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How does informal transnational social protection bond families across borders? The case of Albanian migrants and their transnational families¹

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Abstract

Understanding the relationship between migration, social protection and doing family in transnational settings is important, both at academic and policy level. Migration disturbs safety nets and it created new realities such as transnational families. Migrants and their left behind families try to close the gap that arises between mobile social needs and static services and provisions. In doing so they (re)invent doing family in a transnational context and the protection they offer to one another primarily in the form of remittance, knowledge transfer, time and emotional care tend to provide solid grounds for bonding them across borders. Looking at the case of Albanian migrants and their transnational families, we reconfirm old patterns and sketch new trends in informal transnational protection practices which construct main fundamental ties holding transnational families together and are key in building and strengthen intergenerational solidarity among Albanian migrants and their left behind family and kin.

Key words: migration, social protection, transnational families, informal transnational social protection, Albania

Introduction

Migration – one of the defining issues of the globalised world, is often the ‘talk of the day’ be it in a mainly sending, receiving or transit country context. While this has concurred with an intensification of research in the area of migration, it was only in the early 2000s that significant interest was channelled on the issues of migrant’s access to social protection (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015). Even then, literature on migration and social protection

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evolved around the centrality of the nation-state and issues of migrants' access to formal social protection in destination country (Pelliserry, 2013). But immigrant's access to social protection goes beyond welfare policies of receiving states and the emerging field of transnational social protection is shading light on sending states policies and informal strategies developed by immigrants (together with market, community, family actors) in the context of transnationality (Vathi, Duci & Dhembo, 2019; Faist, 2013). The informal arrangements and practices that involve migrating individuals and their left behind family and kin constitute the informal side of transnational social protection (Boccagni, 2017) whose diverse forms and effects need to be explored also in the light of doing family and intergenerational relations in transnational settings.

Understanding relationships between migration, social protection, and doing family in transnational settings is highly relevant, both at academic and policy level. Transnational social protection, understood as the aggregate of remittances and transnational care practices (Boccagni, 2017), is critical in how leavers and stayers of the transnational families negotiate and maintain mutual obligations across time and space (Baldassar et al., 2007; Wright, 2012). Transnational social protection practices include relationships cultivated over distance, resources being circulated, visits and time spent together along other context-specific factors that shape transnational care (Boccagni, 2017; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Kilkey and Merla, 2014). While studying such practices is often challenged by issues of limited visibility, multi-sited developments, and strong variations over migrant life course, it is of crucial importance as it help outline migrant households' potential to bridge the gap between mobile social needs and static services and provisions (Boccagni, 2017, p.174-175). In doing so, transnational families (re)invent and practice 'doing family' in transnational contexts and the nature and frequency of these activities have the potential to bond families across borders.

Still, effects of migrating family members on those left behind have been documented to be mixed ones, depending also on the individual circumstances (Demurger & Xu, 2015). Similar to the left behind members of family and kin, the migrant is a gendered subject, embedded in a range of social relations (Castles & Miller, 2003) which are important in understanding migratory behaviours (Faist, 2004) as well as the potential repercussions in the realm of social protection (Kordasiewicz et. al., 2017).

Employing a transnational methodological approach helps in better exploring and understanding practices and transactions between migrants and those left behind (Amelina & Faist, 2012). Transnational families, whose members “live some or most of the time separated from each other but yet create a feeling of collective welfare and unity” (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002, p. 3), provide an ideal setting for such explorations. Transnational family members may not always agree on economic and social support strategies and their agendas might differ, but their ties and responsibilities often continue, in distance, in physical presence or absence (Crespi et al., 2018; Reisenauer, 2018), as they explore common grounds on which to cater for those individual agendas. Frequently, such grounds involve different strategies and practices comprising migration as a social protection strategy as well as informal transnational social protection practices which continue across time, space and generations.

Beyond the recent growing interest on informal social protection and sending country perspective, there is yet a clear need for more research which explores relations between informal transnational social protection perspective, the perspective of the sending country context, and transnational families (Albertini, Mantovani & Gasperoni, 2019, p.1693). It is in this framework that this paper aims to provide further insights and understanding on the nexus between migration, social protection and doing family in a transnational setting by exploring the informal transnational social protection strategies and practices among Albanian migrants and their left behind families. In the following sections, we first account for the theoretical framework in which our investigation is set and the relevance of our selected case, before we move to detailing the methodological approach. Results are presented and discussed under the main pillars of informal transnational social protection – remittances, knowledge transfer, time and emotional care. Finally, concluding remarks highlight main messages in terms of findings as well in terms of needs for further research.

1. Migration, Transnational Social Protection and Transnational Families

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) entitles every member of a society to the right of social security; yet, less than a third of the world

population has access to that (ILO, 2014). Mobility (migration and return) from one society to another seems to add extra barriers. Nevertheless, it is only in the last decade that interest on issues of migrant's access to social protection has started to intensify (Bilecen & Barglowski, 2015), primarily evolving around the centrality of the nation-state and issues of migrants' access to formal social protection in the country of destination (Pelliserry, 2013). While such analysis was imperative to stabilize "the structurally poor position" of migrants in that respect (Bommes, 2000, p.90), it did not account for the multitude of informal strategies and practices that individuals and families employ to cover for the welfare gap stemming in the context of an overlap between lack of (full) membership in receiving states and lack of territorial residency in sending ones (Raithelhuber et al., 2018).

Indeed, migration and social protection are intertwined in several respects that go beyond the relation between immigrants and receiving states. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite (2003) were the first to distinguish between migration as a social protection strategy and migration as a condition leading to vulnerabilities that require specific social protection instruments (p. 4). Access to and quality of social protection are among the drivers for (re)migration and return. The most common framework applied is the 'push-pull model' that includes determinants in country of origin, in that of destination, and personal motivations (Lee, 1966). The 'new economics of migration decision theory' (Stark & Levhari, 1982, p.191) shades more light on the micro-level interactions that contribute to migration related decisions. At the household level, these interactions come in various forms including a 'contractual agreement' of the household with migrating member (Massey et al., 1993), a similar scheme is valid also for situations of return and remigration. When it comes to the personal motivation, apart from individual characteristics (age, gender, and education), family setting and conditions play an essential role in migration decision-making processes, plans and strategies (Crespi et al., 2018; Schüring et al., 2017).

Further, migration context provides an ideal framework for analysing distant relationships (Reisenauer, 2018, p.110) and, while there is a variety of different family types and settings, gender and intergenerational relations are found to be highly relevant in any of them (Crespi et al., 2018). At the same time, such relations reflect and shape demographics, economic,

cultural and social developments in the society, leading to an increase of scientific interest on family relations (Karpinska & Dykstra, 2019). However, most work in the area has focused on transnational child-rearing (Parreñas, 2005) rather than intergenerational ties in adulthood, on 'old' rather than 'new' migrants (e.g. migrants from Central and Eastern Europe), and primarily studying patterns, determinants and consequences of intergenerational relations in European families (Albertini et al., 2019) and in receiving country context rather sending ones (Vathi et al., 2019).

Migration processes have resulted in new socio-spatial formations such as transnational families where core elements of the nuclear family, like sharing the same household, do not apply (Schüring et al., 2017). When adopting to new circumstances, such as those created by migration, families tend to adopt with new practices and forms of "doing family". The increasingly accessible communication and traveling make the maintenance of transnational relationships more doable, even when members of families and relatives are physically distant (Reisenauer, 2018; Baldassar, 2007). These new forms, include among others, new (informal) arrangements to provide social protection to family members in the context of transnationality. Transnational families engage in two main types of such cross-border practices – financial remittances and transnational assistance and care (Boccagni, 2017). We draw from the narratives of Albanian migrants to further investigate on such practices. The following section contextualises the relevance of our case study in this respect.

The context

Since the early stages of out-migration in 1990s, Albania has been one of the top recipients of remittances in the world, in per capita terms and as a share of its GDP (Vullnetari & Kings, 2011). Yet in 2018, Albania topped the list of European countries of origin for first-time asylum applicants to EU countries and is still one of the most migratory nations (EUROSTAT, 2018). In only three decades, the various migration waves, patterns, routes and destinations have generated a particularly diverse and rich migration landscape among Albanian migrants² with specific challenges related to formal social protection and transferability of social security (Dhembo, et

² See, for instance, a comparison of the Albanian migrant communities in Greece, Italy and the UK in Vathi, 2015, p. 29-30.

al., 2019; Gemi, 2014). These data alone make Albanian migrants an interesting case to be examined from the migration perspective.

Further, Albania provides an interesting case to be explored also from the perspective of social protection resource environment theory (Levit et al., 2016) as a very dynamic one in terms of the share and interaction between formal and informal resources. In Albania, the social protection system that was established anew in the early 1990s, following the decline of a dictatorial regime, has largely failed to promote social inclusion and the country is still challenged by issues of absolute poverty, deep socio-economic disparities and little social mobility (Duci & Dhembo, 2017). Albania's welfare spending compares unfavourably to EU countries and countries of the region (WB, 2018) and performance of welfare services scores low also in terms of citizen's satisfaction (IDM, 2016, p.5). All these add to an interesting and dynamic social protection resource environment as well as to a potentially rich and divers set of mechanism and tactics citizens employ in navigating formal and informal social protection resources.

In Albania, a primarily familialistic care regime with a growing deficit of state-regulated formal care services (Dhëmbo, 2012) and often poor quality and access on existing ones (IDM, 2016), obliges family members to step in and reinforces a high level of intergenerational interdependence, similar to other Eastern European countries (see Karapinska & Dykstra, 2019). Consequently, family ties of Albanians are expected to be strong, and family members to engage in frequent contact and exchange of support across different settings. These combined elements of Albanian context in terms of migration, social protection, and doing family dynamics make Albanian migrants and their transnational families a fit case for exploring our research question on how does migration, transnational social protection and doing family interact to influence and mirror a sense of family, bonding and intergenerational support in a transnational context.

Methods

This paper uses data generated from a research project on migration and social protection that employs a qualitative, comparative and transnational approach. As other scholars have noted, employing qualitative methods within a comparative and transnational approach is more suitable and helpful in capturing, exploring and better understanding practices and

transactions between migrants and those left behind (Amelina & Faist, 2012). An integrated approach is also a best fit in exploring informal transnational social protection decision-making strategies and processes as it helps overcome challenges in studying them while depicting migrant households' potential to bridge the gap between mobile social needs and static services and provisions (Boccagni, 2017, p.174-178), all of which have the potential to strengthen family ties in transnational settings.

It is in this framework and with the purposes of further exploring and understanding such practices that a total of 33 narrative interviews were conducted with Albanian migrants during Fall 2019 – Spring 2020. All the interviewees were reached using snowballing method. Two 'hot spots' of high intensity and diversity of migration profiles were targeted, namely Tirana (the capital) and Kukës (the district with highest % of outgoing migration)³. Initially, the first cases were identified with the help of local NGOs that cover migration issues and assist return migrants in both areas. Then migrants themselves were asked to recommend other cases.

A maximum variation approach was aimed in terms of gender, age, host countries, legal status at host country, family setup, and migration experience (including return and remigration), and a minimum of 2-3 cases were interviewed per each category. At the end of the data collection process, an almost equal number of women and men were interviewed, ranging from 25 to 55 years old. Almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of the participants were married and parents (to be), two participants were divorced, three engaged/in a relationship, and eight were single at the time of the interview. The interviewed migrants lived at least some part of their life in a transnational family setting and spent on average 7.5 years in counties other than their country of origin, with the shortest period of 5 months and the longest of 22 years, at the moment of the interview. Their migratory experiences ranged from migrating to one destination country to having changed up to five different ones. Host countries altered from 'old destinations' such as Greece and Italy, to more recent ones such as Germany, the UK, France and Sweden along with North American destinations – the USA and Canada.

³ Only in 2016, the mayor of the town of Kukës reports for some 6,000 people to have left the town. <https://www.syri.net/politike/239950/kukesi-po-zbrazet-nga-emigracioni-shehu-jep-shifrat-e-trishta-te-varferise/>

Results

Sending back home: Remittances and Knowledge

Migration and social protection are intertwined in several respects (Sabates-Wheeler & Waite, 2003). Migration is often a substitute for (lack of/failed) social protection in origin country. A weak safety net and/or lack of opportunities to provide care and support for the family if choosing to stay or return, keeps families in a transnational situation. Migration, on the other hand, is argued to disturb safety nets. In particular, when the ones that leave home are the adult children, ageing parents are deprived of potential care and support. This is especially unsettling in societies where families play a crucial role in care and welfare provisions (Zhou, 2012) such as in Albania (Dhëmbo, 2012). Thus, the migrating member of the family has to cater not just for unmet needs that pushed him/her to leave, but also for new arising ones in a transnational setting, and *remittances* are often the key response.

Earlier in this paper, we pointed out at high remittances as a defining characteristic of the Albanian migration. In 2003, Mai & Schwandner-Sievers estimated that an Albanian with a good job outside the country could support at least five people in Albania (p.941). Gemi (2014) documents that most common forms of economic transnational exchange between Albanian migrants and their left being families include sending money to support family, build / reconstruct homes in Albania, or invest in activities that build status back home (p. 412). We find all these forms to still be present in the experiences of our interviewees along with new evolving practices and dynamics.

The only thing we regret is not being able to spend time with our parents... At least, we try to support them financially. We send them Lek [Albanian currency] as much as we can, because if it is for their pensions in Albania, they can't afford even the monthly medicines that they need. (Legal F migrant, 50, Greece)

Financial support tends to diminish over time such as when the migrant child does not intend to return (Wolff, 2019) or when the pressure from the family to remit becomes too high to sustain (Schmalzbauer, 2004). A higher level of integration in host societies, marring/starting a new family there, or economic crisis in host countries, have also contributed to lower levels of remittances among Albanian migrants in the recent years, as less money is available to send back home or cover visiting costs (Michail & Christou,

2016; Gemi, 2014). However, our participants' narratives show that financial support remains a fundamental element in doing family in transnational setting. Regardless of any decline in amounts/frequency of remitting, remittances – one of the most obvious forms of informal transnational social protection (Boccagni, 2017, p.176), continue to be essential and irreplaceable. Remittances are promptly reported as main form of intergenerational solidarity, be it as support migrant children send to their parents or migrant parents send to the children and other family left behind.

Financial support for my family comes first! Luckily, my family does not have only me helping out and they are quite well off, but I still consider sending them money as a sign of responsibility towards my parents. (Legal M migrant, 26, Germany)

In the early migration years, there was a clear trend of predominantly (young) men that would migrate with the main aim of providing for the left behind family (Vathi, 2015; Gemi, 2014). Among more recent migrants, there is a higher incidence of women as well as migration of the older generations in the family which seem to have led to new dynamics in terms of remittance flow. Unlike the traditional expectation for an upward wealth flow in counties with poor welfare provisions where the financial support flow is expected to go up family line – from migrant children to parents (Baykara-Krumme 2008; Karpinska & Dykstra, 2019), as previously observed among Albanian migrants (Gemi, 2014), we find the current flow to have more of a bidirectional nature in terms of intergenerational support. While support for (ageing) parents continues, our data reveal a pattern of parents (re)migrating to support (adult) children left back home and/or build a future for them in the host country so that their transition upon reunification is smoother.

When the crisis hit Italy, I decided to move to Germany. It was primarily for my daughter. I'm hoping to do the papers soon and be able to make her and her husband join me. She graduated several years ago but she has not worked a single day. Her husband works here and there, part-time jobs. So Germany was a better option for them, not me – I'm too weak and tired now to start everything anew. (Legal M migrant, 55, Germany)

Similar to Wolff (2019) findings, we find older members of the family, who have spent most of their (professional) life in Albania but have

recently migrated to be highly involved in remitting. They do so not only to support (adult) children left behind but also prepare for potential return by reinforcing their economic and social capital in their origin country. The following is an example of parents in their fifties, who have taken the advantage of the Electronic Diversity Visa Lottery to migrate to the US – primarily to support their children and prepare a “sure start” for them in the host country before returning one day.

We've worked so hard these last years but at least we've managed to meet our goals. The main reason we left was to help our son get out of prison. Thanks god we've done that and he's now engaged and well settled with his fiancé. We've bought them a small flat. We thought it is good to have it also as a place for us to stay every time we visit or when we return. We've bought him a car too and now we're supporting him to start a small business. We want him to engage in some activity that would keep him away from troubles and make him more responsible and independent...I hope! I don't know but, as a parent, I'm never able to put myself first. Although my children are both adults now, I constantly think of how to best support them (Legal F migrant, 55, USA)

Others provide us with an alternative explanation that what seems as a decline in remittances is in fact a different form of saving and using money for the family members left behind. This is primarily the case for those who plan reunification with family members through processes that are expensive, as explained by this male asylum seeker in the USA.

We [together with brother] sent money back home every time it is needed, but given that I need to pay to bring my fiancé over here and my brother is without paper [irregular], we try to save as much as possible so that we have enough money to cover for that. This is our way of contributing for the family. Back home we've already settled things – we own a big house, we've bought them two cars, our father still works, my fiancé works too, and they're financially doing ok. Our task now is to save money for what I just explained. (M Asylum seeker, 29, USA)

When trying to support their transnational families, migrants may transfer not only financial resources but also *knowledge*. Literature on migration and knowledge transfer has explored extensively on issues of transfer and spread of knowledge, technologies and practices as agents of economic transformation (Wang, 2015). But knowledge transfer goes beyond economic dimensions, ranging from political and cultural knowledge (Demurger, 2015) to knowledge related to health care and birth control (Roosen & Siegel, 2018). Albanian migrants, make no exception.

They engage in transferring, together with their money, knowledge on how and where to invest remittances, technology and practice (particularly in agriculture and construction) with many investing for improved housing and living conditions (Gemi, 2014), fostering also new living styles. The following case shows how a low-skilled Albanian migrant has gained new perspective on women's education while being away from his family, and how this has been transferred to and influenced his wife's life back home.

Wife and sons are still in Albania, unfortunately. Luckily they live with my parents and that takes away some of the concerns... I've tried my best to always support them, improve their living conditions. I've always catered for their needs but also pushed my wife to complete high school, and now she's studying to become a teacher. I've pushed her get a driving licence and also bought her a car. I've come to believe that everything you invest in a woman's education will have high returns. (Legal M migrant, 41, UK)

Unlike money transfers that are easier to identify and appraise, knowledge transfer is often difficult to estimate. However, when asked to think and share their experiences along these lines, a much less explored topic emerged – knowledge transfer on how to successfully (re)migrate. It seems that the most important knowledge migrants amass, send back, or use for the benefit of the left behind family, is how to better inform and guide decision-making process and plans of migration/reunification with family members left behind. This includes knowledge regarding best routes, opportunities, destination countries settings and legal context, and how to protect them from fraud during the process.

“Sharing is caring” - Time and Emotional Care

Money and knowledge transfer are emotionally and relationally embedded and the relation they have with other forms of transnational forms of informal social support and care are critical to their impact (Baldassar et al., 2007; Wright, 2012). Although money and knowledge may diminish, that does not necessarily lead to a decline in other forms of care and time spent in doing family. Even when family relationships are geographically dispersed, they are characterized by a certain level of stability (Baldassar & Merla, 2014, p.6). Yet, distance does challenge various elements of the relationships which do require physical presence/proximity (Reisenauer, 2016, p.146). That is why distance and possibilities to visit

family back home are important factors our interviewees report to have seriously considered when deciding where to migrate.

The main reason I chose Germany was to emigrate in a legal way and be able to visit my family as often as I want – something not possible if I'd enter the UK illegally, which was the only other alternative I had at the time. (Legal M migrant, 26, Germany)

Dykstra and Fokkema (2011) suggest that frequent face-to-face contact increases emotional closeness and facilitates other forms of exchange. Indeed, being able to visit and spent time with family back home is very important for our interviewees. This is particularly stressed by those whose possibilities to visit are limited or non-existent. Migrants who reached host countries illegally or who have been through periods of irregular status (i.e. being not able to visit back home), report this as the “biggest mistake” they did when deciding to leave illegally and the “worst outcome” of a non-fully informed decision. For irregular migrants not being able to be there for the family in good and, particularly, in bad times is unbearable and more troublesome as compared to other limitations that come with an irregular status, such as lack of access to services and provisions in the host country.

I've lost closeness with many of my colleagues and friends, but also with some family members and relatives. It is a very difficult decision, you know? In good or bad times, you can't be there for your family. It is a decision that, in a way or another, made me lose the essence of life. Everyone that comes here like I did [illegally], for as long as they live here, have lost right to live as an emotional human being. Trust me, it's all lost! (Irregular M migrant, 28, UK)

Factors such as distance and mobility gain a particular importance in intergenerational relations when elderly family members are involved in the “equation” of the decision-making process, as this granddaughter explains:

I was so keen to leave...but then again, I thought so much those days of my granny – 80 at the time. I was worried that if I wouldn't be able to get papers in order when the time of my student visa runs out, I would have to stay illegally and probably not be able to see her ever again. This was my biggest concern. (Legal F migrant, 25, UK)

Other activities that contribute to the emotional care are often taken for granted. Similar to what Reisenauer (2016, p.103) finds for the Turkish migrants in Germany, for most Albanian migrants we interviewed, it took

encouragement and probing to make them elaborate on what they seemed to underestimate as routine elements of doing family in a transnational settings, such as time together and communication via technologies. Communication technologies have made proximity and/or mobility not an absolute prerequisite for family solidarity (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997) and advancement of technology and increasing access (especially at origin country), has made certain dimensions of the transnational relationships possible, regardless of distance and mobility options (Karapinska & Dykstra, 2019, p.1732).

Indeed, even among our interviewees, much of the time spent together and emotional care is exchanged via technology. Often, these serve as a substitute/compensation for lack of visits, be it due to immobility or when visits are a burden – when needing permission from work or when there are long, expensive distances to be travelled. Thus, most of our interviewees report to exchange with family back home on (almost) daily bases, challenging also timezone differences.

We've very good and close relations with our children. They are both adults now and have started their own families but there is no single day we don't call each other. We stay up till 1 a.m. just to chat for 5 minutes when they finish their work day. We're very strongly connected as a family, although very far. (Legal F migrant, 55, USA)

Nevertheless, (possibilities for) frequent communication does not mean sharing it all. In fact, one way of showing emotional care in TF context is by censoring information. Senyurekli and Detzner (2008) show that migrants censor information passed to their parents in the country of origin. Parents back home apply the same strategy and conceal information on troubling events (Wolff, 2019). We find this to be valid also when parents are the migrant members of the family and (adult) children the left behind or returned members. Marital relations seem to make no exception either.

I talk almost anything with my wife, but there're things I don't share, as I don't want her to worry. When you're far from each other even something small seems like a huge problem. For example, if there is some work related issue, I share it with my friends at work, why bother my wife with that?! (Legal M migrant, 44, Germany)

Migration may create physical as well as emotional distance which might lead relationships between family members, particularly partners, go under a lot of strain. While visits and technology are accommodating, they

are not enough. Our interviewees report to often combine them with additional 'guarantees' of care and support from people who are physically present, such as other (extended) family members or friends.

They [parents] don't tell me everything, although I call them daily. But I have my colleagues and friends back home who are doctors and I've asked them to keep an eye on my parents' health and report to me [laughs]." (Legal F migrant, 35, Sweden)

Physical presence is important also for maintaining parent-(young) children relations. Parreñas (2008) finds that absent father, viewed as the one making sacrifices to provide family financially, rely primarily on the wife to care for family. We find no evidence of totally absent fathers; however, mothers were often do engage also as interlocutors between distant father and children.

I don't talk to my kids with the same frequency as with my wife, but I learn everything from her – whatever issues they might have with health, school... Then, when I talk to the kids, I ask them to kind of summarise what has happened during those days but there are no details. (Legal M migrant, 44, Germany)

Gijsberts and Lubbers (2013) suggest that family unification in host country or relationship with a native partner may strengthen links with receiving country which could imply that ties with homeland may loosen. While this holds true for our respondents with reference to the host country, none of them described signs of a weakened relationship with the left behind family members. On the contrary, several of them made even clearer plans on how to better support their family members back home once their status in the host country changed due to marriage/reunification with nuclear family members.

Because of her EU passport, my mother in-law can freely enter the UK, so I've been totally focusing on working things out for my family side. In September, I helped my sister's husband enrol in a master studies program here. This coming September, I'll do the same with her. At the same time, I've started procedures for my brother to transfer his studies from Albanian here; he's a second year student of civic engineering. I'm sure that when we all unite over here, we'd be of great support for one another. I've advised all family members that have come on a tourist visa to never break any rules. That might be a problem for my plans later. No plans for my parents yet, as they have few more years till retirement and do not want to give up their jobs back in Albania. I'll come up with something for them too, when time is right. (Legal F migrant, 25, UK)

Overall, our interviewees were keen and proud to share that they either were in the process or were planning reunification with at least one family member left behind. Persisting in reunification plans appeared to be held as indicator of highest levels of dedication and emotional care in their TF.

Concluding remarks

Transnational social protection practices are the realm where migration, social protection and doing family intersect in transnational settings. Informal strategies and practices that migrants and their left behind families advance in a context of transnationality, which include remittances, knowledge transfer, time and emotional care (Boccagni, 2017), constitute major pillars of doing family and intergenerational support in transnational families. Investigating the narratives of Albanian migrants and their transnational families, this paper confirmed the persistence of old practices and strategies and outlined new emerging ones.

Remittances continue to be a fundamental tie in transnational families. Although research has documented oscillations in the intensity of remittances, particularly from migrants in host countries hit by economic crises (Gemi, 2014), the practice of sending money back home persists and is maintained as an important indicator of solidarity in the family. What seems more recent, is a trend for a bidirectional nature of intergenerational support: on one hand, (adult) children sending back to (aging) parents, on the other, parents sending back to (adult) children left behind. Saving and using money for family back home come also as investments to legalise status of migrating members of the family or to enable reunification. Knowledge transfer, although less visible, is an important attachment to these practices, particularly in guiding decision-making and planning processes of migration/reunification with the key element being how to avoid illegal/irregular migration, which can later lead to emotional strains in transnational relationships.

In this light, being able to visit frequently is very important for emotional care. While greater access to technology and more affordable travelling have made sharing time and emotional care in transnational families more doable, physical presence is particularly important for couples and intergenerational relations as those between parents and young children and younger members of the family and the elderly. Apart from keeping in touch on permanent basis, migrants manifest their

emotional care by participating in events and gatherings of the family, by censoring troublesome information, and by continuously working their way towards reunification. The latter is primarily pictured in host countries and return is rarely an option. In this respect, more needs to be investigated on the dynamics of transnational families after (partial) reunions while there is a growing tendency of parents with a professional carriers that do not want to leave until retirement and the repercussions in social protection and social security

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