



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:
Albania's (de)population - shaping the course of the nation
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Albania's (de)population - shaping the course of the nation

Introduction

In the face of numerous uncertainties and variables, the power of demographics in shaping small and transitional countries like Albania cannot be underestimated. The country's challenging demographics, marked by a significant population decline, already influence the present and will undoubtedly shape the future. Over the past years, hundreds of thousands of Albanians have left their homes, leading to a profound demographic shift. Whether driven by the search for a better life or forced to leave due to a lack of opportunities, the fact remains that Albania is in the midst of a demographic crisis that is affecting every aspect of the nation. The potential consequences of this crisis, if not addressed, could be severe, affecting the economy, social fabric, and overall development of the country.

Population beyond numbers - census

The success of any political endeavor or economic policy largely depends on a comprehensive understanding of the needs and demands of different demographic groups. Therefore, the failure to grasp the intricacies of demographics could lead to ineffective decision-making, potentially stalling progress and exacerbating the demographic crisis in the future. The consequences of distorted numbers could be catastrophic. This is where the population census comes in, as a traditional method that covers the entire country and every household, and it is expected to provide a clear picture of how and where Albanian citizens live.

In 2023, the National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT) was gearing up for a significant event—described as a comprehensive and technical process that would provide a detailed snapshot of Albania's current population, including social and economic aspects, demographic movements, and more. According to government authorities, the data and information collected will enable institutions to plan accurate projects and deliver public services more effectively to the people of Albania. This is Albania's 12th national census, 100 years after the first one conducted in 1923. Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama expressed delight in launching the national census, with the support of international partners, notably Italian, French, Swiss, and German partners, ensuring precision in counting, with substantial funding from the European Union (EU) and 55% from the Albanian government. According to Rama, cutting-edge technology

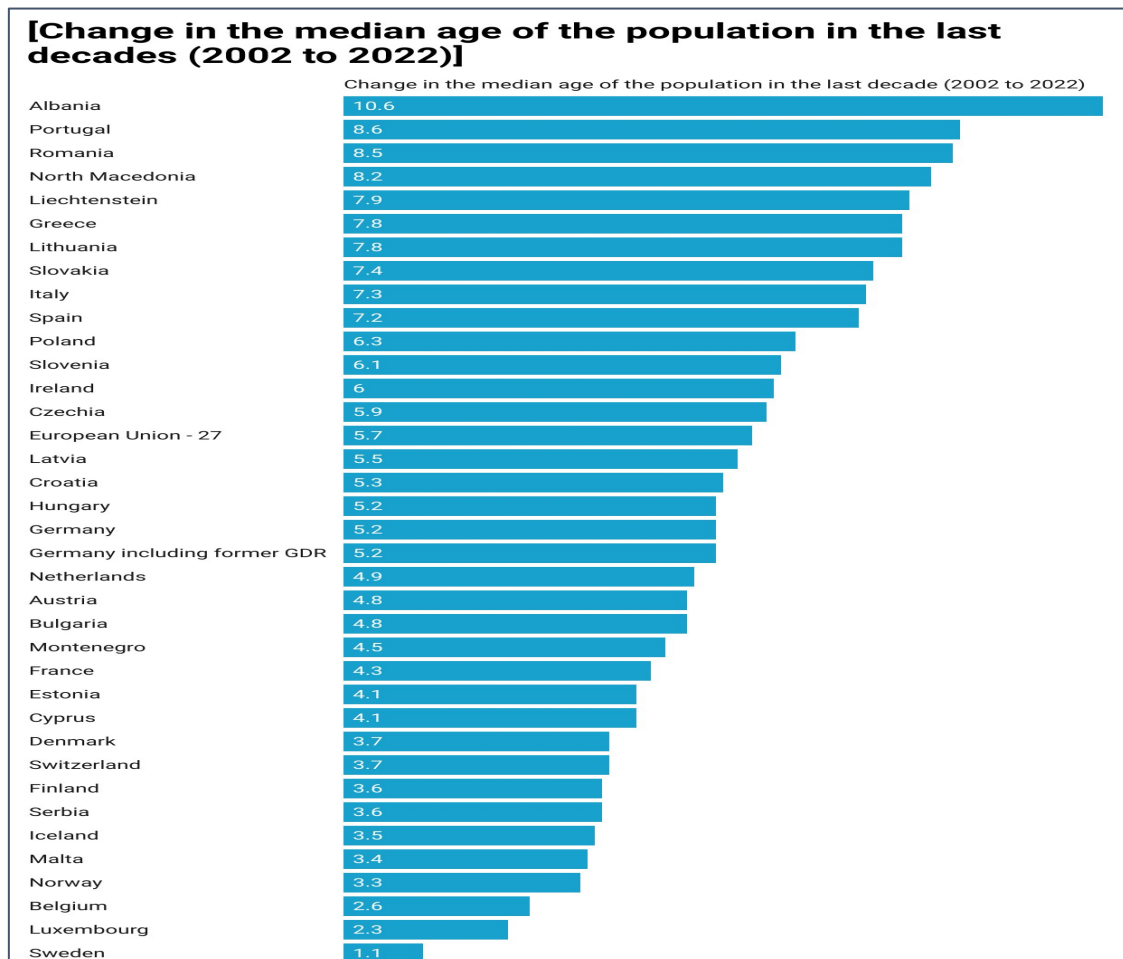
available and INSTAT are crucial factors in guaranteeing real-time data integrity. He noted that the information would be kept confidential and stressed the government's respect for citizen rights, including the right to withhold certain information. Rama also proudly highlighted Albania's progressive legislation on minority rights and the inclusive treatment of ethnic minorities in the census. He acknowledged that there is always room for improvement while asserting that no minority faces discrimination based on ethnicity in Albania.ⁱ

After a two-year delay, INSTAT was set to initiate the population and housing census in September 2023. Citizens reserve the right to withhold ethnicity, religion, and language responses. To underscore the importance of citizen participation, legislation imposes fines ranging from 500 to 1000 Euros for non-compliance with the census. Initially scheduled for 2020, the census faced successive postponements due to the pandemic, parliamentary elections in 2021, and the soaring inflation in 2022. The estimated cost for this comprehensive registration spans around 16 million euros. The previous census of 2011 reported a population of 2,821,977, reflecting an 8% decrease from the 2001 count.ⁱⁱ The module aims to gather information about family members who were absent during the two censuses (2011-2023). This information will be used to evaluate migration statistics for the decade.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the beginning of February 2024, the website of INSTAT was hacked; "Homeland Justice," the group of Iranian hackers, published sensitive data of administration employees, announcing it on online social platforms. They have published personal numbers, first names, last names, phone numbers, e-mail addresses, and residential addresses.^{iv} INSTAT's troubles, such as the infiltration by Iranian hackers, have raised concerns about the reliability of census data. Experts doubt the safety of INSTAT's stored data, although INSTAT insists everything is secure on their servers. The credibility crisis deepened as interest groups questioned the integrity of the census, which had been postponed twice since the hacking revelation. Many doubt the census's validity, exacerbating concerns among communities and interest groups. This hacking incident, with a significant impact on the census, could also pose challenges for upcoming elections, potentially influencing results. The delayed disclosure of the attack and suspicions of data manipulation further erode public confidence. With implications for electoral integrity and the reliability of statistics, the situation highlights the vulnerability of crucial institutions.^v According to the latest data, the Albanian population is 2.76 million.^{vi} Although this is an approximation, most believe that the number is lower.

Albania aging at an unprecedented pace

In light of the ongoing controversy surrounding national data by INSTAT, more reliable tools like Eurostat can help better understand the datasets. According to a recent overview, the median age of the population of Albania reached 38.2 years in 2022.^{vii} It is still ranked among countries with younger populations than other European countries, but in the last two decades, Albania has aged at the highest rates. In 2002, Albanians' median age (the value separating the oldest and youngest half of the population) was 27.6 years old. During the two decades 2002-2022, the population of Albania aged 10.6 more years, the highest rate among all European countries, which aged only 4.7 years during this period. The median age of EU members ranged between 38.4 in Cyprus and 48.4 in Italy.^{viii}



Source: Eurostat, Monitor (own graphic elaboration)

The current demographic situation in Albania is not just a trend but a pressing issue, particularly among younger individuals. It is not just a statistic but also a factor contributing to the aging population. This has resulted in a decline in birth rates, which in turn is leading to an overall increase in the median age of the population. Of particular worry is that this trend shows no signs of slowing down.

On the other hand, there seem to be no signs of returnees despite some indications in the past. This is also seen in Eurostat data on the acquisition of citizenship statistics. Of those acquiring citizenship of an EU Member State, citizens of Morocco (112,700 persons) made up the highest numbers, followed by citizens of Syria (90,400 persons), Albania (50,300 persons), Türkiye (29,700 persons), and Ukraine (29,300 persons). The other trend that continues is Albanians finding new citizenship, overwhelmingly in Italy (75.8 %), followed by Greece (19.2 %).

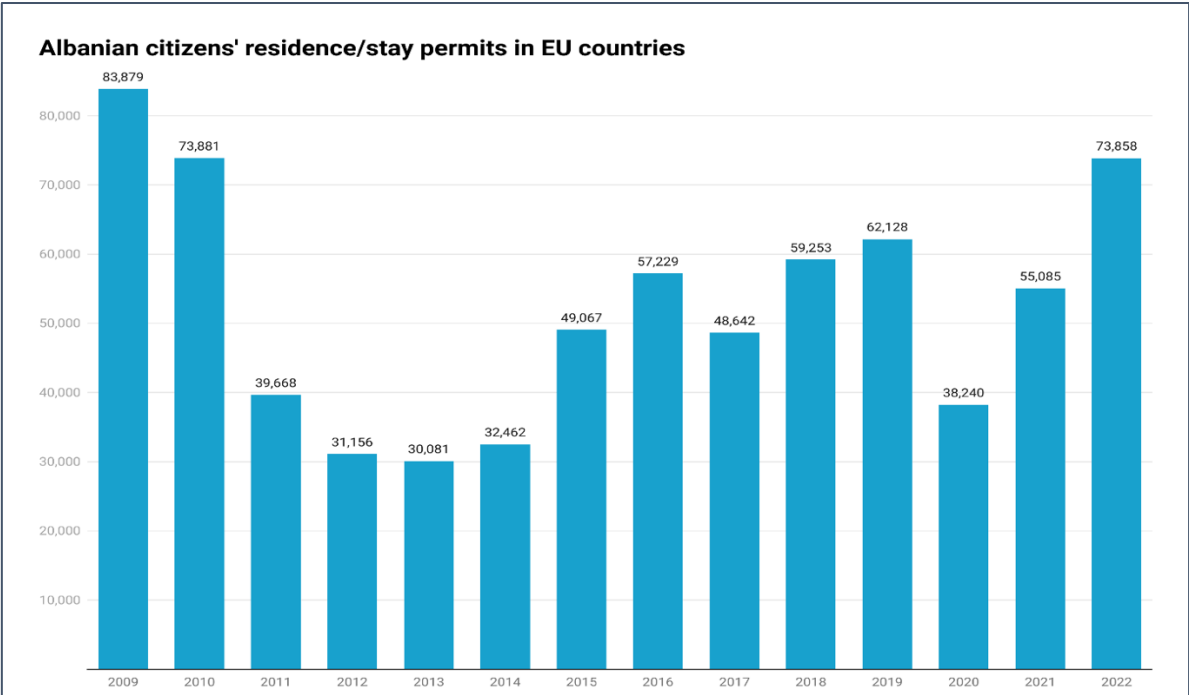
Thirty main countries of previous citizenship, 2022										
Rank	Country of previous citizenship	Total acquisitions in the EU (1 000)	Main EU Member States granting citizenship							
			Rank 1 (%)	Rank 2 (%)	Rank 3 (%)	Rank 4 (%)	Other (%)			
1.	Morocco	112.7	Spain 49.2	Italy 27.5	France 14.3	Belgium 4.3				
2.	Syria	90.4	Germany 53.6	Sweden 21.1	Netherlands 16.5	Belgium 4.0				
3.	Albania	50.3	Italy 75.8	Greece 19.2	Sweden 1.2	Belgium 0.9				
4.	Romania	37.7	Italy 43.2	Germany 18.6	Spain 11.2	Belgium 7.4				
5.	Türkiye	29.7	Germany 48.0	France 18.1	Netherlands 11.1	Belgium 6.0				
6.	Ukraine	29.3	Germany 21.9	Italy 18.4	Poland 17.4	Spain 10.9				
7.	Brazil	25.9	Italy 43.4	Portugal 24.7	Spain 14.8	France 4.6				
8.	India	24.1	Italy 35.3	Netherlands 12.5	Sweden 11.9	Germany 11.5				
9.	Moldova	21.6	Romania 54.3	Italy 34.9	Spain 4.9	France 1.6				
10.	Russia	20.2	Germany 23.3	France 12.0	Finland 10.2	Spain 8.6				
11.	Algeria	18.3	France 73.1	Spain 12.2	Italy 6.6	Belgium 3.3				
12.	Pakistan	18.2	Spain 35.2	Italy 27.1	Germany 10.9	Sweden 6.3				
13.	Ecuador	17.1	Spain 63.3	Italy 33.5	Germany 1.0	Belgium 0.8				
14.	Iraq	15.5	Germany 43.9	Sweden 20.0	Belgium 12.9	Netherlands 9.7				
15.	Tunisia	15.5	France 48.7	Italy 34.5	Germany 9.2	Belgium 3.1				
16.	Eritrea	15.2	Sweden 54.7	Netherlands 37.5	Germany 3.6	Italy 1.7				
17.	Afghanistan	14.8	Sweden 36.4	Germany 28.3	Belgium 13.3	Netherlands 8.2				
18.	Argentina	14.5	Italy 69.4	Spain 26.2	France 1.2	Germany 1.1				
19.	Poland	14.0	Germany 39.6	Sweden 14.5	Belgium 12.3	Italy 7.6				
20.	Colombia	13.8	Spain 80.5	Italy 6.8	France 5.4	Germany 2.4				
21.	Egypt	11.2	Italy 62.9	Germany 11.9	France 6.8	Sweden 4.9				
22.	Bangladesh	11.0	Italy 62.8	Spain 11.4	Sweden 5.4	Portugal 4.8				
23.	Peru	10.8	Spain 47.7	Italy 44.9	France 2.3	Germany 1.9				
24.	Senegal	10.7	Italy 44.3	France 28.0	Spain 22.8	Belgium 2.6				
25.	Nigeria	10.4	Italy 34.3	Spain 27.3	Germany 10.1	Ireland 7.5				
26.	Iran	10.4	Germany 46.3	Sweden 17.7	Netherlands 13.3	Belgium 4.5				
27.	Italy	10.3	Germany 43.6	Belgium 14.9	France 14.6	Spain 11.8				
28.	Venezuela	10.1	Spain 79.2	Italy 5.8	Portugal 4.2	France 2.7				
29.	Dominican Republic	10.1	Spain 80.0	Italy 14.6	Germany 1.8	France 1.1				
30.	Bolivia	9.8	Spain 92.0	Italy 4.5	Sweden 1.4	France 0.9				

Data are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5 for Germany.
Source: Eurostat (online data code: migr_acq)

Source: Eurostat, Acquisition of citizenship statistics ^{ix}

When someone acquires a new citizenship by all considerations, they will not return to the previous one; no one of the above Albanians acquiring an EU citizenship will return because they have been working and paying taxes for years in the host country, thus creating a life there.

Furthermore, besides the ones who now have new citizenship, there are the ones who have a permit stay or foreign residents who work in the EU with an Albanian passport and an EU permit of stay. This number is higher, and with the latest data available, we see the following situation:



Source: Monitor (own graphic elaboration)

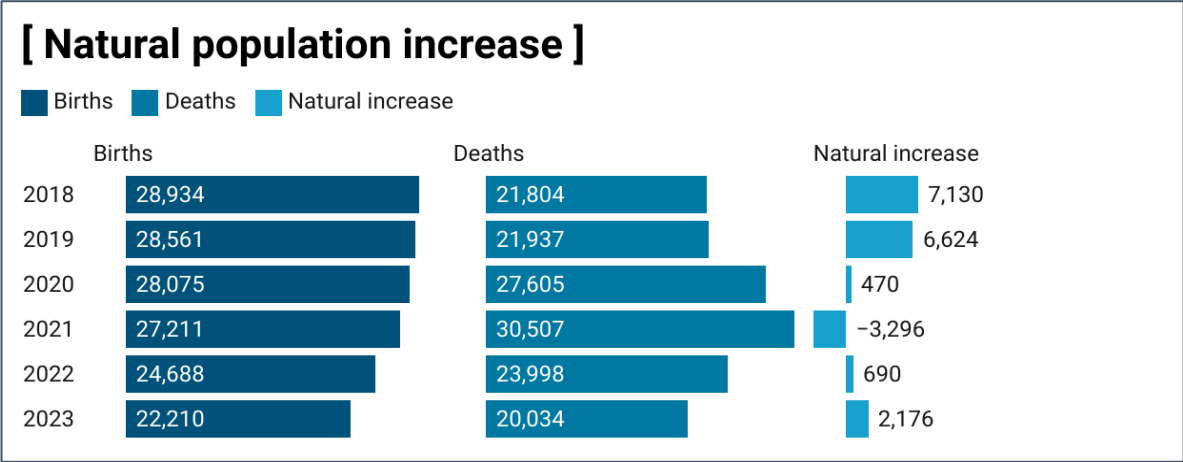
The increase in immigrant flows has been reflected in the significant rise in residence permits that EU countries granted Albanian citizens in 2022. This is the highest figure found since 2010, clearly showing a tendency to increase in persons who leave the country intending to live and work in one of the countries of the EU. Since 2008, these countries have granted about 832,000 residence permits to Albanian citizens.

The number of residence permits began to decline significantly until 2014, reflecting the end of the first immigration cycle (which had started in the first half of the 1990s). The highest number of asylum seekers from Albania in EU countries was recorded in 2015, when a massive wave of emigration started. In January-July 2015, nearly 34,000 requests were registered, while

for the whole year, the number approached 70,000.^x Permits granted and asylum applications fell in 2020 because of pandemic restrictions.

After the pandemic, a new wave of emigration started again, and it was strongly felt in the country, both in the labor market, with businesses unable to find employees, and in consumption, with enterprises complaining about a drop in sales. The new wave of emigration significantly impacted consumption; with many people leaving the country, firms and enterprises experienced declining sales. This was due to a decrease in the number of consumers and a reduction in the disposable income of those who remained. As a result, some businesses were forced to close down, while others struggled to stay operational. Moreover, the next calamity was and still is the conflict in Ukraine, which is exacerbating inflation and making economic hardships even more accentuated, consequently fueling migration trends.

Another quite alarming element is the fall in birth rates. The decline in the previous years is concerning, and according to preliminary data for 2023, the natural increase is still a problem.

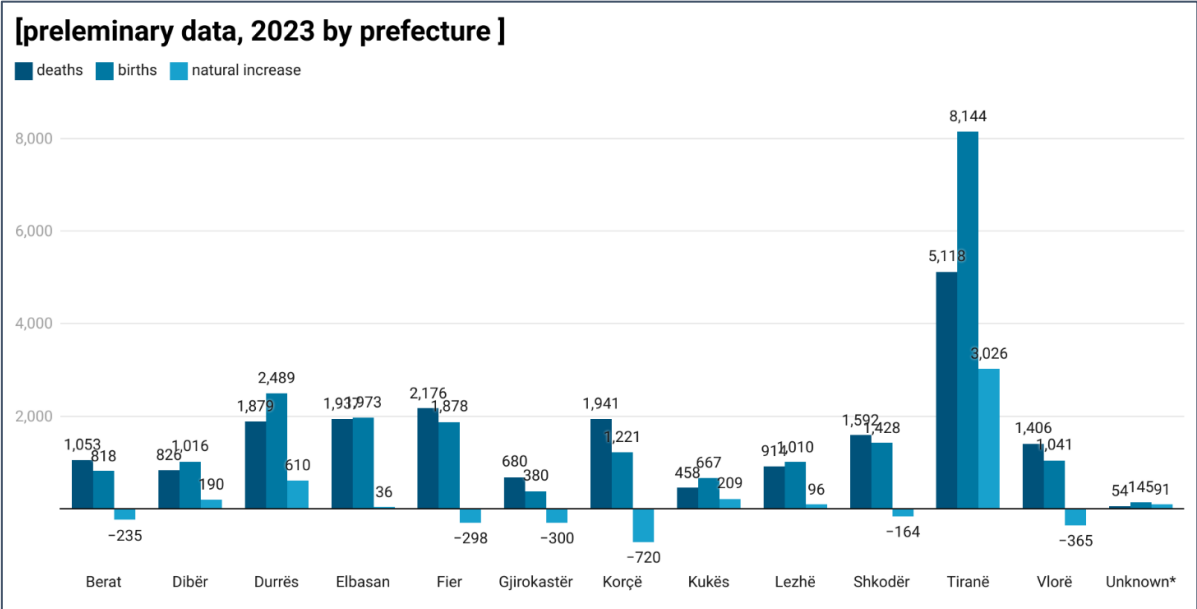


Source: INSTAT (own graphic elaboration)

It is concerning that the number of births has been consistently decreasing every year. This is the only variable that does not seem to stop decreasing. It should be noted that secondary factors such as economic conditions and lifestyle choices contribute to this trend. The high costs of raising a child, including expenses like food, clothing, and education, can significantly burden a family's budget. In a country where the average net salary is 500-600 euros, it costs around 300 euros per month to raise a child from zero to 13 years old and around 400 to 500 euros per month for a child 14 years old and older. It is a significant sacrifice for parents to

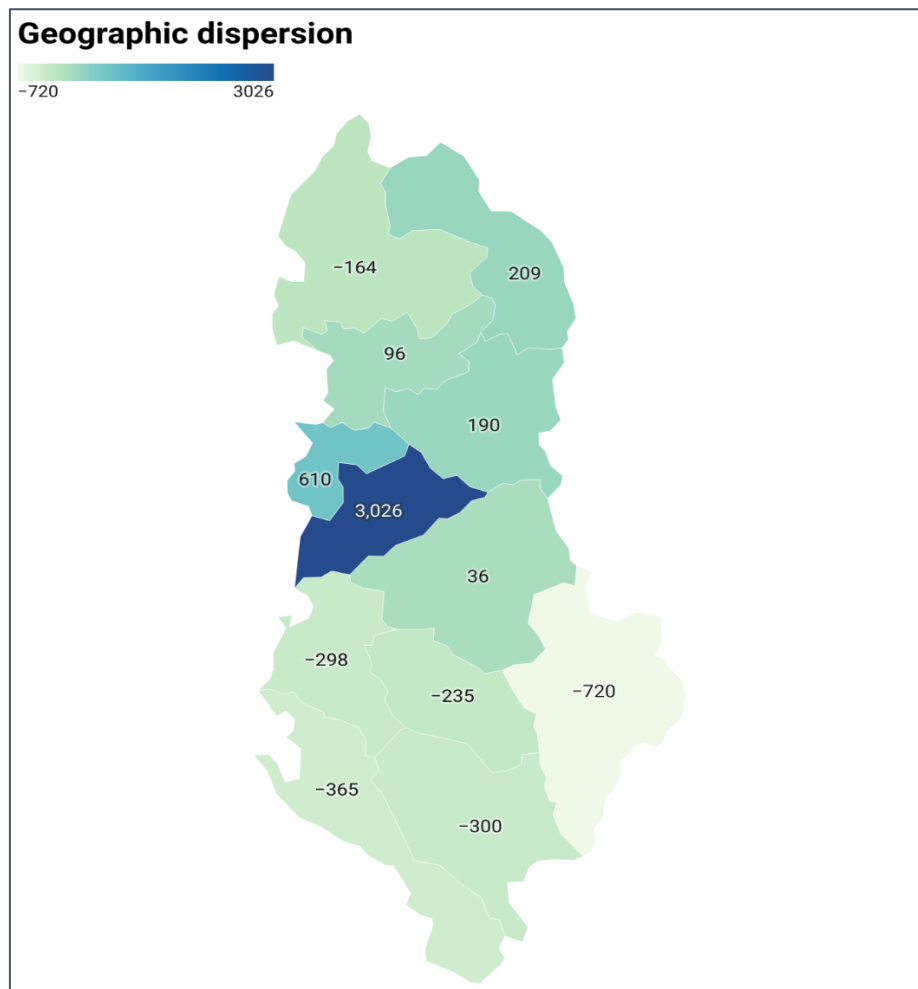
raise children in a world where the cost of living is this high compared to their income. Another contributing factor is the modern concept of life and lifestyle. Due to the fast pace of life and seeking personal fulfillment, the average age of getting married and having children is higher. The traditional family format seems to have faded into the background. For example, in 1967, the average Albanian woman had 5.8 children; in 1990, it was three children; in 2021, it was only 1.3 children per woman. However, experts argue that the main reason for the decline in birth rates is that there are no children because there are no parents.^{xi}

The other imminent issue is the extinguishment of small cities and villages. If we are to analyze the rates of births and deaths for 2023 (although preliminary) by geographic dispersion of the data unfolds as follows:



Source: INSTAT (own graphic elaboration)

For visual purposes, the highlights of the natural population increase are as follows.



Source: INSTAT (own graphic elaboration, interactive visualization available at https://www.datawrapper.de/_qCUoU/)

The main issue is that cities are emptying and villages are disappearing. A country cannot survive on the capital alone. The ongoing population shortage in rural areas is decreasing agricultural production, which is crucial for the country's economy and food security. With fewer people engaged in farming and other related activities, crop and livestock output are suffering, leading to a rise in food prices and a decrease in the availability of fresh produce. Fewer people in the countryside means fewer investments, and a lack of investments (private or government subsidies) results in the village or the rural area remaining more backward. As more people move to the capital or other major cities, infrastructure and public services decrease in rural areas that already lack inadequate facilities and resources. This has widened the gap between urban and rural areas, resulting in staggering social and economic inequality.

A chain reaction of economic, social, and personal challenges

The outflow of people from Albania to other countries significantly impacts its economic development as a steady stream of its youth departs each year.^{xii} In their quest for better prospects and a brighter future, Albanians make a profound sacrifice - they leave behind their families, communities, and homeland. This mass emigration poses a grave risk to Albania's economy, depleting the country of its most precious resource: a young, skilled/semiskilled, and ambitious workforce. The loss of working force and talent can be detrimental to the country's economic growth, leading to a manpower shortage in key industries and sectors. The ones that leave send considerable amounts of money to Albania, but it is never enough to fully compensate for losing their direct contributions to the national economy. Their departure is not just a loss of numbers but a loss of potential and a rupture in the nation's social fabric.

In the early 1990s, Albania's most valuable resource was its young and vibrant population. However, over the last three decades, the nation has suffered significant destruction, resulting in the loss of this critical asset. The country's current predicament not only threatens its present but also its future. The absence of a youthful population could severely impede its progress and development, with potential consequences that are deeply alarming.

According to a Jacques Delors Institute's analysis of the Western Balkans, the region has rapidly become subject to what Professor Gérard-François Dumont calls a "demographic winter." The report highlights Albania, amongst other countries, as a case study, noting that after years of isolation under the previous regime, many Albanians left their country in the 1990s, primarily for neighboring states. This emigration has continued to surge in recent years, strongly affecting the society. It currently has one of the largest diasporas in the world in terms of the percentage of the population living in the country of origin. The reasons behind this wave of emigration are, first and foremost, economic: the growth rates are low, there is mass unemployment, and there are very few prospects for development. In Albania and the region, the growing proportion of elderly citizens is a considerable burden on public finances: the working population is falling while the breakdown of the age pyramid increases expenditure on pensions and healthcare.^{xiii}

The decrease in economic productivity poses significant social challenges. Social welfare systems struggle to adjust to an aging population, and relying solely on family support is insufficient to meet demands. Certain regions are almost wholly abandoned, threatening to

hinder development, as evidenced by Albania's struggle with productivity and competitiveness. The shortage of skilled labor is already noticeable in several industries.

Another crucial element is personal struggles. According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in their 2023 Transition Report, over half of Albania's population has experienced some form of mental health symptom, with women being more affected than men in all countries, including Albania. Depression and anxiety were the most common concerns, with 40% of Albanian men and 58% of Albanian women reporting such symptoms. The EBRD emphasizes the importance of good mental health, as it is closely linked to productivity, work time, income, and overall well-being.^{xiv} Strong mental health can also lead to a more optimistic outlook on life, which Albania lacks. Unfortunately, mental health problems in developing countries are often overlooked, disregarded, and stigmatized, leading to a rise in cases across all age groups. Lately, Albania has seen an increase in people seeking help from psychologists, particularly for anxiety-related issues. The demand for mental health professionals in Albania is at an all-time high, with a shortage of qualified doctors specializing in this field. The post-pandemic situation has only exacerbated the problem, further highlighting the need for appropriate diagnosis, follow-up, and treatment.^{xv}

The importance of adequately counting

A census is an essential tool that provides a detailed snapshot of a country's population and characteristics. It helps governments, policymakers, and planners make informed decisions regarding allocating resources, such as funding, infrastructure, and services. It also aids in identifying social and economic trends, patterns, and disparities, which are critical for developing policies and programs to address specific issues. The accuracy and timeliness of the census are paramount for development and ensuring that the data is reliable and up-to-date. Yet, these projections remain abstract in Albania and have far-reaching implications without precise figures. This uncertainty affects critical areas such as budget proposals and labor force planning, increasing the urgency of obtaining exact data. Furthermore, the risk of misallocating resources and missed growth opportunities only heightens due to this lack of precision.

There are growing concerns about the credibility of the census results. Despite the benefits of digitalization and efficient data entry and analysis, it has taken Albanian authorities months to release the population count. This is a significant delay compared to the previous census in 2011, which took only two months to complete despite having less advanced

technology. Moreover, the population count seems lower than expected based on indirect data sources such as Eurostat and education system registrations. If further delays occur, doubts will inevitably arise. An eight-month waiting period to count the population (data may be released in mid-2024) is abnormal. It raises concerns that the numbers may have been deliberately inflated to cover up underlying issues.

The consequences of an incorrect population number are significant since every figure that comes out of Albania afterward could potentially be wrong. For example, the percentage of unemployment is based on the total population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, birth rate, percentage of the population living under the poverty line, and much more based on population figures. In addition, for the next decade, all the nation's calculations will be based on this census. Hence, if the initial number is incorrect, it will have a ripple effect lasting for the next decade (until the next census scheduled in 2033). Inaccurate data could result in incorrect policies being implemented, incorrect funding, incorrect dispersion of resources, and more, all of which could have severe implications for the nation's future.

Conclusion

How many Albanians are still living in Albania? The simple answer is no one knows for sure. The Prime Minister's unofficial estimation is around 2.5 million, while the most pessimistic sources suggest a number as low as 1.5 million. Even if the actual number is somewhere in between, it is a significant decline and a cause for concern. This trend represents a “demographic winter” and a national disaster. The declining population in Albania is not just a matter of numbers. It has far-reaching implications for vulnerability, economic development, social progress, national security, and individual well-being.

Albanians are constantly tested by adversities and misfortunes, often left to navigate their lives through deserted lands and empty homes. While essential, the significance of numbers can sometimes fall short of capturing the true essence of these human struggles.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ VizionPlus (2023, September 13). Population and Housing Census/ The director of INSTAT tells what will happen to those who do not answer the questionnaire. <https://www.vizionplus.tv/censusi-per-popullsisë-dhe-banesat-drejtoresha-e-instat-tregon-se-çfare-do-te-ndodhe-me-ata-qe-nuk-i-pergjigjen-pyetesorit/>
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- ^{viii} Monitor (2024, February 15). Albania is aging faster than all of the rest Europe, according to Eurostat. <https://www.monitor.al/shqiperia-po-plaket-me-shpejt-se-gjithe-europa-sipas-eurostatju/>
- ^{ix} Eurostat (2024, February 28). Acquisition of citizenship statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Acquisition_of_citizenship_statistics#EU_Member_States_granted_citizenship_to_98_9_900_persons_in_2022
- ^x Euractiv (2022, September 30). EU sees sharp increase in Albanian asylum requests. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/eu-sees-sharp-increase-in-albanian-asylum-requests/
- ^{xi} Soko, P. (2022, December 7). Albanians who flee the country. <https://www.syri.net/web-tv/553706/live-syri-tv-kendi-i-pano-sokos-shqiptaret-qe-ikin/>
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- ^{xiii} Jacques Delors Institute (2023, July). Depopulation in the Western Balkans, Policy brief. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/PB_230720_Demographie-Balkans_Marchais_EN.pdf
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