

# ALBANIA

## The double challenge of employment and migration



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WORLD of WORK magazine

Nearly 135,000 migrant workers, a substantial proportion of the country's 2.8 million population – have returned to Albania between 2009 and 2013. Built with ILO support, the first modern employment offices in Albania show that a proper mix of employment and migration policies can bring tangible results in the lives of migrant workers.

*By Jean-Luc Martinage and Marcel Crozet (photos)*



The first modern employment office in Tirana

The concrete and glass pyramid in the centre of Tirana, once a museum in honour of former dictator Enver Hoxha, is crumbling and abandoned.

The decrepit vestige of times past stands in sharp contrast with the bustle of construction activity across the Albanian capital.

In every corner of the city, there is evidence of economic and commercial dynamism. Yet this belies the fact that Albania is facing a major jobs' deficit, exacerbated by the return of numerous migrants, driven back from EU countries by economic crisis.

"The employment situation in Albania is a real challenge," says Maria do Carmo Gomes, head of the EU-financed ILO project "Human Resources Development" in Albania.

"According to new international criteria for calculating labour statistics that the ILO helped compile, more than 21 per cent of the population are unemployed. Young people are particularly affected. Nearly 40 per cent of youth under 25 are unemployed, according to these criteria," she says.

## A CHALLENGE AND AN OPPORTUNITY

We meet Eriselda Sherifi, 33, at the employment office in Tirana, which only recently played a key role in

*"Albania is currently undertaking major reforms. If employment policies take into account the enormous training needs and new migration, then this challenge can also become an opportunity for the country"*

Maria do Carmo Gomes,  
head of the ILO/EU project in Albania

determining her professional future. She first visited the government-run office a few months ago, after graduating in pharmacy at the University of Bologna, Italy.

While at university, she worked up to 11 hours a day to finance her studies. "I was happy to get my degree after so much effort, but with the economic crisis in Italy, the employment prospects were weak and so I decided to go home."

"I thought I would also struggle to find work in Tirana, given the high unemployment rate in Albania." But





Eriselda Sherifi graduated in pharmacy in Italy. She is now back in Tirana and quickly found a job thanks to the employment office.

she says she was pleasantly surprised after visiting the employment office.

“A few days after meeting with a counsellor at the office, I was put in contact with a potential employer, and I now have a stable job.”

Sherifi was among the first to benefit from the services of the new employment office, which opened its doors in January 2014. Support from the ILO and the European Union and other international donors made it possible to transform what was essentially a hole-in-the-wall office in a back street of Tirana to a modern and easily accessible office whose staff has been trained to assist all categories of jobseekers, from unskilled workers to academics, as well as employers trying to find right workers for vacancies.

The office’s role is all the more relevant at a time when large numbers of Albanian migrants are returning home from European countries still affected by the crisis, particularly Greece and Italy.

Nearly 135,000 migrant workers – a substantial proportion of the country’s 2.8 million population – have returned to Albania between 2009 and 2013. This has resulted in a significant decline in remittances, which had been crucial in enabling migrants’ families at home to make ends meet.

Vasil Varfi lived for ten years with his family in Athens, where he worked as a construction worker, until he lost his job to the crisis.

At 42, Varfi was forced to start from scratch and return to Tirana, where he now works as a maintenance employee, a job he found through the employment office. If he does feel a tinge of nostalgia when he speaks of his days in Greece, there is no question of going back: Upon leaving, he lost his residence permit.

In addition to returning migrants, the employment offices are seeing a growing number of applications from citizens of EU countries.

## DO YOU SPEAK ITALIAN?

Rolando Sorrentino, 25, says that after his studies he could not find work in his native Italy. Through friends he learned that call centres in Albania were looking for Italian speakers.

“That’s how I got my job,” says Sorrentino, who also coaches his Albanian colleagues. “The wages are lower than in Italy, but the cost of living in Albania is much cheaper. At the end of the month, I can even save money.”



Vasil Varfi lived for 10 years in Athens. The economic crisis in Greece forced him to come back to Albania.

Rolando Sorrentino was jobless in Italy. He now works in an Italian call centre in Tirana.







Levent Yurtsever comes from Turkey. He successfully opened a pastry shop in the centre of Tirana.



Anisa Alla is a student at Tirana University. Many young people in Albania are worried about the employment situation.

While it remains marginal, the number of EU citizens seeking work in Albania is increasing, says Fatjon Dhuli, director of the employment office in Tirana. “In January and February 2014 alone, we had 110 people from the EU – mainly Greece and Italy – seeking authorization to work in Albania.”

Levent Yurtsever, 29, arrived from Turkey two years ago to work at a pastry shop. Today he runs his own highly popular oriental pastry store. For him, the “Albanian dream” has come true. But for many, particularly young people, it remains a remote, seemingly unattainable dream.

Anisa Alla, 21, for her part, believes she has a good chance of landing a job once she gets her degree as an engineer, a sought-after profession in Albania.

“But many of my student friends fear they will find themselves jobless once they finish university,” she says. “They can’t stop talking about it.”

Yet Albania is clearly moving on the right track, and plans to expand or renovate ten more employment offices around the country over the coming months as part of the strategy of modernization of the National Employment Services (NES) and of the employment public policies planned by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth. While no silver bullet, this should go a long way towards easing the double challenge of existing unemployment and returning migrants’ need for jobs.

## AN EMPLOYMENT OFFICE THAT WORKS

The ILO is helping Albania build modern employment offices which provide services that until then had been sorely lacking. The employment office in Tirana and the one in nearby Durres play an important role in matching labour market supply with demand.

Centrally located, the offices offer a variety of services to jobseekers, from a self-service area where they can view job listings to the services of counsellors who can provide personalized advice.

They also propose profiles of jobseekers to employers. Similar offices are planned in other parts of Albania. The ILO’s work is part of a larger, EU-funded project entitled IPA 2010 – Human Resources Development ([www.ipa-hrd.al](http://www.ipa-hrd.al)).

The project aims at improving the functioning of the labour market, including by strengthening labour inspection capacities, occupational health and safety, vocational education and training opportunities and the National Employment Services (NES) capacities.

