

INTEGRATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE CASE OF ALBANIAN IMMIGRANTS IN VIENNA AND ATHENS

ARTICLE

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Today, the complexity of migration as a global phenomenon reveals the variety of its national and regional realities along with the related historical background that defines and frames it. In Europe, the altering of the shape of migration that took place from the end of the 1980s largely contributed to its re-conceptualization in the light of a new globalized, diversified and highly politicized environment.

Rather than being systemized in line with a set of traditional typological patterns, contemporary migration shows a variety of fluctuating forms, modes and geographies. Migration flows have a changing nature (i.e. mixed migration) and migrants may show persistence to reach particular countries of destination (i.e. Germany during the refugee crisis in 2015-16). This corroborates the existence of a complex set of factors that enable contemporary human mobility through the developing of networks and inventing of strategies (Bobić & Janković, 2017, p. 15). Furthermore, by making use of social media, transnational ties and links with specific actors in countries of origin and destination, migrants are able to activate their own agency.

Traditionally, the migration narrative has viewed migrants' settlement as an end state based on the idea that, once migrants have settled in the country of destination, migration becomes self-perpetuating because it creates the social and economic structures (e.g. networks) to sustain the process (Castles & Miller, 2009; Bakewell et al., 2011, p. 6). This approach, however, pays little attention to the contextual dynamics unfolding both in receiving and origin countries. These change the initial conditions under which migration takes place (de Haas, 2010) and the role of migrants' agency in developing new strategies for responding to the continuously changing situation (Gemi, 2014, p. 13).

With the issue of integration reflecting the persistence of the connection between migrant integration and the nation state, the notion of transnationalism seems to transcend the earlier static assumptions, aiming to shed light on the practices developed between individual, collective and governmental actors located in two or more countries. It has been widely acknowledged that the transnational perspective has substantially changed the understanding of migrants' cognitive geographies, their pathways of integration, and their patterns of mobility (Vathi, 2015, p. 117). In fact, transnational mobility can be clearly

placed in the framework of the integration discourse, where national integration policies as well as citizenship regimes are considered as opportunity structures that may encourage, discourage or shape the degrees and types of immigrants' involvement in transnational activities. In the context of redefining the concept of integration as a three-way process (country of destination, country of origin, and migrant him/herself), integration and transnationalism have gained a prominent role in understanding the multiple trajectories of migrants.

In this study we seek to identify the patterns of interaction between integration and transnationalism under specific context-bound national and local conditions and see how they shape the dynamics of migration trajectories of Albanian migrants. It does so by applying a comparative cross-national and cross-local perspective, focusing on two (receiving) countries that represent different migration and integration regimes, Greece and Austria, particularly focusing on two local metropolitan areas: Athens and Vienna.

Our analytical approach is based on the argument that these complex processes take place within migration systems that connect countries and regions. It functions as a typological paradigm of an EU-Western Balkans migration system that takes into account the (a) heterogeneity and multiple dynamics of migration trajectories, (b) changes (e.g., economic crisis, stagnation) occurring in a migration system, and (c) the role of migrants' agency (vis-à-vis structure). The methodology relies on the multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, which is based on 30 interviews conducted in Athens, Greece and in Vienna, Austria.

An explanatory typology of integration and transnationalism

The two countries differ significantly in terms of political organization, their model of governance, the economic and labor market structure, and migration patterns. Although they are both members of the EU, Greece is an economically unstable country of the southern EU, recently hit by a dual crisis, both financial and humanitarian. It emerged as a destination country at the beginning of the 1990s and hence had little experience in managing migration and integration. On the other hand, Austria is an economically and politically stable country with a different migration and integration legacy, representing the North-Western European regime.

Although there are differences, the two countries share some similarities. These similarities can largely be attributed to the large-scale presence of a migrant population from the countries of the Western Balkans, to the existent historical, political, economic and cultural ties with Albania, and to their strategic geographical positions on the European map.

In both countries, integration policies are particularly stringent. Despite acknowledging multiculturalism as a permanent feature, the citizenship regime remains based on the *ius sanguinis*. In contrast to Greece, where dual citizenship is recognized, migrants in Austria have to renounce their previous nationality, although with certain exceptions. In this vein, naturalization is conceptualized as "reward" (Jurado, 2008, p. 5) for a migrant's assimilation, rather than as an institutional tool for deepening integration.

In terms of integration, Albanians seem rather to follow an assimilation trajectory, which is paradoxically coupled with weak bonding and bridging social capital. Interestingly, at individual level the attention is primarily focused on coming as close as possible to Austrian and Greek social patterns, which means “hiding” any sort of difference and preferably becoming “invisible”. Some attribute it to the “impersonal face” of integration patterns applied in Austria, whereas in Greece it is linked with embedded discrimination.

Considering Greece and Athens, the study reveals that in the absence of any plan or specific local integration policy, migrants have achieved a certain degree of integration by themselves, a process that has been called one-way rather than two-way integration. To put it differently, integration (assimilation) “happens by accident” as migrants are left to their own devices. This has paved the ground for the emergence of individual strategies, in which some migrants remain attached to their own culture, while others assimilate very quickly and the remainders live in-between cultures.

In Austria, the prevailing integration paradigm promoted by both conservative and social democratic parties is the idea of assimilation (Fassmann & Reeger, 2008, p. 33). Opposing this approach, the city government in Vienna has consistently promoted the idea of cultural diversity and multiculturalism, including tailor-made integration measures and policies according to local special needs and conditions (Biffl, 2017, p. 168).

With regard to transnationalism, different patterns are also identified, which are mostly attributed to different migration governance and welfare regimes, to geographical distances (e.g. proximity between Greece and Albania), labor market priorities, as well as bilateral agreements with Albania.

In Greece, relatively recent political developments such as the liberalization of entry visas for Albanian citizens entering the EU, the economic crisis, and the strong tendency of lapsing into irregularity caused a cascade of events that include the increase of transnational/circular mobility and the search for other migratory destinations. In fact, de-legalization/disintegration is considered an emerging phenomenon in transnationalism, also strengthening the explanatory typology of reactive transnationalism. In fact, when transnationalism emanates from exclusion in the host society, then there is a negative integration denominator (Bivand Erdal & Oeppen, 2013, p. 878). As this study further indicates, the types and forms of transnational activities depend primarily on the level of integration vis-à-vis exclusion in the host countries and, secondly, the openness of opportunity structures in the homeland. In the case of Albanian migrants in Vienna, it becomes clear that deeper integration/assimilation has led to the limitation of transnational activities, both in their form and their intensity.

In an attempt to synthesize the findings, this study has identified a typology of causal relation between integration and transnationalism, which is structured around three categories: migration pattern, level of integration/assimilation, and forms of transnational activities. According to this, the Austrian paradigm encompasses a more nuanced transnational pattern of Albanian migration. It encapsulates a type of linear transnationalism along with some

elements of a resource dependent transnationalism. The first suggests that as integration/assimilation of Albanians in Austria has increased, their transnational activities (if any) have gradually decreased. The second type, on the other hand, implies that financial and human resources are needed for engaging in transnational activities, thereby assuming a positive relationship between integration and transnationalism. Indeed, the transnational transfers of Albanians are mostly related to professional projects and studying of highly skilled individuals. Finally, the Greek paradigm falls within the type of reactive transnationalism. This implies a positive relationship between exclusion (negative integration) and transnationalism, which results from discrimination or a negative experience of integration that migrants face in the host society.

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