



The Contribution of the Arbëresh Diaspora to the European Integration Process

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Received: 9 January 2025 / Accepted: 5 March 2025 / Published: 25 March 2025
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Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv12n108

Abstract

This paper examines the role of the Arbëresh (Italo-Albanians) and the Albanian national issue throughout different historical periods, primarily during the National Renaissance, and their evolution over time, leading to cooperation with Italy—their second homeland—paving the way for the European integration of the Arbëresh diaspora in Italy and Albanians in Albania. Two peoples, separated by the same Adriatic Sea, have successfully coexisted while maintaining strong ties of friendship from early historical periods until today. The Arbëresh are an ethnic Albanian community living in Italy, having migrated from Albania in the 15th century following the Ottoman conquest. They originated from Albania, the historically Albanian region of Epirus, and the numerous Albanian communities in Attica and Morea (present-day Greece). They settled in Italy between the 15th and 18th centuries, after the death of the Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastrioti (Skanderbeg) and the progressive Ottoman occupation of Arbëria and, more broadly, all former Byzantine Empire territories in the Balkans. During this period, Skanderbeg and many other Arbëresh decided to leave their homeland with their families. They settled in southern Italy, where they were warmly welcomed by the Italian people. Over the years, this relationship strengthened, based on the respect Italians had for Skanderbeg, whose legacy was often compared to that of the Italian hero Giuseppe Garibaldi. Garibaldi, known as the "Hero of Two Worlds" due to his military endeavors in South America and Europe, played a crucial role in Italian unification. Supported by Italy, Skanderbeg and the Arbëresh found stability in their new homeland, forming their own communities. The connection between the two peoples grew stronger during the Italian Risorgimento, when a large Arbëresh community participated in Garibaldi's battles for Italian unification in 1860.

Keywords: Arbëresh diaspora, Southern Italy, national issue, Skanderbeg, Garibaldi

1. Introduction

The Arbëresh of Italy have played a significant role in consolidating and promoting Albanian national identity. Due to their presence in Italy and ongoing contact with Albania, they helped preserve and spread Albanian culture, traditions, and history. The Arbëresh supported and contributed to the Albanian national movement, advocating for independence and national unity. Continuous connections between the Arbëresh and Albanians in Albania allowed for collaboration, with Albanians seeking Arbëresh support for resistance efforts against foreign rulers and diplomatic relations with other states. The Arbëresh actively participated in organizing national conferences and promoting the Albanian cause on the international stage. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Arbëresh played a crucial role in the Albanian National Renaissance. They established national and international associations and organizations. During this period, they engaged in intellectual and literary activities to promote the Albanian language, culture, and history. Arbëresh writers and

intellectuals, such as Girolamo de Rada, Giuseppe Schirò, Zef Serembe, Anselmo Lorecchio, and Terenc Tocci, contributed significantly by creating important literary and historical works, striving to restore historical memory and Albanian national identity. A key figure was Francesco Crispi (October 4, 1819, in Pallaci-Ribera, Sicily – August 11, 1901, in Naples), an Arbëresh revolutionary, Italian Prime Minister, and patriot. In 1860, alongside Bertani, Bixio, Medici, and Giuseppe Garibaldi, Crispi led the "Expedition of the Thousand," which landed in Sicily on May 11, 1860. On May 13, 1860, Crispi participated in the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy. This highlights the close ties and contributions of the Italo-Albanians (Arbëresh) to the unification of Italy and the strengthening of relations between the two peoples. By the late 19th century, the Arbëresh were also involved in efforts to establish a modern Albanian state. In 1878, the Albanian national issue gained momentum as the movement for independence intensified, organizing itself and gathering support from within and outside Albania. The Arbëresh were crucial to this movement, contributing financially, organizationally, and politically. During this period, in 1912, Albania declared independence from the Ottoman Empire. This historic achievement resulted from the efforts of many Albanian actors, including the Arbëresh of Italy, who promoted national identity and Albania's independence. The Arbëresh preserved their Albanian identity, helping to maintain and promote the Albanian language, culture, and history in Italy. They also supported the Albanian national movement for independence and unity. The relationship between the Albanian diaspora and Albania has remained strong, as traditions, customs, and the Arbëresh language continue to be preserved today. Meanwhile, relations between the Italo-Albanians and Albanians have continued to consolidate over the years. Although contact was interrupted during Albania's communist regime, the 1990s events reignited the ties between the two peoples. Albanians once again emigrated to Italy in search of a better life, just as Italians had once emigrated to Argentina. For many Albanians, Italy was the land of dreams. The mass exodus of the 1990s brought the two peoples closer together. Albanians once again found Italian hospitality, and with their moral integrity, they left their mark in art, culture, media, and many other fields—just as the Arbëresh had done in the past. Today, the Arbëresh continue to preserve Albanian traditions, customs, and culture while honoring their Italian homeland in various academic and professional roles. At the same time, the relationship between the Arbëresh and Albanians in Albania continues to strengthen.

Today, we can confidently say that these connections have been reinforced in all aspects—political, cultural, social, academic, and beyond. This path of bilateral cooperation is driving Albania's progress in multiple fields, particularly tourism, which is evolving significantly. Moreover, the free movement between the two countries further strengthens their ties, paving the way for enhanced bilateral cooperation and facilitating Albania's European integration process.

2. The Consolidation of the Albanian Diaspora in European Union Countries

The "old diaspora" refers to the first wave of Albanian emigration toward European countries and beyond. The Arbëresh community settled in Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries, primarily due to political and military developments in Albania. The Arbëresh have preserved their origins, language, culture, and traditions, and many prominent figures have emerged from their ranks. Meanwhile, the "new diaspora" consists of those who emigrated after the 1990s, coinciding with the large migration wave following the fall of communism. Most of them have settled or are striving to settle in Western European countries. It is worth mentioning that around 500,000 Albanian citizens migrated to Greece, Italy, and other European countries in the early 1990s when Albania opened up to the world. Albanians who emigrated en masse to Italy formed the second-largest immigrant community in the country.

But did Albanians adapt to the host European countries? Which European states received the most Albanian migrants during the large migratory movement of 1990? What is their number in these European countries? Has migration continued after the 1990s? What were and are the reasons for emigration?

Very little is known about the current annual number of migrants worldwide, and the available information is contradictory. Through migration and asylum policies, the EU aims to establish a more comprehensive migration policy, shifting from a primarily reactive approach focused on combating irregular flows to a more holistic policy based on migration management. Migration has now become a global phenomenon that, in one way or another, affects all states worldwide. Its impacts are significant both socially and individually. Migration continues to be a crucial issue for many countries, affecting both origin and host nations. This phenomenon has long been present in many parts of the world. Every country has faced migration at certain periods. The same process occurred with Albanians following the fall of the communist regime in the 1990s. Although migration levels have fluctuated over the past two decades, the overall trend has been increasing over time. The term "a better life" encompasses a wide range of factors that drive Albanians to leave and is reflected in the diversity among Albanian emigrants. They have primarily settled in geographically proximate countries, such as Italy, or in nations that require labor in various sectors, such as Germany, which has recently opened

many opportunities for Albanian specialists in the medical field. The tendency to migrate toward EU countries is noticeable across all social strata, although recently, there has been a rise in "brain drain." In addition to Germany, Albanian emigrants also favor neighboring countries such as Greece. Approximately 3/5 of migrants live in Greece, 1/5 in Italy, and 1/5 in Western Europe and other parts of the world (Papanagos Harry, Sanfey Peter, 2001). The old diaspora primarily settled in the USA and some Western European countries, whereas the new diaspora is found in Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, France, etc.

3. The History and Expansion of the Albanian Diaspora

3.1 The Diaspora in Italy

Albania and Italy are two neighboring countries that, despite different traditions and cultures, have maintained and strengthened their ties. Italy and Albania are separated only by a 75 km sea distance. Many studies have sought to shed light on Albanian emigration to Italy, yet many questions remain unanswered. This is due to the fact that Albanians who emigrated did not stay in one place but frequently moved from one village to another or from one region to another to find better living conditions and simultaneously avoid assimilation (Kamsi, 2006). However, it is now known that in southern Italy, from the Abruzzo region to the far end of Calabria and Sicily, there is a large Albanian presence (Tirta, 2004). Documents found in the Naples archive by researchers such as Francesco Tajani, Lorenzo Giustiniani, and archivist Manfredi Polumbo indicate that the number of Albanians reached 200,000 people spread across 80 locations. Studies suggest that Arbëresh people also settled in many other places, some of which disappeared over time. This suggests that the number of Arbëresh may have been even greater than what is stated in recent studies. Many villages or towns have disappeared, along with the Arbëresh population that was assimilated into the local community. Albanian emigration to Italy led to the formation of significant colonies, including in the Province of Cosenza. Since 1999, the "Arbëresh" language has been officially recognized by the Italian government as a "language of an ethnic and linguistic minority." In the early 1990s, a massive wave of Albanian migrants arrived in Italy, forming the second-largest immigrant community in the country (INSTAT, 2020).

3.2 The Diaspora in Greece and Other Countries

The migration of Arbëresh people to Greece began in the late 13th century and ended around 1600 from a region called Arbëria, which was part of the Despotate of Epirus (the central region of modern Albania). Additionally, Greece is home to the largest community of Albanian emigrants, who settled there after 1990. Albanian migrants have contributed significantly to the Greek economy and society. They have successfully integrated into the labor market and local communities (INSTAT, 2020). Albanians have also emigrated to many other countries, establishing their communities in Romania, Turkey, Bulgaria, Egypt, Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and even as far as the United States and Australia.

3.3 Statistics on the residence and age of albanians in european countries

The most recent population and housing census data from 2010 indicate that 905,000 individuals born in Albania were residing in 28 European countries. On the other hand, citizenship-related statistics show that 962,000 Albanian citizens live in 15 European countries (Eurostat, 2011). Italy and Greece have the highest percentage of Albanian citizens living abroad (around 75%). They are followed by the USA, Germany, the UK, Canada, Belgium, etc. Migration trends over the last decade indicate that 56% of migrants in Germany and Greece were men, while 51% of migrants in Italy were men. Migration to Germany is still closely linked to employment (and studies), as evidenced by the low number of migrant children (France The National Institute of Statistics and Economic, 2017). In contrast, Italy and especially Greece have a broader age distribution, indicating family migration. These migration patterns are reflected in Albania's population structure, as reported in the 2011 Census. According to the 2010 census round, Albanian citizens living in Europe are relatively young, with about 36% belonging to the 30-49 age group.

3.4 *Does Albanian Emigration to the EU continue? What are the Current Reasons for Emigration Compared to the Past?*

Very little is known about the current annual number of migrants worldwide, and the limited available data is often contradictory. Migration statistics are often insufficient, inconsistent in terminology, and lacking in accuracy. Professor Russel King, from the School of Global Studies at the University of Sussex in the UK and Director of the Sussex Centre for Migration Research, emphasizes that Albanian emigration has continued for nearly 30 years. However, its nature is changing. It is no longer primarily driven by economic or political reasons but is now affecting all social classes, age groups, and income levels. The latest trend is the emigration of university graduates and highly qualified young people, with 57% of the 18-40 age group intending to emigrate. About 46% of those who have never emigrated before want to leave, while 72% of returnees—those who had previously emigrated—wish to leave again. Albania is experiencing a brain drain, losing its skilled workforce. However, this is not only happening in Albania but across the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. If Albania develops socioeconomically in the right direction, it could prevent young people from emigrating.

3.5 *Does the Situation in Europe and the World Encourage Albanians to Emigrate?*

On a global level, many countries seek experienced professionals. Canada, Australia, and other nations have migration policies that attract highly skilled individuals. As a result, Albania loses its young, educated workforce, which contributes not to their home country but to the nations they migrate to (Ballkanbooster, 2018).

4. Conclusion

The Arbëresh community has played a vital role in preserving Albanian identity and fostering strong ties between Albania and Italy. From their migration in the 15th century to their contributions during the Albanian National Renaissance and Italian unification, the Arbëresh have maintained a deep connection to their Albanian roots while integrating into Italian society. Their cultural, political, and intellectual contributions have been instrumental in shaping both Albanian and Italian histories. Similarly, the broader Albanian diaspora has continued to influence Albania's development and its integration into Europe. Migration, both historical and contemporary, has created dynamic and complex relationships between Albania and host countries, particularly Italy and Greece. While early migrations were driven by political and military conflicts, modern migration is increasingly influenced by economic opportunities and globalization. The phenomenon of "brain drain" remains a challenge, as Albania faces the loss of skilled professionals seeking better prospects abroad. Despite these challenges, the ties between Albania and its diaspora remain strong. The free movement of people between Albania and EU countries, particularly Italy, continues to reinforce these connections, promoting cultural exchange, economic collaboration, and political partnerships. The Arbëresh and the broader Albanian diaspora serve as a bridge between Albania and Europe, playing a crucial role in Albania's path toward European integration. The history of the Arbëresh and the evolution of Albanian migration highlight the resilience of Albanian identity across borders. While migration remains a defining factor of Albanian society, it also presents opportunities for strengthening Albania's global presence and fostering bilateral cooperation with host nations. Moving forward, addressing the challenges of migration and harnessing the potential of the diaspora will be crucial for Albania's sustainable development and integration into the European community. Additionally, the enduring presence of the Arbëresh and their ongoing efforts to preserve the Albanian language, traditions, and cultural heritage demonstrate the power of diaspora communities in maintaining national identity across generations. Their contributions to literature, politics, and education have cemented their role as vital actors in both Albanian and Italian history. Through institutions, linguistic preservation, and cultural organizations, the Arbëresh have ensured that their heritage remains alive, serving as a testament to the resilience of the Albanian people despite centuries of displacement and assimilation pressures. In the broader context of migration, Albania's new diaspora continues to expand and evolve, shaping the country's economic, social, and political landscapes. While migration provides Albanians with opportunities for better employment and education abroad, it also raises concerns about depopulation and workforce depletion at home.

Governments and policymakers must navigate this dual reality, finding ways to support emigrants while also creating conditions that encourage skilled professionals to return and contribute to Albania's development. Looking ahead, the relationship between Albania and its diaspora—both historical and contemporary—will be crucial in determining the country's trajectory. Strengthening transnational ties, fostering economic partnerships, and implementing

policies to leverage the potential of the diaspora can transform migration from a challenge into an opportunity. The story of the Arbëresh, their integration into Italian society, and their unwavering connection to Albania serve as a model for how diaspora communities can play an active role in nation-building and cultural preservation. Ultimately, the Arbëresh and the broader Albanian diaspora illustrate the interconnectedness of migration, identity, and national progress. Their legacy is one of perseverance, adaptation, and contribution—an enduring link between Albania, Italy, and the wider European landscape. As Albania continues its journey toward European integration, the lessons from its diaspora's history will remain invaluable in shaping a future of collaboration, unity, and shared prosperity.

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