



YOUTH MIGRATION IN ALBANIA: CAUSES AND POLICY RESPONSES

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Abstract

This research paper examines youth migration in Albania, identifying key drivers such as economic conditions, educational aspirations, and social networks. According to the data, there has been a significant increase in migration among individuals aged 15-29, as well as a notable rise in asylum applications from this demographic as young Albanians seek better opportunities. In response, the Albanian government has implemented policies aimed at job creation and educational enhancement. Collaborative efforts with international organizations are also underway to promote safe migration and support the reintegration of returnees. The current study highlights the urgent need for targeted strategies to address the root causes of youth migration, as well as the effective implementation of existing policies and initiatives, to promote sustainable development in Albania.

Keywords: Youth Migration, Economic Factors, Labor Market, Educational Aspirations, Migration Trends, Policy Responses

INTRODUCTION

Youth migration studies are essential for identifying trends in migration behavior, revealing factors such as education and employment opportunities that influence young people's decisions to migrate.

However, it is necessary to first set forth a clear definition of youth migration. In the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2019) study, youth migration is categorized from the perspectives of various institutions and organizations as follows:

“... in initiatives by the European Union young people may range from 13 to 30 years of age (European Commission, 2011). The UN and Global Migration Group define youth as any individual aged from 15 to 24 (Global Migration Group, 2014). Other international organizations refer to young people being aged between 10 and 24 years (UNFPA, 2014; WHO, 2019).”

Moreover, Belmonte et al. (2020, p. 8) in the technical report Youth and Migration: An Overview concluded that:

“... youth migration can be defined as a form of mobility which takes place during young people's transitions to adulthood (understood broadly as occurring between 15 and 29 years of age) and interacts with the formative personal, familial and social transformations involved therein. Migration during the transition to adulthood can provide specific opportunities and challenges which influence their subsequent adult lives.”

Referring to global statistics, between 1990 and 2020, the number of young migrants aged 15 to 24 increased from 22.1 million to 31.7 million. By 2020, this demographic represented 11.3 percent of all migrants and 2.6 percent of the global youth population (UN DESA, 2020). Addressing these trends requires a comprehensive approach that includes economic reforms, educational improvements, and policies aimed at creating a more conducive environment for youth retention.

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive examination of youth migration in Albania by first reviewing existing literature and then identifying the key socio-economic and personal factors that drive this migration. Subsequently, the study will present data-driven insights related to this phenomenon in Albania. Finally, this research will identify policies and institutional responses to youth migration, aiming to provide a clear overview of the situation for policymakers to effectively address the associated challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Different researchers and authors have studied youth migration and concluded that it significantly impacts both individuals and societies. For instance, Mihi-Ramirez and Kumpikaite (2014) conducted a structured survey to explore Lithuanian undergraduates'

attitudes toward migration, engaging 1,250 students from countries with increasing academic mobility. Their study highlighted the significance of economic factors as both push and pull factors for student migration, noting that family support and scholarships are crucial for educational mobility. Understanding economic indicators like per capita income, GDP, and wage trends is essential for predicting future academic mobility. Additionally, motivations to emigrate vary by country, with political stability, climate, language, and other cultural factors frequently cited.

Additionally, Heckert (2015) examines two primary factors that differentiate youth migration: the motivations of young migrants and the financial backing from their families. Education drives nearly 25% of youth migration periods, while labor migration increases notably between the ages of 16 and 24, in contrast to a decline in family-related migration. About two-thirds of unmarried youth migrants rely on financial assistance from their parents, suggesting that youth migration often represents a continued phase of parental investment. The study argues that migration theories should integrate education-related migration as an essential element of human-capital investment. Furthermore, the diversity of migration experiences throughout life has not been thoroughly investigated, and education migration should be viewed as a means for families to enhance their children's future prospects.

Alternatively, Hassan et al. (2020) indicate that migration is driven by push factors such as inadequate health and education facilities and pull factors like better opportunities in urban areas. They note a shift from joint to nuclear families among migrants, with improved socio-economic conditions for many, though some face challenges. The research recommends enhancing opportunities in both rural and urban areas to reduce migration pressures.

Moreover, Sardak et al. (2021) highlight that examining trends in international youth migration reveals its increasing importance and impact on social development. Positively, youth migration can enhance human potential, enrich public life, promote scientific progress, and improve communication. However, it also poses challenges, including environmental degradation, increased transport and social issues, the spread of disease, and rising crime. Despite these concerns, global demographic trends show an upward trajectory in both international and local youth migration by the mid-21st century, further shaping social development.

The findings of Khan et al. (2023), reveal that push factors such as lack of job opportunities, low wages, and social discrimination significantly drive migration, while pull factors like better employment opportunities and improved living standards also contribute.

Additionally, the research indicates that although many migrants are influenced by both push and pull factors, addressing push factors is crucial for effective policy development; demographic elements like marital status and age positively influence the length of stay, whereas education level and pre-migration income have a negative effect.

CAUSES OF YOUTH MIGRATION IN ALBANIA

Migration, particularly among highly qualified young individuals, is a significant phenomenon in Albania. Various factors, such as economic, educational, social, and political conditions, contribute to this situation.

When discussing economic factors, key indicators include high unemployment rates and low wages, which significantly influence migration decisions. Albania has faced persistent challenges with high youth unemployment rates. According to the Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the unemployment rate in Albania (aged 15-29 years), increased from 21.5% in 2019 to 22.2% in 2023. This represents a change of 0.7 percentage points over the five-year period. During this timeframe, the increase indicates a slight deterioration in the population's employment situation, prompting young people to seek opportunities elsewhere for better job prospects and higher wages.

As a further point, in 2023, the gross average monthly wage in Albania was approximately €714 (INSTAT, 2024), while the gross average monthly wage in the European Union varied significantly by country, but it was approximately €3,840 (EUROSTAT, 2024).¹

Moreover, the limited availability of high-quality education programs motivates students to seek education abroad. The research of King and Gëdeshi (2020) on the actual and potential migration of students from Albania indicates that students' express concerns about the quality of education in Albanian universities, highlighting issues such as a lack of practical application, limited scientific research, and insufficient resources. Consequently, foreign universities are seen as providing valuable knowledge and skills that are lacking in Albania, along with diplomas that hold greater international recognition and can enhance employability in the global job market. As a result, many seek foreign institutions for better opportunities and internationally recognized diplomas, driven primarily by the desire for an international career (77%) and the prestige of attending a renowned university (66%), with a stronger emphasis placed on career prospects.

¹ Author's calculations, The EU's average salary is €24/hour
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lc.lci.lev_custom_13042709/default/table?lang=en

As an added point, political instability and corruption are significant factors driving youth migration. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) shows that Albania scored 37, indicating a perceived level of public sector corruption that is closer to being classified as highly corrupt, thereby highlighting ongoing challenges in addressing this issue.

Family connections and networks play an additional role in influencing youth migration in Albania. Established Albanian diaspora communities in countries like Italy, Greece, and the USA create supportive networks that facilitate migration by offering valuable information about job opportunities, housing, and the immigration process. Families often assist in covering the financial costs of migration, making it easier for young people to relocate abroad. Furthermore, personal referrals from family members can enhance job prospects, easing the transition into a new environment. Emotional support from family also helps reduce feelings of isolation and uncertainty, making the prospect of migration more attractive.

The public health service situation in Albania has a significant impact on youth migration, as many young people seek better healthcare opportunities and quality of life abroad due to insufficient services and facilities at home. Limited access to quality healthcare and a shortage of medical professionals compel youth to consider migration as a viable option for their well-being and future prospects. When analyzing the figures related to public expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP in Albania, it is noted that this figure was 2.98% in 2022. This indicates a decrease compared to 2021, when public expenditure on health was 3.36% of GDP (Albania in Figures, 2022).

Globalization has made migration more accessible for Albanian youth, making it an attractive option. The rise in international travel opportunities and the impact of global media have both played pivotal roles in shaping their aspirations for life and work abroad. According to tourism statistics, Albanian citizens' departures during the five-year period from 2019 to 2023 increased by 16.7%. This growth could have been even more substantial taking into account the decline in the movement of citizens in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic (INSTAT, 2024).

YOUTH MIGRATION TRENDS IN ALBANIA: A DATA-DRIVEN INSIGHT

The data comparison between the 2011 and 2023 census periods (as illustrated in Figure 1) indicates a noticeable decline in the population of the 15-29 age group, dropping from 704,297 in 2011 to 430,330 in 2023, suggesting high levels of emigration among this demographic.

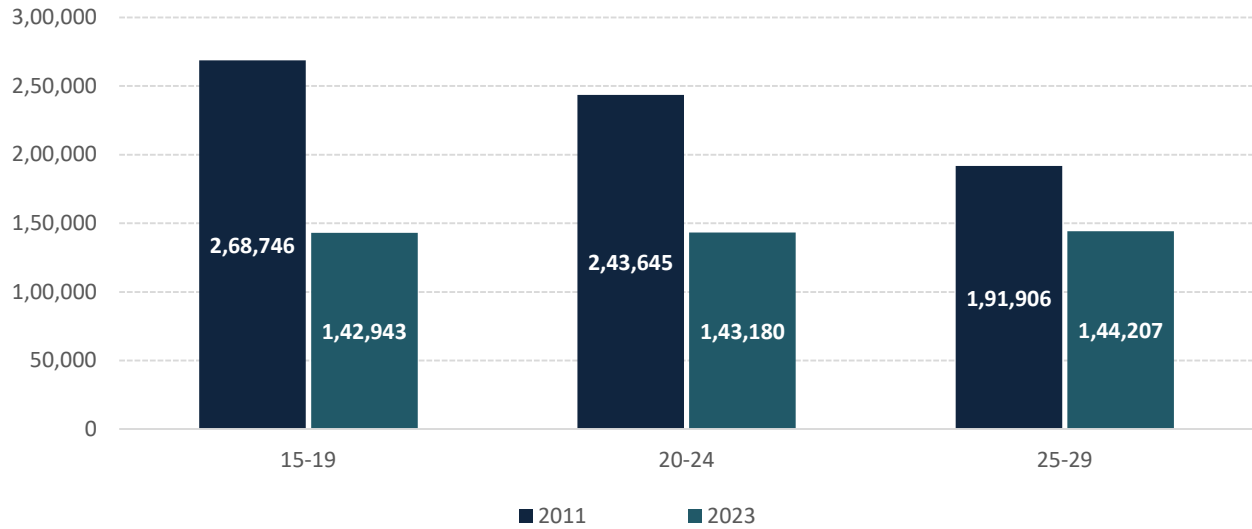


Figure 1. Resident population by age group in Albania, 2011 and 2023
Source: INSTAT (census data)

Figure 2 illustrates the trends in asylum applicants from Albania to EU-27 countries, categorized by age group, between 2014 and 2023.

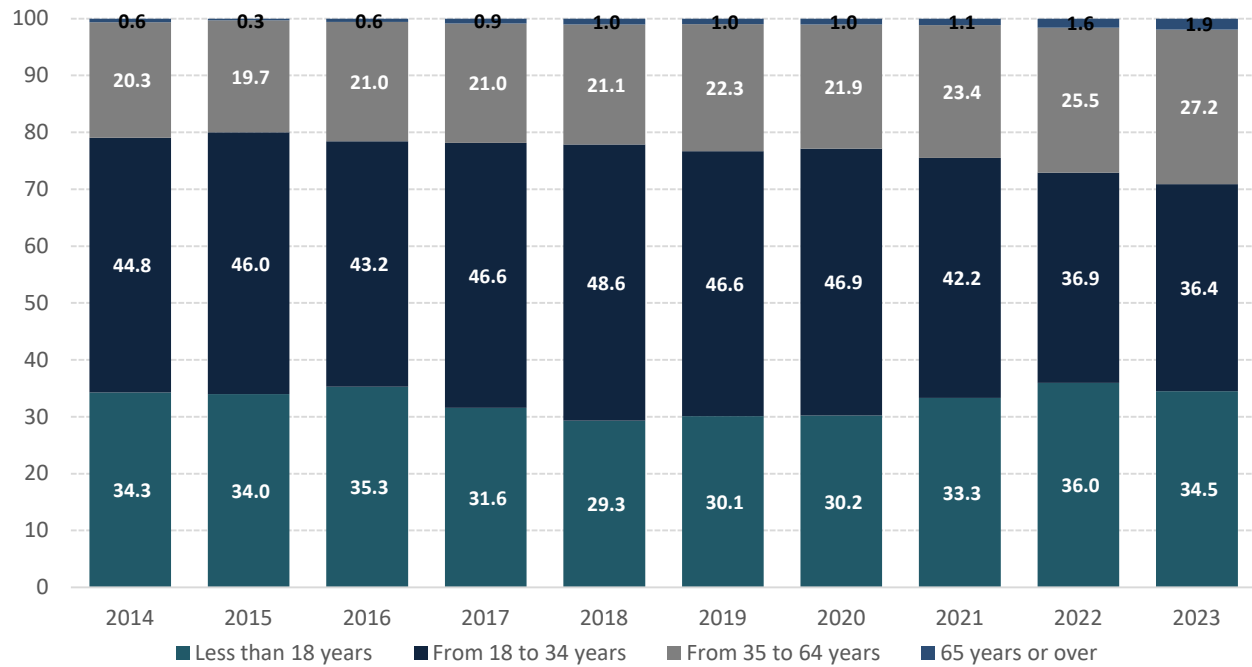


Figure 2. Asylum applicants from Albania in EU-27 countries, by age group, 2014-2023
Source: Eurostat

Youth asylum seekers aged 18 to 34 have shown a significant decline, however, they still constitute the largest segment of asylum seekers. This trend is likely driven by a combination of economic and social factors that compel them to seek opportunities abroad.

In contrast, the population aged 35-64 years has experienced a steady rise in applicants, highlighting increasing emigration among middle-aged individuals, possibly due to worsening job prospects or family reunification.

Though still a small percentage, the aging population (65 years or over) has also seen a rise in asylum applications, suggesting older individuals are seeking asylum, likely to join family members or access better healthcare and social services in EU countries.

Figure 3 illustrates the trend of government expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP in Albania from 2016 to 2022. In 2016, education expenditure in Albania was at its highest, reaching 3.96% of GDP. This was followed by a gradual decline, dropping to 3.61% in 2017 and further to 3.15% in 2018. A brief recovery occurred in 2019, bringing the percentage back to 3.92%, but it started to decrease again in subsequent years, ultimately falling to 2.75% in 2022, the lowest point in the period.

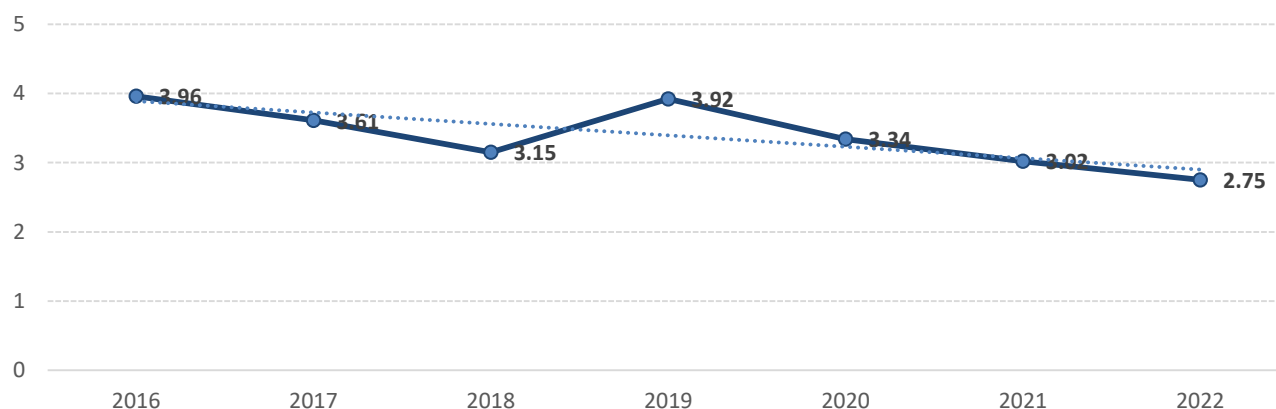


Figure 3. Government expenditure on education as a % of GDP in Albania, 2016-2022

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

This downward trend, particularly in recent years, may reflect a shift in priorities or budget constraints, which could have implications for the quality and accessibility of education in the country.

Figure 4 shows the net flow of internationally mobile students from Albania between 2018 and 2021.

From 2018 to 2021, Albania experienced a consistent net outflow of internationally mobile students. In 2018, the net outflow was 16,791 students, indicating that many more Albanian

students studied abroad compared to the number of international students coming to Albania. This trend continued, with the net outflow decreasing to 8,850 in 2019, then rising to 9,422 in 2020, and reaching 12,032 in 2021. The data reflects a persistent imbalance, with Albania seeing a higher number of students leaving for education abroad than those arriving to study in the country

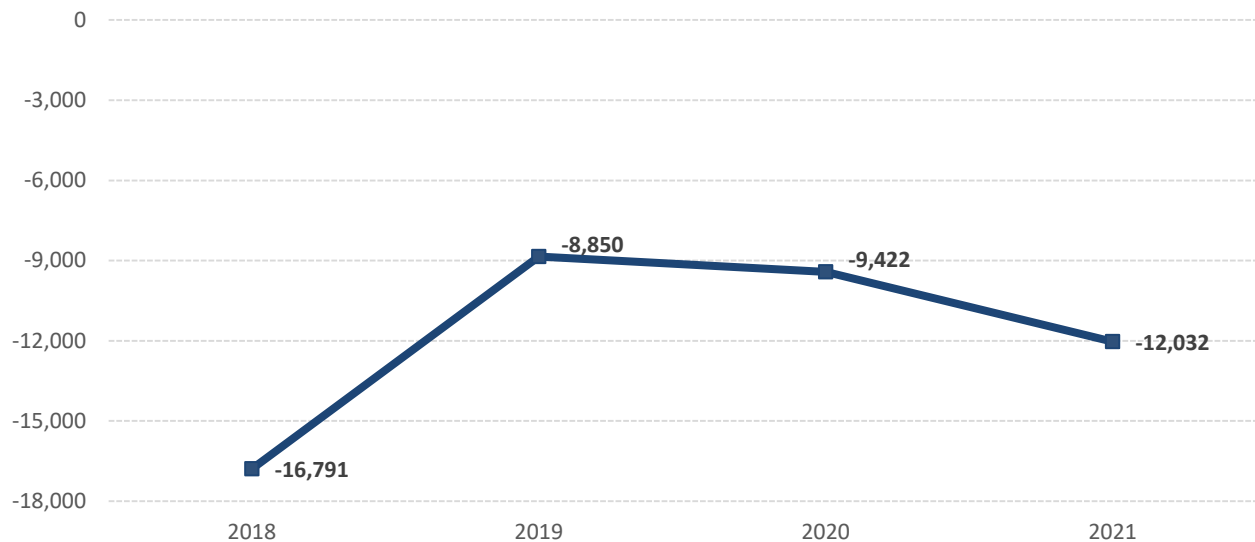


Figure 4. Net flow of internationally mobile students (inbound - outbound) from Albania, 2018-2021

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES

International youth migration is governed by relevant policies, which serve as a framework for managing migration on a global scale. Migration policy mainly aims to regulate and manage border crossings, but additional policies are necessary to tackle the integration of migrant youth.

These policies should cover: 1) employment initiatives; 2) social support programs; 3) educational frameworks; 4) information strategies; and 5) security measures. It is crucial to prioritize the implementation of employment, educational, and social policies for migrant youth. For instance, enhancing education and training programs in less developed countries can better equip young people who may migrate to enter regional and international labor markets (Sardak et al., 2021, pp. 375-376). The figure below illustrates the authors' approach to the Regulation policies of youth migration flow.

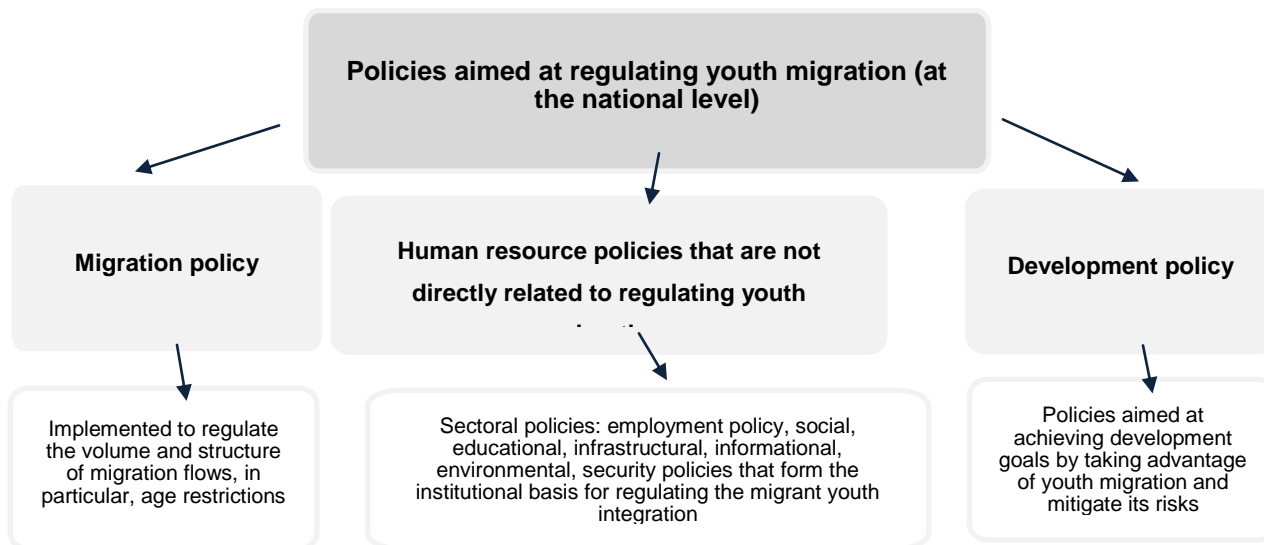


Figure 5. Regulation policies of youth migration flow

Source: Sardak et al., 2021, p. 375

In response to youth migration, the Albanian situation requires a comprehensive approach that includes policy development, educational and employment initiatives, social protection measures, and international cooperation. While challenges remain, ongoing efforts aim to create an environment that supports youth and reduces the impetus for migration.

The Albanian government has established a comprehensive National Strategy for Migration 2024-2030 and the Action Plan 2024-2026 to tackle the challenges and opportunities associated with migration, including specific provisions for youth migration aimed at fostering conditions that encourage young people to remain and contribute to the local economy. To combat youth outmigration, the government has implemented employment and education policies designed to enhance job opportunities and educational outcomes, such as vocational training programs and higher education scholarships that equip youth with essential skills for the labor market. As well, social protection measures have been introduced to support vulnerable youth populations by reducing poverty and improving healthcare access, while aligning migration policies with EU standards as part of the EU accession process facilitates educational and employment pathways for youth within the EU.

In addition, several migration-related strategies have been implemented, including the National Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030, which aims to enhance job opportunities and skill development for the youth. Additionally, the Albanian National Diaspora Strategy 2021-

2025 focuses on leveraging the potential of the diaspora to foster economic development and strengthen ties with Albanians abroad. Furthermore, the National Youth Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2029 outlines targeted initiatives to support youth empowerment, address their specific needs, and encourage their active participation in society, thereby aiming to reduce the factors that drive youth migration.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, youth migration in Albania is influenced by a mix of economic conditions, educational goals, and social networks. It is essential to understand these interconnected drivers in order to develop effective policies. The government must particularly focus on the challenges faced by individuals aged 15-29, as the statistics for this group are concerning.

Despite the various policies implemented by the Albanian government, ongoing monitoring and evaluation are crucial to ensuring that these initiatives fulfill their intended objectives. Strengthening collaboration with international organizations can also enhance the capabilities of local institutions, leading to a more integrated approach to migration management.

Addressing the root causes of youth migration is vital for fostering sustainable development in Albania. Strategies aimed at improving economic conditions and expanding educational opportunities will be key in retaining young talent and reducing the outflow of skilled individuals. Additionally, continued research is necessary to track migration trends and assess the long-term effects of current policies, offering valuable insights for policymakers to adapt their strategies to evolving circumstances.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDIES

The issue of youth migration in Albania requires further research across several key dimensions. Future studies should concentrate on longitudinal analysis to uncover long-term trends and socioeconomic factors impacting migration patterns, as well as comparison studies with other Western Balkan countries to highlight specific issues.

Furthermore, monitoring the socioeconomic effects for both the origin and destination communities, adding qualitative methodologies to better understand migrants' experiences, and evaluating existing rules are critical. Exploring the role of technology in influencing youth migration decisions, looking into youth empowerment programs, and studying the psychological effects of migration on youth during and after resettlement will provide a comprehensive picture, ultimately guiding more effective policy responses.

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