

Albania Between Containment and Cooperation: A Laboratory for the Externalisation of European Migration Policies^{*}

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Abstract

In recent years Albania has undergone a significant transformation – from a country primarily of emigration to an active site of transit and containment within broader European migration dynamics. Since 2018, its cooperation with Frontex and, more recently, a 2023 agreement with Italy to establish migrant reception centres on Albanian soil have marked pivotal developments in the externalisation of EU border control. This article explores Albania as a case study in the shifting landscape of migration governance, employing a normative framework, secondary data, and original fieldwork – including interviews with institutional stakeholders and activists – to examine the implications for national sovereignty, international cooperation, and the protection of migrants' rights.

Keywords: migration in albania, migration governance, externalisation of borders, Italy-Albania agreement, transit migration.

1. Introduction

This paper stems from an attempt to understand a profound and still little explored transformation, the changing role of Albania in European migration regimes.

^{*} Although the two co-authors jointly contributed to the research and the overall development of the paper, the introduction and section 2 are the responsibility of Prof. Berti; sections 3 and 4 are the responsibility of Dr. Hasanaj; and the conclusions were jointly written by both authors.

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Traditionally recognised by migration studies as a reality of emigration, Albania has progressively taken on a new profile, becoming a transit territory for irregular migration flows and, increasingly, a place of containment. This transformation is part of the broader framework of the European Union's migration and asylum strategies, particularly in the processes of externalisation of borders to third countries, to which the management of borders, asylum claims and the control of human mobility is delegated (Düvell, 2014).

The Albanian case offers a privileged vantage point for understanding the contradictions of contemporary migration policies, particularly within a Europe marked by deep asymmetries between centre and periphery (Hess & Kasparek, 2017; El-Shaarawi & Razsa, 2019). This article therefore pursues two aims: first, to examine how migration policies shape mobility within Albanian territory; second, to critically assess the 2023 Italy-Albania memorandum, which establishes offshore centres for sea-rescued migrants under Italian responsibility, as a paradigmatic shift in EU asylum policy, raising crucial legal, political, and ethical questions about sovereignty, rights, and international cooperation.

The first part traces some key passages in Albania's migration history and describes recent changes in the political and social context. The second part focuses instead on its role within the Balkan routes and the local management, often partial or delegated, of new migrant presences. A subsequent section is dedicated to the analysis of the Italo-Albanian agreement in its most relevant aspects, with attention to the legal, operational and symbolic implications. The essay therefore proposes a critical reading of this agreement, placing it within the Albanian social and institutional transformations.

This essay adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach combining secondary data analysis, documentary research, and ethnographic fieldwork to explore the social and institutional dynamics surrounding the Italy-Albania migration agreement.

The research unfolded along three main lines:

- Analysis of reliable secondary data from national, regional, and European sources.
- Documentary review of relevant legal frameworks in Italy and Albania, to map the institutional setting and identify critical issues regarding rights protection and responsibility-sharing.
- Qualitative fieldwork conducted in Albania (2023–2025), involving site visits to Shëngjin and Gjadër and 13 semi-structured interviews – 8 with institutional actors involved in migrant reception, and 5 with local activists engaged in protests against the agreement. Rather than offering conclusive assessments, the essay proposes interpretative insights and

open questions, acknowledging the limitations of this preliminary inquiry and the need for further empirical research.

2. Historical context and recent transformations

In order to understand Albania's current position within the European migratory regimes, it is necessary to briefly review some of the stages of its recent migratory history. The end of the communist regime in 1990 represented a turning point, since the forced closure of borders and cultural isolation had kept the country separated from the rest of Europe for almost half a century. The political collapse gave rise to three great waves of migration that deeply marked Albanian society and helped shape the diasporic identity that still characterises large sections of the population today.

The first was in July 1990, when some five thousand Albanian citizens took refuge in foreign embassies in Tirana to seek asylum. The second, between January and March 1991, saw tens of thousands leave the country on overcrowded ships bound for Italy, or by crossing the border with Greece on foot. The third, in 1997-1998, was triggered by the collapse of the so-called 'financial pyramids', which brought the country to the brink of economic and institutional collapse, causing a new wave of mass emigration (King & Mai, 2008).

These repeated waves of migration led to a profound change in Albanian society, profoundly affecting the way citizens think about the future, the value they place on education and work, as well as their sense of belonging. For many families, departure has become a 'normal' choice, almost taken for granted (King & Vullnetari, 2003), no longer just a dream or an escape but the only means of improving one's existence. Young people, especially, grow up with the idea that staying may represent a risky gamble, while emigrating may be a natural stage of life: in 2019 alone, for example, over 43,000 departures were recorded (INSTAT, 2020).

Albania has a large diaspora, with an estimated 1.4 to 2 million citizens living abroad, primarily in Italy, Greece, Germany, and the US (IOM, 2019). Emigration continues to be a key strategy for social mobility, especially given Albania's persistent economic challenges, including deep territorial inequalities and a limited welfare system (INSTAT, 2023). Despite ongoing stigma toward Albanian migrants in host societies (Mai & Schwandner-Sievers, 2003; Mai, 2005), remittances remain vital for the national economy, exceeding €900 million in 2023 and highlighting the enduring socio-economic role of migration for the country (A2 News, 2025).

Although Albania has historically been a country of emigration, recent years have seen the emergence of three partially overlapping trends.

First, return migration: around 9,400 returns were recorded between 2019 and 2021, driven by economic hardship abroad, retirement, or the desire to reinvest at home (UNDP, 2025). Some returnees have launched small businesses, particularly in tourism and real estate, though these cases remain marginal and hard to quantify.

Second, new forms of foreign presence are emerging. Digital nomads, retirees, and small entrepreneurs – especially from Italy – are drawn by the lower cost of living and favourable tax regimes (Italian Network, 2021; La Stampa, 2023). In 2023, over 2,200 Italian citizens were registered with AIRE in Albania, alongside 3,000 Italian-owned businesses. The government has also introduced residence permits targeting retirees and remote workers (Italian Network, 2024).

Third, as an official from the Albanian State Police’s Border and Immigration Department notes, Albania is receiving labour migrants from Asia and the Middle East: “These are Pakistani, Bengali, Indian, Iraqi, Iranian and other citizens from neighbouring countries, people who have entered Albania on a 90-day tourist visa, and who before the visa expires apply for work, waiting until the outcome arrives. Because of the lengthy procedures, which include 6 to 9 months, many of them go underground.”

Together, these trends indicate a shift: Albania is no longer just a place of departure, but increasingly a country of return and arrival, with evolving migration dynamics and future implications.

3. From transit to waiting: the new migrant presence in Albania

The concept of transit migration has become central to understanding contemporary forms of human mobility, especially in the Mediterranean area and in Albania, as evidenced by the evolution of European migration strategies, which are increasingly oriented towards externalised border control and differential management of flows (Collyer et al., 2010; Carta, 2024). Originating in the political and institutional language of the 1990s, the term initially referred to the short passage of people through non-destination countries, waiting to reach a final destination. However, this linear view has been highly problematised in the social sciences, and several authors have highlighted how ‘transit migration’ often represents a condition that is prolonged, uncertain and actively produced by political and border devices (Düvell, 2014; Hess & Kasparek, 2017).

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As Papadopoulou-Kourkoula (2008, p. 4) notes, transit migration is “the situation between emigration and settlement that is characterized by indefinite migrant stay, legal or illegal, and may or may not develop into further migration depending on a series of structural and individual factors”. More than a temporary geographical passage, it represents an experience of suspension that often turns into a form of forced stasis or indefinite waiting. The duration of the stopover depends on multiple elements: migration policies, economic resources, family or community ties, the possibility of working, even informally.

The very concept of transit migration is blurred and politicised (Düvell, 2010), often used to reinforce containment and security policies, attributing to transit countries, especially non-EU ones, the task of managing migration flows on behalf of Europe. The risk is the overlap between transit and irregularity and the reinforcement of stereotypes whereby ‘migrant/borderline = threat’.

But the reality of transit migrations is far more complex (Collyer et al., 2010). Those in transit include refugees, asylum seekers, people with tourist or family visas, regular and irregular migrants, vulnerable women and children. Trying to rigidly delimit this category risks hiding the richness and complexity of individual trajectories, often made up of unforeseen stops, obstacles, forced decisions, second thoughts.

This complexity is clearly reflected in the case of Albania, which from being a country of emigration has increasingly become a country of transit (and, more rarely, of destination) for those migrants (mostly from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan and Iraq) who travel the so-called ‘Balkan route’ towards Western Europe. The phenomenon intensified after 2015, when the closure of some previously used migration corridors redirected the flows. In particular, the agreement between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016 led to a drastic reduction in arrivals through the Aegean Sea, while the increasing difficulties in crossing the borders between Serbia and Hungary or between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina pushed many migrants to take alternative routes through the southern Balkans (BVMN, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021).

TA border police high-ranking official we interviewed¹ reported that “*So-called migrants in transit, whom we call ‘ghosts’ because we only intercept them when the traffickers are arrested, have been increasing sharply since 2020. In recent months we have witnessed several cases where traffickers have used small vans to transport migrants from the south to the border with Greece, or to the north, to the border with Montenegro; the Border Maritime Police has shown increasing reports of dinghies along the coast of Vlora, hidden for*

¹ Interview conducted in October 2025 in Tirana at the General Directorate of the State Police.

use or abandoned after use. This is why we have close cooperation with the harbour master's office in Brindisi and Bari?

In 2018, the Albanian government signed an operational agreement with Frontex to respond to unexpected migration flows, becoming the first country in the Western Balkans to formally cooperate with the agency (BRMC, 2020, pp. 20-21). The agreement, which was signed in October of the same year and entered into force on 1 May 2019, marked a significant turning point in migration governance in the region, allowing for the first time the deployment of Frontex agents in a non-EU territory; it also provided for joint operations along the main access routes to Albanian territory – from the land borders with Greece, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro, to the port hubs of Durres and Vlora, to Tirana airport – with the stated aim of countering irregular migration, cross-border crime and human trafficking.

The agreement also strengthened the European Union's institutional presence in the country, bringing Albania into the EU's externalised migration management system. As we have observed, the intensification of border controls between Greece and North Macedonia has in fact contributed to diverting flows along a new Adriatic route through Albania and Montenegro and then towards Croatia and Italy. This change has had a significant impact on the perceived migratory pressure in the country. According to UNHCR (2019, p. 2), there has been a substantial increase in both arrivals and asylum applications since 2018.

In response to this increase, Frontex has deployed personnel from several EU member states in Albania, with highly specialised profiles, including surveillance officers, experts in document screening and recognition, support officers, interpreters and specialists in the detection of stolen vehicles, deployed in strategic locations such as Kapshticë, Kakavijë, Han i Hotit, Tirana airport and other border areas. In the first months of the operation, concrete results were recorded in the fight against irregular migration. Most of the apprehended migrants came from crisis contexts such as Syria, Iraq and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2019, p. 1).

In addition to surveillance and law enforcement activities, Frontex also plays a key role in Albania in operational coordination and technical assistance, and has been directly involved in repatriation operations of Albanian nationals irregularly residing within EU Member States, through charter and scheduled flights. The presence of the agency represents, therefore, one of the most evident expressions of the progressive Europeanisation of migration policies in the country and contributes to the stabilisation of the routes but, at the same time, raises crucial questions regarding the respect of the fundamental rights of migrants and the decision-making autonomy of the Albanian state.

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Most migrants in transit live outside the official circuits, in precarious accommodation without documents, access to services and prospects. Regardless of Frontex's role, the situation still appears poorly managed and left in the hands of associations, often of a religious matrix, as emerged during some interviews with both institutional figures and NGO operators and activists.

As we were told by the head of the Anti-Trafficking and Migration sector of Caritas Albania², many people in transit live on the outskirts of cities, camped in abandoned buildings or even close to the border, without legal or social help. One particularly critical aspect concerns internal mobility: although there are no formal prohibitions, in practice migrants are unable to take taxis or public transport, because they lack documentation, economic resources or simply because of accessible information: "If you are a taxi or bus driver and you find an undocumented migrant on board, you risk three years in prison for aiding and abetting illegal immigration: there is widespread fear and, to be on the safe side, almost everyone refuses to let migrants board, even those who would have a travel document that would legitimately allow them to take a vehicle to reach the border and leave the country. Most of the migrants travel from the south to the north of Albania with traffickers because every aspect of trafficking is organised; there are very few you see on foot, and it is precisely those who would have a waybill but cannot access public transport to do so".

In these situations, the role of Caritas Albania is fundamental since, together with mosques, parishes and small informal local groups, it is one of the few actors able to provide concrete help, guidance and listening. Granted a form of operational exclusivity by the government, Caritas extends beyond humanitarian aid to assist border authorities with translation, asylum procedures, and vulnerability assessments. Its work spans cultural mediation, legal and psychological support, and procedural guidance – effectively building an 'infrastructure of transience' at the intersection of social and institutional functions. As we were told by the Caritas Albania manager, "We [Caritas] are often the first to intervene, even before the police". This aligns with official reports (Caritas Albania 2024, p. 6), which note that since 2015, Caritas Albania – working alongside UNHCR – has supported border authorities by providing translation, cultural mediation, and procedural guidance, especially for unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups at entry points.

The absence of a coherent public strategy on transit migration was also clearly recognised by another of our interviewees, an official of the People's Advocate office³.

² Interview conducted in April 2025 in Tirana at the headquarters of Caritas Albania.

³ Interview conducted in October 2023 in Tirana at the Office of the People's Advocate, which acts as the national ombudsman.

According to what he reported, the Albanian government tends not to intervene directly in the management of the phenomenon, preferring to delegate the task to Caritas, which is actively present at the main border crossings. This operational delegation translates into a kind of ‘internal externalisation’, where a third sector organisation actually assumes responsibilities that should fall on public institutions (Carta, 2024; Bonacini & Costantini, 2020). Thus, Caritas becomes the only stable reference point for hundreds of people crossing Albania in search of protection or passage to Europe.

Even some privileged witnesses confirmed to us how people in transit are left in a condition of indefinite waiting, entrusted to the initiative or tolerance of humanitarian actors in the field. One of our interviewees, for example, worked from September 2021 to April 2025 in the Shëngjin refugee camp that housed Afghans in transit waiting for visa approval for the United States⁴ themselves. The worker recounted how the second Trump administration abandoned funding to the Samaritan’s Purse organisation, the one with which the United States itself managed visa screening for Afghan exiles directly on Albanian soil. The sudden interruption of the US commitment meant that, at the time of the interview, 70 Afghan nationals were still ‘stuck’ in Albania indefinitely and in a situation of legal uncertainty: *“We, in Albanian, say that they are “neither fish nor fowl”: the process of reaching the United States or Canada has in fact been interrupted, but the Albanian government refuses to let them acquire residence permits”*.

In short, what we were able to observe and document in the course of our research is a model of institutional disengagement, in which transit migration is managed in a fragmented, unstructured and largely invisible manner.

Despite the fact that these migrants represent a potential resource, particularly in a context marked by the continuous emigration of skilled young people towards countries such as Italy, Germany and other EU Member States (Veshi & Da Molin, 2020), their presence in Albania continues to be interpreted and managed as transitory and the migrant in transit is considered as a figure to

⁴ In 2021, the Albanian government took in approximately 2,400 Afghan nationals who were evacuated after the Taliban took Kabul, accommodating a large proportion of them in the seaside resort of Shëngjin, within the Rafaelo Resort rehabilitated as a refugee centre. The Afghan Rescue Project (ARP), financed by American NGOs and private individuals, aimed to provide an initial safe haven for refugees waiting for visas to the United States or Canada and offered temporary accommodation to hundreds of Afghans. The experience, though brief, had activated a small local economy made up of services, catering, logistics and security, and is now remembered by some as a useful precedent for interpreting the agreement with Italy as a possible opportunity for territorial development.

be regulated and directed elsewhere, rather than as a subject to be integrated, albeit temporarily, into the social and economic fabric of the country.

4. The Italy-Albania protocol of 2023: externalisation and negotiated sovereignty

In recent years, many EU member states are adopting more restrictive policies and procedures on granting international protection status to migrants (Düvell, 2014). These policies also restrict the access of asylum seekers by outsourcing the management of migration flows to third countries that cannot always guarantee rights and protection in line with international and European standards.

The externalisation of migration controls can be defined as the set of extraterritorial state actions (unilateral, bilateral or multilateral) “to prevent migrants, including asylum seekers, from entering the legal jurisdictions or territories of destination countries or regions or making them legally inadmissible without individually considering the merits of their protection claims” (Frelick et al., 2016, p. 193). It is therefore a preventive and selective strategy, which is played out outside the borders, but with profound effects on the internal management of the migration phenomenon.

Externalisation represents a complex and multifaceted process involving a network of institutional and supranational actors, each with specific roles and functions, but coordinated towards the achievement of common objectives in the field of migration control and management. Individual state actors and networks of bilateral relationships are flanked by international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which contribute specific expertise in humanitarian management and compliance with international human rights law.

This multi-actor migration governance model reflects a strategy of shared responsibility, with each actor contributing resources and organisational capacities to contain migration flows and respond to the social and political challenges imposed by international mobility.

In response to the problems of border security and coordinated migration management, the European Union has signed important cooperation agreements with third countries. One of the most significant examples is the agreement between the European Union and Turkey of 8 March 2016, also known as the ‘EU-Turkey Declaration’, which stipulates that irregular migrants and asylum seekers landed on Greek islands in the Aegean Sea will be returned

to the treaty country, significantly reducing migration flows to Greek shores (European Council, 2016).

In 2017, on the other hand, the so-called ‘Malta Declaration on External Aspects of Migration’ (European Council, 2017) was issued at the informal Malta Summit of the European Council, emphasising the need to combat traffickers and support the development of local Libyan communities in order to reduce migratory pressures on borders. Objectives include working closely with some of the migrant transit countries, especially those in the central Mediterranean, to strengthen border controls; training, equipping and supporting the Libyan National Coast Guard and other relevant agencies; and improving reception facilities for migrants in transit countries.

The 2018 border management cooperation agreement between Frontex and Albania is another example.

Many of these initiatives begin as bilateral agreements between individual European countries and nations of origin or transit, and then evolve into a broader context of transnational cooperation focused on controlling irregular migration and combating human trafficking.

Emblematic is the agreement between Italy and Albania, which in November 2023 signed a memorandum of understanding to build two centres for irregular migrants on Albanian territory, in Shëngjin and Gjadër. The protocol, which has catapulted Albania into the centre of the European debate on the externalisation of borders, states that migrants intercepted in international waters by the Italian navy can be transferred to Albania for verification of the requirements for international protection status.

In the Italian government’s plans, these facilities are intended to receive migrants rescued at sea by the Italian authorities and, although they are located in Albania, they fall under Italian jurisdiction and management: Article 3 of the protocol states that the areas are granted to Italy free of charge, while Article 7 specifies that the centres will be entirely managed by Italian personnel and governed by Italian law.

A hotspot-style identification system was implemented in Shëngjin, for the initial phase of fingerprinting and preliminary registration. According to the implemented procedures, migrants must then be transferred within a few days to Gjadër, where the subsequent identification procedures will be carried out, i.e. the examination of the asylum application and, if the requirements are not met, the start of expulsion procedures.

The agreement, particularly with regard to the limit of only 28 days for the assessment of applications, has raised concerns among scholars, jurists (Juss, 2024) and part of civil society with several doubts being expressed about the legitimacy of the agreement and the risks of violations of migrants’ human rights (Amnesty International, 2024).

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There are numerous legal and political questions related to the suspension of sovereignty and the opacity of guarantees for migrants. An analysis of the European Council on Foreign Relations (Varvelli & Ziccardi, 2025) warns that such agreements risk “internal legal complications, ethical problems, and tensions within and between EU institutions.” The protocol can be interpreted as a paradigmatic example of the externalisation of migration management, in which international law risks being subordinated to bilateral technical-administrative logics (Muharremaj & Cami, 2024).

Although it has been presented as a gesture of European cooperation, it is still unclear whether the agreement initiates a path of collaboration between countries or whether it restores Albania’s substantial ‘passivity’ in migration management. The immunity granted to Italian personnel working in the centres is one of the most controversial points of the agreement from the Albanian point of view. In fact, Albanian authorities would not be able to intervene directly in the centres, except in extraordinary circumstances, and would be excluded from the day-to-day management of operations (Varvelli & Ziccardi, 2025). This would create a grey area of negotiated sovereignty in which the distinction between formal and substantive control would become ambiguous and migrants’ rights would risk being suspended or weakened.

This model seems to fully reflect the logic of the externalisation of border control: a process in which EU member states transfer part of the functions of reception, selection and control of migrants outside the EU space. This logic would aim not only to contain migration flows, but also to delimit legal obligations arising from European and international asylum and human rights law (Cuttitta, 2018).

The 2023 agreement fits into the broader EU strategy of externalising migration control, already tested also in Turkey and Libya, where responsibilities are increasingly delegated to non-member states, often without robust legal safeguards (Hasanaj, 2023).

Sociologically, externalisation is not just a technical tool but a political-symbolic mechanism that reshapes state relations, diffuses responsibility, and creates new vulnerabilities for migrants. This may normalise opaque practices where international law is weakened and rights become subject to political discretion. Symbolically, the agreement signals Albania’s alignment with EU migration policies, but it also reveals an asymmetry: in exchange for political visibility and leverage in EU accession talks, Albania risks becoming a logistical outpost for EU asylum management – raising concerns over conditional cooperation and the deepening divide between Europe’s centre and periphery, particularly in the field of fundamental rights.

To confirm the sensitivity of the agreement, the Albanian Constitutional Court itself was called upon to assess its legitimacy. While excluding that it could

formally be a transfer of sovereign powers, the Court acknowledged that the Albanian authorities could access the centres only with Italy's consent or in exceptional cases (GKRS, 2024), which configures an operational suspension of sovereignty that, although not declared, is fully active and legally relevant. Requests for further verification, such as those made by the parliamentary opposition (A2 News, 2024), confirm the divisive scope of the agreement not only among international observers, but also within the national institutions and public arena.

4.1. The agreement as a theatre of externalisation: suspended jurisdictions, deferred rights.

In the most recent developments, the Gjadër centre has been formally redefined by the Italian government as a Centre for the Permanence and Repatriation of Migrants (CPR), intended for the detention of persons already present on Italian territory and recipients of an expulsion order (Decree-Law 37/2025).

Initially intended as centres for the temporary reception of sea-rescued migrants, the Gjadër and Shëngjin facilities quickly faced logistical challenges, high costs, and blocked transfers, turning temporary shelter into prolonged immobility. This de facto failure led to a major shift: Gjadër was officially reclassified as a CPR, marking a clear departure from the original protocol and reinforcing the trend toward normalising extraterritorial detention (Amnesty International, 2024; La Repubblica, 2023).

This is a reconfiguration of the border as an administrative space of removal that has produced effects not only on a symbolic level, but also on a legal and political level, especially in Italy. A number of recent rulings by the Supreme Court of Cassation (Corte Suprema di Cassazione, 2025) and the Court of Appeal of Rome (Corte di Appello di Roma, 2025) have raised doubts on the constitutional and international compatibility of detaining people in centres located abroad, highlighting the risk of unequal treatment with respect to what is provided for in Italy.

But what is most striking is the profound misalignment between the Italian positions and those of the European Union. While a more cautious approach prevails in Brussels on the use of third countries for asylum management, the Italian government has included Albania among the so-called safe countries, relying on a functional but legally controversial definition. In this gap one could glimpse a tension between the state logic of containment and the common architecture of European law, which risks producing grey areas, where the protection of rights is weakened and responsibilities are diluted.

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In this framework, the centres envisaged by the agreement would not only be physical infrastructures for migrant management, but political and legal liminal spaces where the boundaries of protection, justice and humanity are renegotiated. Like refugee camps and similar facilities, these centres are places where the law could apply in a partial way and where, once again, the migrant's body could become a battleground between sovereignty, security and law (Agier 2008, p. 30, p. 69; Lagios et al., 2018, p.30).

4.2. Internal reactions and social tensions

In the Albanian context, reactions to the agreement with Italy are far from unequivocal. The government has presented the agreement as an advantageous form of international cooperation, capable of strengthening Albania's role on the European scene, in society and in the local communities involved. In some areas, such as in Shëngjin and Gjadër, there are those who see in the opening of these centres an opportunity to stimulate the local economy, offering jobs and new activities related to security, services and logistics (OBCT, 2024). This view is also influenced by what happened in 2021, when some 2,400 Afghan refugees were temporarily housed in Shëngjin and many local families and businesses benefited economically from their presence.

However, alongside these pragmatic expectations, there is also strong criticism, especially from activists, independent journalists and voices within the opposition. The accusations range from the violation of human rights to the loss of sovereignty to political subordination to the Italian government.

The Albanian press amplified the dissent about the agreement by commentators such as the writer and dissident Fatos Lubonja: speaking on BalkanWeb (2023), he openly spoke of an 'intimidating method' to discourage asylum seekers, denouncing the extension of detention time to 18 weeks. Public protests against the Italy-Albania agreement have emerged across Albania, led by youth groups and civil society organisations. As reported by Top Channel (2024), demonstrations denounced the "externalisation of human rights," reflecting growing discontent and civic mobilisation, despite a politically fragmented landscape.

Our interviews with activists further reinforce this critical perspective. One organiser of protests in Shëngjin and Gjadër stated⁵: "Albania's increasing involvement in international migration flows reflects a new phase in the geopolitics of European borders. However, instead of being the result of a shared path, it seems to respond to a logic of externalisation of responsibilities

⁵ Interviewed conducted remotely via video call in May 2025.

by the European Union. Albania is being transformed from a country of emigration into a country of containment, without adequate internal public debate and without sufficient institutional preparation. This raises serious questions in terms of human rights and democratic sovereignty”. And, in particular, she notes that the agreement between Italy and Albania “is worrying, both for its content and for the way it has been imposed. It is a measure that institutionalises the administrative detention of migrants outside Italian territory, creating real ‘zones of exception’ beyond the guarantees of the rule of law. A decision dropped from above, which undermines the democratic principles on which any international agreement should be based”.

Symbolic actions have also accompanied the protests. In June 2024, during the Italian PM Giorgia Meloni’s visit, the Mesdhe collective displayed a banner in Shëngjin reading “Italy-Albania: November 2023 like April 1939” (Wired, 2024). In October, the same group staged another protest with a banner showing the Albanian PM Rama and Meloni in prison uniforms, declaring “The European dream ends here” (Corriere della Sera, 2024; La Stampa, 2024). Demonstrators gathered in front of the Prime Minister’s office with slogans such as “Stop lager” and “No CPR – neither here nor anywhere.” (Gazeta Impakt, 2024).

At the same time, it is important to remember that many criticisms of the agreement originate in political circles already hostile to the incumbent government. Some activists and opposition parties use the migrant issue to criticise Edi Rama’s political management more generally, and fuel internal conflict.

In this sense, the public discourse on the agreement becomes intertwined with the tensions of domestic politics, and the migrant ceases to be seen as a human being, with needs and rights, and is confirmed as just a body on which fears, interests and power strategies are projected.

This aspect is also evident in the way official communications are handled: the agreement with Italy was in fact presented as a diplomatic victory, but without any real involvement of civil society or a transparent debate on the legal and moral implications of its implementation. As emerged during the interview with the previously mentioned activist involved in the organisation of the protests in Gjadër and Shëngjin: “Citizens’ reactions have been varied and concern and bewilderment have spread among a section of the population, fuelled also by the lack of institutional transparency. The fact that no one has been consulted has generated distrust and, in some cases, hostility. It is clear that there is a lack of serious work to raise awareness, information and public involvement”. Another activist, who lived in Italy during the period of his

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university studies:⁶ “The agreement has not been declared: neither in Albania nor in Italy has there been a public debate, but in Albania the situation is particularly worrying because it is a country that cannot have a say in many geopolitical dynamics. I think that an agreement was made directly between Edi Rama and Giorgia Meloni, and between their respective parties, because the citizens learned everything from the press when it was done and, moreover, we learned the amount of money Italy would have given Albania, maybe a billion euros, but nothing about the rules of transfers from the CPRs, about who we would host, for how long. The Albanian citizens would have been entitled to be informed, but instead the debate was not transparent”.

Finally, it must be remembered that Albania does not yet have a fully autonomous and structured reception system, nor adequate tools to guarantee effective access to protection for those who are entitled to it. As documented by ADL Zavidovici (2019) and other international observers, in transit countries the construction of containment spaces is never neutral: it produces material and symbolic effects that reshape the hierarchies of citizenship and redefine the relationship between state, migrants and host communities. In our case, this reconfiguration is a direct reflection of the Italian political debate, which is increasingly oriented towards a securitarian and symbolically strong management of the migration phenomenon. What happens in Rome, in terms of political and administrative decisions, produces material effects in Gjadër, where an agreement designed for reception is transformed into an instrument of administrative removal. In a meeting with a local official⁷, we were told quite frankly that “the initial purpose had already changed before everything was even operational”. This statement struck us because it confirms how the implementation of migration policies is never neutral, but is constantly affected by contingent political dynamics.

In parallel to the protests against the agreement, there have also been forms of silent reception aimed not so much at the migrants planned for the new centres, but at those who have already been passing through or staying informally in Albanian territory for years. During an informal interview with us in a local parish, a woman confirmed the growing tension within Albanian society, telling us: “I don’t know if I understand all this, but I know we cannot leave anyone in the cold. We were also migrants”⁸.

The reported testimonies refer to migrants in transit, who are often invisible and off the official radar. Widespread solidarity with them represents a spontaneous and human response, which coexists with a society divided

⁶ Interview conducted in the spring of May 2025 in Lezhë.

⁷ Interview conducted in April 2025 in Gjadër.

⁸ Interview conducted in May 2024 in Shkodër.

politically, but still shot through with the memory of its own emigration. These voices, diverse and at times conflicting, render the complexity of Albanian reactions, marked by both fear and compassion, distrust of institutions and spontaneous acts of solidarity.

5. Conclusion: Albania as a geopolitical laboratory

In recent years, many European countries have adopted more restrictive asylum policies, making it difficult for asylum seekers to enter their territories. This has led to an increase in migrants stranded in transit countries, often lacking adequate resources. After 2015, Europe promoted a strategy of externalising migration control, delegating responsibility to third states, such as those in the Western Balkans, through agreements that intertwine security, migration and the fight against crime. In this framework, Albania represents an emblematic case as it has become a strategic crossroads of European policies and reflects the deep tensions that run through contemporary European migration governance.

Since 2015, it has assumed a central role as a transit country in the new Balkan migratory geography. Those who cross it, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, at least in the initial project do not intend to settle there but are forced to stay there for indefinite periods due to border closures, slow international protection practices and difficulties in continuing the journey (Hasanaj, 2022). This condition of ‘suspended transit’ produces significant effects: it multiplies informal camps, generates temporary community relations and produces liminal zones where legal norms only partially apply (Agier, 2008). It is also in these spaces of transit that new forms of vulnerability are shaped, but also practices of solidarity, as observed in the city of Shkodër or near Gjadër, where mosques, volunteers and religious communities offer basic support to migrants in transit (Hasanaj, 2023).

The 2023 agreement with Italy is not an exception, but is part of a well-established trajectory: that of the externalisation of borders, which transfers not only territorial control, but also moral and legal responsibility for the management of human flows to third countries (Frelick et al., 2016; Cuttitta, 2018). Italy thus maintains control over asylum procedures by preventing migrants from physically entering its territory, reducing their access to EU legal mechanisms (Varvelli & Ziccardi, 2025). This generates opaque legal zones in which rights are suspended or reinterpreted according to administrative logic.

Albania, in this context, is configured as a hybrid space: still a transit country for migrants who do not intend to stop there, but increasingly also a logistical containment platform where new models of delegated management

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of flows are experimented. To this is added a dimension of strategic subordination: accepting this role may represent a political advantage for Albania, useful to strengthen its position in the EU accession process (Muharremaj & Cami, 2024). The signing of the bilateral protocol with Italy represented a symbolic and material step in this trajectory, offering the country a leading role in the containment of flows, but at the price of a growing ambiguity with respect to its sovereignty and the protection of rights (AHC, 2020): on the one hand, it is an active part of European projects, while on the other, it suffers the most ambivalent effects.

The infrastructures built in Shëngjin and Gjadër are not mere reception centres, but boundary places, legal and political spaces where a management model that could be replicated elsewhere is being tested. Yet, this logic has already shown its limits: the priority given to deterrence and containment has produced grey areas of law, suspensions of protection and a weakening of the European project in its most ambitious and solidarity-based dimension. As seen along the Balkan route, the result is often a system of opaque and fragmented delegation in which emergency measures take the place of structured and shared reception policies.

But there is also another key to interpretation that concerns the symbolic and human dimension of what happens: migrants arriving in the centres in Albania are not just detained, but displaced – even in the deepest sense of the term. They are pushed from the centre to the periphery of Europe, but also from the sphere of law to that of exception, according to the logic described by Agamben (1998), in which the law is suspended. At the same time, they leave the public discourse to enter a silent, often invisible, marginal and administered space, as Agier (2008) observed in his studies on humanitarian camps and limbs. In these places, jurisdiction becomes flexible, responsibility is diluted and material, legal and symbolic distance is organised as a political response (De Genova, 2013).

Albania's experience illustrates the broader dynamics of externalised migration control in Europe. It exemplifies how cooperation mechanisms between EU and non-EU states can reproduce asymmetries of power and accountability.

Understanding these dynamics requires moving beyond crisis narratives toward a more sustainable framework of shared responsibility and legal coherence.

In this sense, any serious reflection on the future of European migration policies must also consider the Albanian case, as part of a wider pattern rather than an isolated episode.

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