly in property "at home" as well as family festivals in the native village, often ignoring the fact that those abroad contribute the lion's share'. (p. 182) This fact is true not only in the case of returned migrants, but also in cases when migrants continue to live abroad and that in the same time have invested in starting businesses in their country of origin. These businesses are managed by the parents, mostly the father, or the brothers. These are mainly characterizations of the trade of decorative plants, bars, and restaurants which peak in summer.

Francesko (45, M): *We are running three different businesses but we don't have anything divided, each of us lives in different houses here, but there (Italy) we have the same place to go to. We also take care equally for our parents, sometimes me, sometimes my brother...*

Pjeter (68, M): *I manage during the year the restaurant that my son opened. He comes in the summer, and he brings with him the deliverables. This kind of business is not easy to maintain because the client asks for service of high quality... For my wife and me this engagement with the restaurant is important, as we have something to do, pass the day with it and are busy all the time...*

In Dajç commune 325 families out of a total of 2234 families, are composed of lonely old people. As highlighted by Vullnetari (2015) 'Older parents position themselves as guardians of these homes, perhaps among the very few who truly understand the human cost and the more-than-material value of remittances' (p, 6). According to the key informant many more would have left, but especially people of older age miss the land, the livestock, the home, and so they prefer to live alone and wait.

Maria (70, F): *(removing the dust from a cupboard) this is the room of my son's family...this is his bed, here will sleep my nephew... they sent money to build this house...but they live here only one month a year...*

In spite of the supportive role played by the family, cases of returnees and started businesses, the population of this rural area has diminished significantly. Returning didn't turn out to be sustainable, and today it is unlikely to come across people in the streets of the village, very different from years ago.

Martin (20, M): *My last friend, who was also my age, has left as well.*

As defined by previous studies: “Looking to the future, as families increasingly regroup in the destination countries, as the older generation left behind dies off, and as large-scale return migration seems unlikely for the time being, the transnational phase of the second generation’s upbringing may likewise pass away along with a shrinking or reshaping of transnational social fields” (Vathi & King. 2011, p. 517).

5. Conclusions

Family and blood links have been determinant factors in the decisions taken by Albanians with regard to migration, its continuation, return or remigration. These decisions are based on the economic, social and psychological well-being not only for the migrant in the individual level, but also in the family and kin ones. From the same rationale follows the process of adaptation for returned migrants, where the investment of financial and social remittances has been accomplished for and through the family as well. This impact is harder to be tracked in the large urban areas, oriented towards an individualistic approach, but remains more evident in Albanian families of rural areas.

According to the New Economics of Migration approach, migration is considered to be a living strategy for the migrating individual as much as for the entire family. This strategy becomes noticeable from the moment of deciding to leave, which results after a consultation with the family. This consultation can consist of a clear conversation with the other family members, but can also arise as a consequence of a silent self-evaluation of the conditions that they, the potential migrant, are momentarily in. The second case is more applicable to decision-making by individuals that have more vulnerable family members, such as children, elderly parents or ailing relatives. Chain migration is the first reflection of the impact that

family and kin links have in the choice of emigration destination, job and approach to integration. The first to be “pulled” to the destination country are the closest family members, and then the circle extends to include more distant relatives and community members. The continuity of migration and the ways of its exploitation as a living strategy are also based on the analysis of attracting and repelling factors related to the well-being of the family. In the early 1990s, conditioned by the high levels of poverty, the material well-being of the family was considered a priority. This can be observed in the initial consumption of financial income, which primarily went to the construction of big houses that at the same time reflected the myth of return. The utilization of social capital was also undertaken by relying on the knowledge, support and opportunities offered by the family’s and community’s emigrants. Living beside each other in the home or host country, building quite similar houses, being all part of the care-taking process for their parents and in the same time helping each other in the children-raising process tell us how big the role of the family constellations is. This role is not limited only within the area of Dajç Commune but it is obvious also in the transnational field created during the years of migration in the relationship between the origin and destination country. In accordance with the three types of transnational social fields given by Faist, we defined: Kinship groups reflected mainly in the chain migration and the possibilities to work at each other’s’ activities; transnational circuit in the creation of joint business and agricultural activities and the transnational community as migrants of Italy and the USA have created respective organizations (Alba Migrantes and Mother Teresa) in order to co-finance different investments in the commune concerning mainly the rehabilitation of infrastructure and agriculture.

However, these strong community and family transnational ties seem to weaken in the case of second-generation migrants. The difficulties of re-adaptation coming from the sharp differences between the host and home countries and the lack of institutional support from the

latter, may lead to a re-consideration of migration. The existence of a part of the family abroad makes the idea of migrating again easier. The difficult economic situation of the commune, the low number of returnees and the high number of people intending to migrate are indicators of the fact that massive returns are still unlikely. Transnational ties based on family constellations and social networks might be a good resource for the development of the commune. However, future plans and expectations depend on the second-generation migrants who are gradually forgetting their roots.

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