

Between Hope and Despair: Exploring Experiences and Belonging of Return Migrants and Their Children in Albania

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Abstract : Return migration is receiving increased attention as the phenomenon challenges assumptions of natural 'homecomings'. This talk outlines preliminary findings from an ongoing PhD study which explores return migration of Albanian migrants (aged 30-50 years) and their children (aged 7-18 years). Participants (n=51) were purposively recruited from two Albanian cities with divergent social and economic conditions, and the majority had returned from Greece following the recent economic downturn in that country. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with respondents aged 13 years and above, and were augmented with focus groups and family case studies. Data collection for case studies was aided by photo elicitation, interviews and participatory techniques (drawing) were employed for children aged 7-12 years. Through a multidisciplinary perspective, findings will uncover experiences of migrants and children upon return, the quest to identify with the originating country and create a sense of belongingness. Narrative analysis reveals that the abrupt return was associated with ambivalent feelings and disillusionment about their (re)settlement for both younger and older participants. Faced with unexpected realities and lack of opportunities, particularly for the children of migrants, Albania is viewed as a 'transit country', a temporary solution to escape the crisis in the destination country and move to a more developed western country. Adult return migrants articulate lack of employment and insecurity for the future. Apart from school difficulties, children experience isolation and social exclusion, marked by stigmatized labelling from other peers which exacerbates their belonging. Such mobilities have had deeper effects in complicating family relationships as influenced by many disintegration factors. Feelings of alienation and being emigrant for the second time were common in participants' accounts. Findings concerning the difficulties of individuals (re)connecting with their ethnic background and the impact on their identities are discussed in relation to the literature on return migration and identification.

Keywords : return migration, belonging, identity, disintegration, integration

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