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Migratory Movements in Tirana During the Year 2020

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Abstract

This paper addresses urban development phenomena in Tirana, focusing on migratory movements during 2020 under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the number of residents who changed their residence during this year, the reasons for this decision, and official data on the number of houses sold during this period. This study used qualitative methods, including interviews and informal conversations. Data processing involved transcribing conversations and interviews, categorizing them by themes, and utilizing participants' quotes from the study. Qualitative data analysis reveals that most interviewees identified better educational opportunities for their children and improved living conditions as the primary reasons for leaving their place of origin and moving to Tirana during the pandemic. Additionally, the data show a decline in house sales in Tirana during the same period. This research emphasizes a small group of individuals expressing a sense of returning to their previous residences during the pandemic. This longing was motivated by the sense of security their hometowns provided. This is attributed to the low population density in their cities or villages of origin and the fact that families were united to cope with challenging situations.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, migratory movements, place of origin, adaptation, return to the place of origin, etc.

1- Introduction

Given that Tirana is the capital of the country it has to and does indeed fulfill the function of a political and administrative center, as well as welcoming and accommodating international actors in business, culture, sports, diplomacy, science, and other spheres of life, as well as representatives of international institutions. This role has inevitably led to the development of urban and human capital that enables and facilitates professional and social interaction between these groups of individuals. The quality of life and standards of living, level of services, communication infrastructure, and other social amenities such as education, service facilities, shopping streets, recreational facilities, and entertainment mean that this is a fairly clearly defined social space in the urban context of Tirana with its own

territorial and social boundaries. Everyone can tell where the restaurants are, the food and industrial markets, the fruit and vegetable markets, and where the population of different kinds lives in the urban area of the capital (Mulita, R., 2013: 153-154).

Tirana is the country's central city and for the people from other cities and villages of the Republic of Albania, it is the "promised land". The migration process has increased after 1990 and is still ongoing in the present day. Families and individuals are still leaving their homes and settling in Tirana daily. The highest concentration of newcomers was observed in the most developed cities of Albania. In 2020, Tirana was the Albanian capital with the highest net internal migration with 5,226 people arriving than leaving the city. On the other hand, Dibra was the district with the lowest migration rate because 990 people left rather than moved in. (Tirana had the highest net internal migration rate in 2020 with 5,226 people arriving than departing while Dibra had the lowest rate with 990 people leaving than coming in. (http://www.instat.gov.al/media/9432/vjetari-statistikor-2021_final-29122021.pdf, p. 50, cited on 15.04.2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted urban development trends, especially migration patterns. According to data from the Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Albania, approximately 7,170 people migrated in 2020, a notable decline compared to 2019, when 20,753 individuals migrated. (http://www.instat.gov.al/al/temat/treguesit-demografik%C3%AB-dhe-social%C3%AB/migracioni-dhe-integrimi-i-migrant%C3%ABve/#tab2, cited on 11.04.2022).

2- Methodological Aspects

This paper is based on an analysis of both primary and secondary data. It includes a review of the literature and studies related to COVID-19 and urban development. Furthermore, it examines statistical yearbooks and reports published by the Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Albania. These documents provide insights into migration patterns, housing sale prices, and building permits issued during the pandemic years.

Qualitative methods, such as interviews and open discussions, were utilized to conduct this study and present its findings. These methods aim to scientifically understand the reality, phenomena, or problems that are being investigated.

The interview is a specific type of verbal communication designed to facilitate data collection between the researcher and participants regarding the formulated research questions. This study will primarily focus on unstructured or open-ended interviews, as the aim is to explore the reasons why the interviewees left their place of origin to settle in Tirana.

3- Literature Review

Urban sociology focuses on the city and its social dimensions. These dimensions include aspects such as population, social movements within urban areas, organizations, and social connections. Internal migration is a significant phenomenon that has greatly impacted urban life. Large cities, which tend to offer more employment opportunities, attract migrants, resulting in substantial changes and transformations in urban environments. Conversely, some cities face depopulation as a result of migrants leaving.

Urbanization is the movement of the population into towns and cities, away from rural farmland, which results when cities grow in population, perhaps partly through natural increase but mainly through migration from rural areas by people in search of the economic opportunities associated with urban life (Giddens, A.,2021:770).

Internal migration refers to the ongoing movement of individuals or groups across symbolic or political boundaries as they relocate to new residential areas and communities. Sociological research on migration is diverse and often intersects with broader topics, such as kinship studies, social networks, and economic development. In the analysis of migration, a common distinction is made between push and pull factors (Marshall, G., 2009: 247).

According to a study published by the Bank of Albania on the real estate market for the first half of 2020, market indicators suggest that more agents believe the situation has worsened than those who think it has improved. The total number of homes sold by the 165 entities included in the study was 825, which is approximately 176 fewer than in the previous six months. Around 35% of the homes sold during this period were purchased by non-residents.

The study also forecasts a decline in the number of properties sold in the next six months, while demand for rental housing and commercial properties is expected to increase. Additionally, rental prices for properties in the capital region, particularly in the city center, are anticipated to rise. (https://www.bankofalbania.org/rc/doc/19102020_Per_publikim_Tregu_i_pasurive_te_paluajtshme_6MI_2020_17708.pdf, cited on 14.04.2022).

4. Discussion of Findings and Analysis

On March 8, 2020, the Republic of Albania confirmed its first two cases of COVID-19. In the following days, the number of cases rose, prompting the government to implement measures similar to those adopted by many countries around the world. On March 13, 2020, the closure of major cities, including Tirana, the capital, was announced. It was decided that school and university education would continue through online platforms. Movement was restricted to specific time slots for the purchase of essential food items.

The nearly two-month lockdown resulted in significant changes to lifestyle, social interactions, and urban developments in cities around the world. The urban landscape of the capital city was also impacted by the pandemic, leading to a decrease in the number of people choosing to settle in Tirana during and after 2020. Due to its high population density, the capital faced an increased risk of COVID-19 transmission. Additionally, the pandemic further highlighted issues related to the weakening sense of community in some cities, as messages like "stay at home" encouraged more self-centered behaviors. (https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7499053/, cited on 14.04.2022).

M.N., a woman in her mid-40s, moved to Tirana in September 2020. During an interview, she shared, "*We decided as a family to move to Tirana to be closer to our daughter, who was starting university. Even though her classes were online, we wanted her to be near the school and not miss out on her education. It was a significant challenge for all of us, but we couldn't leave her alone in such a difficult situation*."

Migration potential is higher among men than women in Albania, which is attributed to the country's traditional society where men typically lead the migration process. Women often follow later through family reunification or marriage (Gëdeshi, I., King, R., 2018:41).

Sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi, in his book "*Vështrime të kryqëzuara në det*", states: "Most young Albanians, especially those who emigrate, are not pessimistic. Although they currently experience lower economic well-being and have fewer opportunities for advancement compared to their peers in Eastern and Western European countries, the majority of young Albanians remain optimistic. Furthermore, if young people - and Albanians in general - were truly pessimistic and unwilling to make sacrifices for a better life, they would not undertake the 'hellish' journey to reach the 'shores of hope'. Instead, they would resign themselves to their fate in Albania" (Dervishi, Z., 2009:21).

Despite the global pandemic in 2020, young Albanians continued to relocate, driven by optimism and the hope for a better life in the capital city of Albania.

In 2020, a total of 961 building permits were approved for new constructions. In the fourth quarter of 2020, 306 building permits were granted for new developments, which is an increase from 202 permits approved in the fourth quarter of 2019. This represents a 51.5% growth year-over-year. (http://www.instat.gov.al/al/publikime/njoftime-p%C3%ABr-media/, Building Permits Q4 2020, cited on 11.04.2022).

S.F., a woman in her mid-40s living in Administrative Unit No. 8, shared her observations in an interview: "*In my neighborhood, there has been a significant increase in new construction projects since the second half of 2020. A group of private houses were demolished, and high-rise buildings are currently being built in their place.*

In the former Dinamo Factory area, 10 and 12-story apartment complexes are nearing completion. What stood out to me is that construction work was only suspended in March 2020. After that, I consistently saw workers arriving in groups every day and working closely together, despite gatherings being officially prohibited."

After the pandemic, an increase in prices has been observed across all sectors, including the construction industry. According to data from the Institute of Statistics in Albania, the Construction Cost Index for residential buildings - a metric that tracks the price trends of construction materials, labor costs, and other capital expenditures - showed a 0.1% increase in the fourth quarter of 2020. These costs are categorized into six main areas according to EUROSTAT's classification for the Construction Cost Index: material costs, labor costs, machinery expenses, transportation costs, energy expenses, and other expenditures. (http://www.instat.gov.al/al/publikime/njoftime-p%C3%ABr-media/, Construction Cost Index for Residential Buildings, Q4-2020, cited on 11.04.2022).

In a casual conversation, R.T., a man in his mid-50s who works for a private construction company, said, "*After the pandemic, we noticed a rise in the cost of raw materials needed for construction, which inevitably led to an increase in the prices of apartments and houses*."

During the pandemic, some individuals chose to return to their hometowns for various reasons, including a desire to be close to family during difficult times and to minimize contact with unfamiliar people. J.L., a woman in her 40s, shared her experience: "*I moved back to my hometown of Delvinë and stayed there until September 2020. I continued working online for a private company. This was to avoid contact with strangers in Tirana and to be close to my parents and other family members so that if we were infected, we could support each other*."

H.Z., a man in his mid-60s, emphasized during an interview, "*I returned to my home in Elbasan to reduce my risk of infection, as Tirana had the highest number of cases from the very beginning of the pandemic. I'm grateful I didn't sell my house in Elbasan; it proved to be invaluable during these challenging times*."

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions and recommendations can be drawn. The nearly two-month isolation period resulted in significant changes to lifestyles, social interactions, and developments across cities and countries worldwide. The pandemic also impacted urban development in the capital, leading to a decline in the number of people moving to Tirana during and after 2020. After the pandemic, a noticeable increase in prices has been seen across all sectors, including construction. During the pandemic, many people chose to return to their hometowns for various reasons. Some sought to stay with family to navigate challenging situations together, while others aimed to minimize contact with unfamiliar

individuals. In light of the changes brought about by the pandemic, healthcare institutions, local authorities, and the community need to collaborate in restoring a normal urban life. This collaboration is a key recommendation of this study.

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