

Unsafe in a Safe Country: Evaluating the Support and Reintegration Challenges for Albanian Trafficking Victims within the Context of the UK's "Safe Country" Designation

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How to cite this paper: Guri, K., & Rees, S. (2024). Unsafe in a Safe Country: Evaluating the Support and Reintegration Challenges for Albanian Trafficking Victims within the Context of the UK's "Safe Country" Designation. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 519-556.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.125030>

Received: March 22, 2024

Accepted: May 28, 2024

Published: May 31, 2024

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Abstract

This research delves into the multifaceted challenges of human trafficking and domestic violence in Albania, set against the backdrop of its designation as a "safe country of origin" by the United Kingdom. It critically examines the implications of this designation for the safety and welfare of trafficking victims and explores the socio-cultural and legal landscapes that underpin the phenomena. Through a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative interviews with professionals and analysis of secondary data, the study highlights the inadequacies in support structures for victims upon their return to Albania. It reveals that despite legislative efforts and international cooperation, returned victims face significant obstacles in reintegration, including social stigma, economic hardship, and psychological trauma. The research underscores the need for comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to improve support and protection mechanisms for trafficking victims, questioning the efficacy of Albania's current anti-trafficking framework and the UK's safe country designation. By focusing on the lived experiences of victims and the effectiveness of support services, this study contributes valuable insights into the complexities of trafficking in Albania and the impact of recent policy changes on victim support and protection.

Keywords

Trafficking, Domestic Violence, Immigration, Mental Health, Social Services, Support

1. Introduction

1.1. Human Trafficking in Albania

Human trafficking remains a critical human rights issue, exploiting vulnerable individuals for profit through coercion, deception, or fraud (Ramaj, 2023). Globally, it disproportionately affects women and children from less developed countries, with Albania identified as a significant source country for trafficking into Western Europe (U.S. Department of State, 2023b). Human trafficking continues to be one of the most disturbing phenomena for Albanian society for more than two decades. It has been reluctantly acknowledged by government officials after 1997, who have attempted to consider it as illegal migration (Panorama, 2018). Although there has been notable academic attention on the trafficking mechanisms, recruitment strategies, and socio-economic factors in Albania, research on the reintegration challenges faced by victims upon their return is scant (Balidemaj, 2019). This gap is concerning, given the pivotal role of such insights in enhancing victim assistance programs.

In Albania, human trafficking is a complex issue, deeply rooted in various socio-economic, historical, and structural factors. This complexity is largely a result of the nation's tumultuous transition from communism, which has led to economic instability, widespread poverty, and high unemployment rates (Brodie et al., 2018). These conditions serve as a breeding ground for trafficking, especially targeting vulnerable groups such as children and the youth, who are often from impoverished backgrounds, with limited education, and experiencing family breakdowns (Davy & Metanj, 2022). The lack of education and awareness regarding trafficking, combined with the inadequacy of victim support and protection services, increases the risk of trafficking (Brodie et al., 2018). The situation is further worsened by weak social protection systems, leaving a notable gap in safety nets for those at risk. Discrimination based on gender and ethnicity, limited access to critical services, and restrictive migration policies also heighten the vulnerability to exploitation (Brodie et al., 2018). By the close of 2016, there were 7,811 Persons of Concern to UNHCR in Albania, which includes refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons, showcasing a significant amount of movement that could potentially intersect with trafficking risks (Brodie et al., 2018). Additionally, the influence of corruption and organized crime within the country, coupled with the demand in destination countries, significantly fuels the trafficking cycle. Importantly, studies have shown that socioeconomic factors are responsible for 80% of trafficking cases or high-risk situations among children, emphasizing the urgent need to tackle these underlying issues to effectively combat human trafficking (Ozcan & Farruku, 2020).

Albania's efforts to combat human trafficking have been under critical scrutiny. Despite legislative initiatives and interventions aimed at dismantling trafficking networks, the effectiveness of these measures in providing tangible support and protection for victim's post-return remains questionable (Brodie et al.,

2018). The country's designation as a safe country of origin by the UK raises pertinent questions about the safety and welfare of trafficking victims and the broader implications for their rights and support systems. This designation necessitates a reevaluation of Albania's anti-trafficking framework, considering both the advancements made and the persistent challenges that hinder the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims into society.

Recent studies highlight the inadequacy of support structures for returned victims, who often face social stigma, economic hardship, and psychological trauma, further complicating their recovery and reintegration process. The critical evaluation of Albania's governmental efforts reveals a pressing need for comprehensive, evidence-based research to inform policy and practice, aiming to improve the conditions and support mechanisms for trafficking victims (Rajaj, 2023).

1.2. Domestic Violence

In Albania, domestic violence, and gender-based violence remain significant societal concerns despite legislative and policy advancements aimed at their eradication. The "End Violence Against Women in Albania (EVAW)" Joint Programme, initiated by the United Nations in Albania, represents a comprehensive effort to address these issues. The conclusion of Phase I in 2022 saw strengthened institutional commitment towards implementing laws and policies in accordance with international standards, significantly enhancing the legal, policy, and institutional frameworks combating domestic violence. Notable achievements include the expansion of Coordinated Referral Mechanisms (CRMs) and an increase in support for survivors under protection orders, alongside the rise in Free Legal Aid Centres (FLAC), which collectively enhance victim support (United Nations in Albania, 2022).

However, the battle against gender-based violence in Albania is far from over. The country grapples with underreporting of cases, survivor stigmatization, inadequate enforcement of protection orders, and a lack of shelters and support services. These challenges are compounded by concerns over the alignment of Albanian legislation with international norms, the issue of femicide, and the rise of technology-facilitated violence against women (United Nations in Albania, 2022). The reduction in the number of district courts further exacerbates access to justice issues for women, indicating systemic barriers to the protection and rights of survivors.

The widespread nature of violence against women in Albania is highlighted by the third National Population Survey on Violence Against Women, conducted by UN Women. This survey reveals that approximately 52.9% of Albanian women have experienced violence in their lifetime, with concerning statistics on dating violence, intimate partner violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment, and stalking (UN Women, 2019). The survey also sheds light on societal norms and perceptions that often trivialize such violence or view it as a private matter, underscoring the deep-rooted challenges in combating domestic violence

in Albania due to its possible lack of notice.

The legal system's response, as evidenced by the Gjirokastra Court's issuance of a significant number of protection orders in 2022, indicates both the persistence of domestic violence and the efforts to address it through legal means. Despite these efforts, the increase in reported cases and identified perpetrators highlights ongoing challenges in reporting violence and accessing services, especially for those in rural areas or from marginalized communities (Oculus News, 2023).

This situation underscores the pressing need for Albania to enhance its societal and legal responses to domestic violence, ensuring effective protection for victims and preventing future incidents. As Albania navigates its designation as a safe country, the complexities involved in addressing domestic violence demand continued and strengthened efforts. This necessitates a comprehensive approach that not only addresses the legal and institutional framework but also tackles the societal norms and barriers that perpetuate violence against women. Further research into these challenges and the effectiveness of current interventions is crucial for informing future policies and support mechanisms (Ramaj, 2023).

The observations on the weakness of the Albanian state in terms of institution, law, order, and pervasive corruption paint a complex picture of a country grappling with deep-rooted challenges. In 2019, nearly 51% of Albanians were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, significantly higher than the European Union average, underscoring the socio-economic difficulties faced by the population (Albania Daily News, 2021). This situation is further exacerbated by slow progress in poverty reduction, despite average GDP growth, indicating a disconnect between economic growth and improvements in living standards.

Corruption remains a critical obstacle, not only hindering Albania's EU candidacy but also its investment climate. The procurement and construction sectors, along with the judiciary, are particularly affected, with a legal framework in place but poor enforcement and low conviction rates (GAN Integrity, 2020). This is mirrored by Albania's fall in the Corruption Perception Index, signalling ongoing issues with political will and systemic efforts to undermine democracy through control over the judiciary and media (Halla, 2021). The 2019 local elections highlight the political challenges, with the Socialist Party running uncontested amid a boycott by opposition parties and an unprecedentedly low voter turnout, raising questions about the legitimacy of the electoral process and further criticizing Albania's democratic institutions (Halla, 2021). Efforts to combat corruption have been noted, such as the prosecution of high-level officials, yet the enforcement of anti-corruption measures remains a priority. The case of former Minister Saimir Tahiri and investigations into ex-president Ilir Meta exemplify the challenges in addressing high-level corruption and the influence of the executive over judicial processes (SELDI, 2022). Amidst these challenges, the despair among Albanians has led to a significant emigration trend, with many seeking better opportunities abroad, which has implications for the country's demographic and economic future. In the context of returning victims of traf-

ficking, these systemic issues present significant obstacles to reintegration and support. The pervasive corruption and weak rule of law can hinder the effective protection of victims and the pursuit of justice against traffickers. Furthermore, the socio-economic conditions that contribute to vulnerability to trafficking are exacerbated by the state's institutional weaknesses.

The corruption within the Albanian Judicial System illustrates a profound challenge to the country's legal and democratic processes. Post-communist Albania's struggle with judicial corruption is highlighted by the slow progress of the vetting system initiated in 2016, aimed at overhauling the justice system. Despite this, the implementation has been criticized for its slow pace and the justice reform's effectiveness remains in question, with significant figures within the judiciary still awaiting vetting (Semini, 2022, ABC News). This situation is exacerbated by historical legacies of unchecked power and insufficient accountability post-communism, as only a minimal number of individuals associated with the communist regime's abuses have been held accountable (Rejmer, 2021). Furthermore, the judiciary's vulnerability to corruption and political influence undermines efforts towards ensuring independence and integrity, as noted by the USSD 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (United States Department of State, 2022). The vetting process's extension until 2024 underscores the enduring nature of these challenges. Additionally, concerns over privacy and the police's misuse of data highlight broader issues of governance and trust in state institutions. The cumulative evidence suggests a deep-seated corruption problem within Albania's judicial system, with significant implications for law enforcement and the protection of human rights, indicating a pressing need for comprehensive reforms to restore integrity and public confidence in the judiciary.

1.3. Albania's Designation as a Safe Country

The UK's declaration of Albania as a "safe country of origin" in December 2022 has sparked significant debate regarding its implications for victims of trafficking and domestic violence within its borders. This designation, juxtaposed against Albania's ongoing struggles with these issues, necessitates a closer examination of the impact on the safety and welfare of the affected individuals.

The U.S. Department of State's 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report acknowledges Albania's efforts in combating human trafficking but indicates that the country does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking. It highlights persistent vulnerabilities among victims, despite government efforts to improve protection and support mechanisms (U.S. Department of State, 2022). GRETA's (2020) concerns regarding the adequacy of state protection and support mechanisms further underline the complexities faced by survivors, casting doubt on the appropriateness of the UK's designation (GRETA, 2020).

The backdrop to this designation includes a notable rise in the number of Albanian nationals seeking asylum in the UK, with reports indicating around 12,000 arrivals via small boats in 2022, a significant portion of the year's total

boat arrivals. This surge underscores the challenges faced by the UK immigration system and highlights the nuanced realities of migration and asylum-seeking from Albania (Walsh & Oriishi, 2023).

In response, the UK and Albania have intensified collaboration to manage illegal migration, evidenced by the UK-Albania Joint Communique signed in December 2022. This agreement facilitated the return of over 1,000 Albanian nationals, encompassing failed asylum seekers and voluntary returns. These measures aim to deter illegal migration and expedite the removal of individuals with no legal right to remain in the UK (Home Office, 2023).

However, the Migration Observatory (Walsh & Oriishi, 2023) notes that despite the decrease in arrivals from Albania following these measures, almost half of the initial decisions on Albanian asylum applications were positive, challenging the notion of Albania as universally safe for all its nationals.

This situation underscores the nuanced realities of migration and asylum-seeking, where economic motivations often intersect with genuine fears of persecution. The UK's designation of Albania as a "safe country of origin" and subsequent policy measures reflect a multifaceted approach to immigration control. Yet, the significant number of positive asylum decisions for Albanian nationals points to ongoing challenges and vulnerabilities within Albania, suggesting that the situation requires a more nuanced understanding and response than the designation might imply.

The UK Foreign Travel Advice notes that public security in Albania is generally robust, especially in major cities, though crime and sporadic protests can occur. Conversely, the U.S. Department of State's 2023a Albania Travel Advisory designates the country as "Level 2: Exercise Increased Caution," citing limitations in law enforcement's capability to offer assistance, particularly in remote areas. This cautionary stance is attributed to the presence of organized crime and drug-related violence across the country. Albanian media outlets and experts have observed a declining trend in general security since 2012, noting a rise in criminal professionalism to the extent of committing homicides for financial gains as low as 6 thousand euros (Rrmoku, 2022). The Albanian Security Biometer's latest results highlight corruption as the principal security concern among citizens for the fourth year in a row, with growing apprehensions about the future security and prosperity of younger generations amid national and international turbulence (CEE, 2023). The populace predominantly views political self-interest and external interferences as significant hindrances to peace and reconciliation within the Balkans, suggesting that enhanced collaboration with neighboring states could address the challenges posed by organized crime (CEE, 2023).

Furthermore, a recent significant security incident involved the unauthorized disclosure of detailed personal data belonging to approximately 630,000 Albanian citizens. This breach exposed sensitive information, including salaries, job positions, employer details, and ID numbers. Security expert Enri Hide criticized the institutional response as insufficiently serious and inadequately prepared to mi-

tigate the associated risks, indicating a glaring vulnerability in Albania's cybersecurity infrastructure and an absence of a contingency plan for such events (Sinoruka, 2021). This breach not only undermines national security but also places individuals at increased risk, emphasizing the urgent need for stronger cybersecurity measures and a more proactive approach to protecting citizens' digital privacy.

The situation concerning organized crime in Albania is deeply troubling, significantly affecting the nation's democratic processes, economy, and societal fabric. The intertwining of criminal organizations with political power has created a network that challenges democratic norms and fosters illegal activities on an international scale (Newton-Cheh, 2020). Since the fall of communism in the 1990s, Albania has emerged as a hotspot for organized crime, notably gaining control over the lucrative cocaine market in the UK, valued at nearly £5 billion, and extending its operations across Europe (Newton-Cheh, 2020).

1.4. On the Topic of Organised Crime

The infiltration of organized crime into the judiciary and elected offices has been profound. A law passed in 2016 aimed at purging the political system of individuals with criminal convictions revealed that 7% of Members of Parliament, five mayors, and one minister had criminal pasts, illustrating the depth of the problem (Newton-Cheh, 2020). The chaotic post-1997 environment, following the collapse of pyramid schemes, along with challenges in institutional reform, endemic corruption in law enforcement, and Albania's strategic geographical location, have all contributed to the flourishing of organized crime.

Activities associated with organized crime in Albania include human trafficking, illicit drug and arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, extortion, contract killings, organized cybercrime, and money laundering (Zhilli & Lamallari, 2015). Despite efforts to combat these issues, the government's actions have often been criticized as inadequate or superficial, with concerns that certain measures could inadvertently strengthen the immunity of drug cartels and further entwine organized crime with the political elite (Tase, 2020).

The UK's decision to "fast-track" the deportation of Albanian asylum seekers, particularly those arriving via small boats, reflects a complex stance. While this policy is part of broader efforts to manage illegal migration, it also intersects with the challenges posed by organized crime within Albania. The UK's designation of Albania as a "safe and prosperous country" contrast sharply with the reality of Albanian nationals who are compelled to flee due to the threats posed by organized crime and the lack of effective protection within their own country (Home Office, 2023).

This paradox highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of Albania's safety designation, taking into account the pervasive influence of organized crime. While the UK aims to deter illegal migration by emphasizing legal migration routes, the positive asylum decisions for a significant number of Albanian

nationals underscore the ongoing risks and vulnerabilities faced by individuals, suggesting the complex reality of Albania's safety from a human rights perspective (Walsh & Oriishi, 2023).

1.5. Socio-Cultural Landscape

The socio-cultural landscape of Albania, shaped by significant migration flows, has profound implications on the country's demographic, economic, and social fabric. Over the last quarter-century, Albania has experienced one of the highest emigration rates in Europe, with approximately one-third of its population emigrating. This mass migration, initially driven by economic hardship, unemployment, and political instability following the collapse of the communist regime, continues due to ongoing economic challenges and the pursuit of better living standards and educational opportunities.

The United Kingdom's designation of Albania as a safe country intersects with these migration patterns, raising questions about the impacts on those seeking to leave due to abuse or trafficking. The stigma associated with returning—particularly for victims of trafficking—is compounded by societal attitudes towards migration, employment, and the reintegration process. Media portrayal significantly influences public perceptions of migrants, often casting them in a negative light, which can hinder the societal reintegration of returnees and contribute to the stigmatization of victims of trafficking (Dhëmbó, Caro, & Hoxha, 2021).

Furthermore, Albania's socio-cultural dynamics are critical to understanding the challenges faced by returning victims of trafficking and those seeking to escape domestic violence. The societal norms and perceptions that often trivialize or privatize violence against women are indicative of deep-rooted cultural attitudes that can exacerbate the difficulties in addressing these issues effectively.

Despite Albania's progress towards political stability and adherence to human rights, the designation as a safe country requires a nuanced analysis that considers the socio-cultural challenges impacting victims of trafficking and domestic violence. The complexities of reintegration, influenced by societal attitudes and economic conditions, underscore the need for comprehensive support mechanisms that address not only the immediate needs of returnees but also the long-term challenges of reintegration into Albanian society.

The role of media in shaping attitudes towards migrants and returnees highlights the importance of responsible reporting and public discourse that supports, rather than stigmatizes, victims of trafficking and domestic violence. Efforts to combat these issues must consider the socio-cultural context, aiming to shift public perceptions and provide a supportive environment for victims and returnees (Dhëmbó, Caro, & Hoxha, 2021).

1.6. Legal Framework of Return

Albania has undertaken significant legal and structural reforms to address hu-

man trafficking and domestic violence, particularly in the context of aligning with international standards and enhancing protections under its national framework. With technical assistance from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Albania endorsed a new National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for potential victims of trafficking. This updated mechanism aims to ensure comprehensive protection for victims through collaboration among all pertinent institutions, based on a thorough needs assessment and consultations with state and civil society stakeholders (OSCE, 2023).

The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) acknowledges Albania's efforts to strengthen the rights and position of victims through legislative amendments and the National Action Plan for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings 2018-2020. This plan encompasses activities designed to improve the identification, protection, and reintegration of victims, supported by a dedicated budget and the establishment of a Victim Advisory Board. GRETA emphasizes the importance of providing specialized legal assistance and legal aid to human trafficking victims from an early stage, highlighting the necessity of ensuring victims' access to justice and effective remedies, including compensation. However, GRETA also notes concerns regarding the limited number of criminal court decisions on victim compensation and the absence of a functioning state compensation scheme for trafficking victims (GRETA, 2020).

The European Union's support for Albania's strategic aspirations towards EU membership underscores the country's commitment to EU integration and reform agendas. This support reflects Albania's progress in judicial reforms, tackling corruption and organized crime, and ensuring fundamental rights and freedoms, essential benchmarks for EU accession (European Parliament, 2023).

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in the effective implementation and enforcement of these legal frameworks, particularly in terms of victim support and protection. The designation of Albania as a safe country by the UK necessitates a critical examination of these legal and institutional reforms to assess their adequacy in protecting victims of trafficking and domestic violence. The ongoing issues related to the enforcement of protection orders, access to legal aid, and the reintegration of victims into society highlight the need for continued efforts and enhancements in Albania's legal and institutional response to these issues.

In light of Albania's designation as a safe country, it is imperative to ensure that legal and policy reforms are effectively implemented and that victims receive the support and protection they need. This requires not only legislative action but also a comprehensive approach involving law enforcement, judiciary, and civil society to address the root causes of trafficking and domestic violence and to improve the overall safety and well-being of victims.

Furthermore, the Albanian judicial system has long been beleaguered by corruption, undermining efforts to combat human trafficking and domestic vi-

olence effectively. Initiatives such as the Justice Reform of 2016 (Wilson, 2023), which introduced a vetting process for judges and prosecutors to ensure integrity and professionalism, represent significant steps towards addressing judicial corruption. Despite these efforts, the efficacy of anti-corruption measures remains questionable (Balidemaj, 2019). The vetting process, while ambitious in scope, has been criticized for its slow pace and limited impact, with significant figures in the judiciary still awaiting evaluation. Furthermore, the European Commission's reports on Albania's EU accession progress have consistently highlighted the need for more decisive actions to combat corruption within the judiciary, underscoring a persistent gap between reform initiatives and their implementation on the ground. The lack of comprehensive enforcement mechanisms and the continuing influence of organized crime and political interests within the judicial system pose substantial obstacles to meaningful reform (European Commission, 2020, "Albania 2020 Report").

In Albania, combating human trafficking has been significantly hindered by systemic corruption within the judicial system. Corruption manifests in various forms, including bribery, influence peddling, and procedural delays, which collectively undermine the integrity and effectiveness of judicial processes (Balidemaj, 2019). For example, the 2019 European Commission report on Albania highlighted ongoing concerns regarding judicial corruption, indicating that such corruption poses a critical barrier to effective law enforcement against traffickers and protection for victims (European Commission, 2019, "Albania 2019 Report"). The reluctance or inability of the judicial system to prosecute and convict traffickers effectively not only perpetuates impunity but also discourages victims from coming forward, fearing retribution or mistrusting the judicial process. Moreover, corruption facilitates a climate where traffickers can operate with relative impunity, undermining both national and international efforts to combat human trafficking (Balidemaj, 2019).

1.7. Looking through the Lenses of the Individual

The experiences of individuals affected by trafficking and violence in Albania illuminate the complex realities behind statistical data and policy discussions. Recent research indicates a significant reluctance among victims to seek help or self-identify as trafficking victims, compounded by the challenges they face upon their return or during their integration into society (Ramaj, 2023). Many victims express fear of returning to Albania, apprehensive they will confront the same conditions that made them vulnerable to trafficking initially (US Department of State, 2023).

The designation of Albania as a safe country by the UK has sparked concerns among advocacy groups and victims alike. The narrative of safety contrasts sharply with the lived experiences of many who have been subjected to trafficking or domestic violence. Individuals report conditions of abuse and exploitation, both prior to their departure and upon their return, highlighting the dis-

crepancies between policy definitions of safety and the reality of their situations (Logier, 2023).

For instance, the tragic case of A.D, a 37-year-old Albanian who committed suicide one week after being rejected stay in the UK, brings to light the dire consequences of the lack of support and recognition of the vulnerabilities faced by victims. This incident has had a profound impact on the Albanian community, particularly among the young and vulnerable, who fear similar fates await them due to the current designation of Albania as a safe country (Taylor, 2023). Esme Madill, a solicitor at the Migrant and Refugee Children's Legal Unit, emphasized the increasing feelings of desperation among Albanian victims of trafficking, underscoring the potential for more tragic incidents if the situation does not improve (Taylor, 2023).

Moreover, the distrust in protective organizations and the perceived inadequacy of support mechanisms underscore the urgent need for comprehensive strategies that address the immediate and long-term needs of trafficking victims. The interplay of socio-economic factors, fear of re-trafficking, and the cultural stigma attached to victims necessitates a nuanced approach in providing support and ensuring their safety and well-being upon return (Logier, 2023).

In Albania, victims of human trafficking often hesitate to seek help due to a combination of deep-seated fears, systemic barriers, and societal issues (Ramaj, 2023). The widespread fear of reprisals by traffickers, who may threaten the victims or their loved ones, serves as a major obstacle (Ramaj, 2023). Recent studies within the country reveal that the majority of victims escape on their own (Davy, 2022), which raises questions about the effectiveness and reliability of law enforcement, further intensifying the victims' hesitation to trust authorities. Additionally, a deep-seated mistrust towards law enforcement and government institutions, intensified by concerns over corruption (CEE, 2023) and possible collusion with traffickers, makes victims wary of seeking help, fearing neglect or further abuse (Davy, 2022). This apprehension is exacerbated by the risk of social stigma and exclusion, amplifying the personal and societal risks associated with seeking assistance. The dependency on traffickers for basic necessities, combined with psychological coercion, hampers victims' ability to seek support or envision a safe way out, particularly when trafficked by family members or acquaintances (Davy, 2022). This issue is magnified in the context of Albania's family-centric culture, leading some victims to blame themselves for the situation and to avoid reporting to authorities and return to their traffickers, as they are "vulnerable to re-trafficking by the same person, especially if that person has not been convicted. The same trafficker is much more dangerous, because they already know the victim's weaknesses" (Davy, 2022: p. 56). Davy (2022) emphasizes the critical need for immediate post-rescue support, including shelter, medical care, and psycho-social counselling, to reassure victims of their safety and facilitate their recovery and reflection. This combination of factors, along with a general unawareness of available support services and rights (Ramaj, 2023), traps many vic-

tims in a cycle of exploitation, leaving them feeling isolated and without the means to alter their situation.

These individual experiences challenge the notion of Albania as a universally safe country for its nationals, highlighting the importance of considering the unique and varied risks individuals face. The reluctance to return, coupled with the socio-economic and cultural factors highlighted by victims, underscores the need for a reassessment of the criteria used to designate countries as safe and the mechanisms in place to support victims of trafficking and violence.

1.8. Conclusion of the Literature

Looking at the presented research, it can be assumed that there is a high intertwinement between many spectres of Albania's current conditions regarding its safety when considering victims of trafficking and domestic violence. The unlined predispositions as to why Albania would be designated as a safe country, combined with the mentioned data, leads to believe that this decision stems from a political outlook rather than a humanitarian one. Nevertheless, while the country's policy does align with the issues UK itself faces from the immigrants, such solution seems to undermine the status of Albania. The country's current conditions are perceived as improving however the contradicting information, on par with political, economic, and statistical instability poses the risk of creating an imaginative frame, hindering the actual reality of the situation. Thus, the current research aims to unveil further information regarding the current situation in Albania and the conditions that entitle it.

2. Methodology

This investigation focused on four key institutions, encompassing three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and one governmental facility. The NGOs involved are Different and Equal (D & E), located in Tirana; Vatra Psycho-Social Centre, situated in Vlora; and Another Vision, based in Elbasan. The governmental facility is the National Reception Centre for Trafficking Victims (NRCTV), also located in Tirana. Outreach efforts were made to these organizations, with Another Vision being the only NGO to confirm participation. Additionally, the Human Rights in Democracy Centre, an NGO dedicated to advocating for human rights with a special emphasis on vulnerable societal groups such as women, girls, minors, and minorities, agreed to contribute to the research. An interview was also conducted with a social worker, who chose to remain anonymous, further enriching the study's insights. The research also included participation from "Family," a centre providing psychological and legal counselling. These organizations collectively contributed to the research over a three-week period in December 2023, offering a multifaceted view of the support system available to trafficking victims in Albania. Lastly, information was gathered from one of the U Matter Counselling counsellors (**Table 1**).

Table 1. List of the interviewees and their professions.

ID	Profession
SW1	Social worker with a coordinating role
SW2	Social Worker
LAW1	Lawyer
SW3	Social Worker
PSY1	Psychologist

2.1. Study Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to comprehensively understand the complexities of human trafficking in Albania, with a focus on the return, rehabilitation, and reintegration processes of victims. The design incorporates both quantitative data to capture broad patterns and trends and qualitative insights to delve into the personal experiences and systemic challenges faced by trafficking victims. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the multifaceted issue, considering ground-based evidence.

2.2. Sample Selection

The sample for this study consisted of professionals involved in the support and rehabilitation of trafficking victims. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who can provide in-depth insights into the phenomena being studied. Efforts will be made to ensure the sample reflects a diversity of experiences. Because of the multifaceted ethical requirements, we were unable to conduct interviews with victims of trafficking and/or domestic violence.

2.3. Data Collection

Data collection will involve a combination of in-depth interviews, and review of secondary sources. In-depth interviews will be conducted with professionals working in the field. These interviews will explore personal experiences, the effectiveness of support systems, and the challenges encountered during the return, rehabilitation, and reintegration processes. The data collection was carried out via semi-structured interviews. This approach allowed for some consistency upon the aim of the study, while leaving room for further questions. The interviews took place in designated offices and via on-line meetings. The interviews lasted between 60 - 75 minutes and were then transcribed in Albanian.

2.4. Ethics

The interviews adhered to the GDPR guidelines and were approved by the 'The Psychologist Order' in the Republic of Albania. The participant was prior informed of the purpose of the study and their right to forfeit at any given time without any given reason. Upon the examination and analysis of the interviews, all the information would be destroyed to preserve anonymity. To preserve

anonymity the actual interview will not be published in the research.

2.5. Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was conducted through qualitative content analysis, a methodological approach that allowed for an in-depth examination of interview transcripts to extract meaningful patterns and themes. This process involved a meticulous reading of textual data collected from participants, followed by coding and categorization to identify key themes relevant to the research questions. By employing qualitative content analysis, the study harnessed rich, descriptive insights into the complex phenomena under investigation, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of human trafficking, return, and reintegration processes within the Albanian context. This method proved instrumental in distilling the essence of participants' narratives, thereby contributing significantly to the depth and breadth of the study's findings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Is Return the Best Option

From the interviews it was identified that the main reason why many individuals would flee the country was due to possible economic gains, as previously documented as well. One of the main regions identified by one of the interviews in this context was the region of Kukes which has previously been put into spotlight as the region where most Albanians come to the UK. Nearly every family in this region has at least one individual that lives in the UK and about 70% of the youth wishes to flee the country (SW1). Such reason was identified derived due to two factors. The first factor relates to general promises from traffickers and illegal recruiters promising individuals, mainly youth, a way to earn a lot of money on a short amount of time. This on par with Albania's social media directives, highlighting a luxury life, makes it easier for individuals to fall prey to these conditions. And because many of these individuals come from rural areas where, as previously mentioned, there isn't any option for economic stability, such opportunities are nearly always preferred from these individuals (SW1). In that regard, it was also highlighted by the interview that according to their intel there had been no voluntary return for any of the individuals (SW1). It was also highlighted that nearly all the individuals that would flee the country were males, which relates back to the Office for National Statistics Data for 2023 (Walsh & Oriishi, 2023).

Interview insights reveal that repatriation for victims of trafficking and domestic violence in Albania might not always represent the most beneficial option. Despite legislative enhancements and procedural reforms, significant obstacles remain in ensuring effective protection, accessible rehabilitation services, and a supportive environment for victims. The classification of Albania as a "safe country" has not fundamentally shifted the landscape for addressing the root causes of vulnerability for these individuals (SW1, SW2, SW3, LAW1,

PSY1). Systemic challenges, including insufficient services, economic dependencies, social stigma, and safety concerns, suggest that return might not always align with the victims' best interests: *"I'm afraid not. I'm afraid not because all the reasons that I mentioned are not only fears of these women but are actually problems that exist in our country. We have very big problems with services, we have problems with housing these women, especially in the long term, we have problems with their security. Just for the year 2023, we have 16 women killed in Albania, so it's a phenomenon that is very widespread in Albania, unfortunately. This year in fact we have more women killed than last year, so this is a factor that tells a lot. The fact that women are killed, questions the entire system and raises the question if we are in a safe country for these women?"* (LAW1) The complexities surrounding the decision to return, including concerns about individual safety, economic reintegration, and the sustainability of reintegration programs were acknowledged. While Albania provides frameworks and programs for returnees, including trafficking victims, it's stressed that each case must be considered on its own merits, taking into account specific circumstances and risks involved. The nuanced perspective provided suggests that while returning can be a viable option for some, it is not universally applicable. The interview pointed out that even with progressive strides in providing reintegration processes, the stability and effectiveness of these measures are yet to be fully realised: *"We have said, look, if you help us, because I have 15 beds that I use, but if you help us so that we can have both bed capacities and services at the same time, that is, help us financially, we also have the human capacity to offer this, based on our long experience. Of course, this is done through bilateral agreements, not just to help an organization but through state agreements, so the state itself must be involved in this kind of support, so that the support is multifunctional and multidimensional, as we say, because assistance is also needed in the territory where they will live, so the state itself must provide these tools, that's the idea."* (SW1) This statement underscores the critical need for government involvement and financial support to enhance service capacity and ensure a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to reintegration. Without such support, individuals may find themselves compelled to leave Albania again, faced with unchanged conditions that prompted their initial departure.

Some of the interview responses also presented a more nuanced view on the topic. For many victims of trafficking and abuse, returning to their home country may offer more stability when considering the victim's physical and psycho-emotional state (SW3). It was further highlighted that: *"Returning to the state of origin is more favourable as for every case of return, an intervention plan is realised. The intervention plan is an instrument that guides the interaction and coordination on the ground, the role of each service and actor, as well as the orientation of interventions in a practical way."* (SW2). Furthermore, another issue raised is the expectancies that most individuals face when traveling to the UK specifically can be very psychologically damaging. Because a lot of individu-

als are usually used to portray the UK or most European countries as highly economically attractive, when they are faced to the difficulties and the conditions, they have to endure this can worsen their psychological state (SW1). *“During a visit we had in 2022 to England, I had to meet groups of young people who indeed reflected this type of emotional distress as well as mental health issues. There were also cases of relapses among individuals who had been dealing with these issues, including drug use, while also experiencing significant mental health problems like severe depression. This directly affects an individual’s mental health, especially when they stay for a long time in employment without receiving the benefits they are entitled to, or the expectations they had envisioned for their lives, and then it reflects on their mental health subsequently.”* (SW1)

However, this was also highlighted that such re-integration came with a series of challenges such as the victim’s re-enrolment into education, workplace, and community (SW3). The economic instability in Albania significantly affects these individuals, marking economic opportunities in destination countries as a crucial factor in their decision-making. Other reasons for preferring to stay in the destination country include avoiding stigma and accessing higher levels of safety. Conversely, potential benefits of returning to the home country include social and emotional healing and the opportunity to confront trauma. However, for a successful reintegration process, a comprehensive system addressing both economic and cultural challenges is necessary. Due to the traditional roots, the families of many of the victims, particularly female victims, do not show any form of support towards the individual upon return (LAW1). Furthermore, economic changes are intertwined with the country’s political and innovative landscape, making them complex issues to address. This comes to no surprise as the UK and US governments have both acknowledged that there is an economic instability within the Albanian population, however when considering the cases of providing support to individuals, such factors cannot amount to a reason of seeking help ([UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023](#)). Furthermore, since the declaration of Albania designated as a safe country, the total UK exports to Albania have increased by 21.4% ([UK Department for Business & Trade, 2023](#)) which could possibly provide more economic stability. The UK Government has invested over £ 3.5 million of Official Development Assistance between December 2019 and September 22 on the ‘MSF programme’ led by UNICEF.

Culturally, a significant gap exists in the reintegration process, mainly due to the pervasive stigma against victims, even within their families, which are often their primary support systems. This stigma can lead to social isolation, feelings of guilt, loneliness, and depression, potentially resulting in re-trafficking rather than reintegration (LAW1). Recent studies and reports, such as those by the United Nations Development Programme ([de Siqueira, 2022](#)) and the International Organization for Migration ([IOM, 2021](#)), have highlighted the multifaceted challenges faced by returnees and trafficking victims in Albania, empha-

sizing the need for targeted support and comprehensive reintegration programs. These documents underscore the importance of addressing both immediate needs and long-term integration strategies, highlighting economic empowerment, psychological support, and community reintegration as key components of successful reintegration efforts in Albania.

Thus, such information presents a certain paradox for individuals returning to Albania. As it would seem Albania has received financial support and is documented to be on paper able to take care and provide security for the victims of trafficking and domestic abuse. However, the interview insights revealed that people were yet fleeing the country and that there is still a form of distress and uncertainty for returning victims within their family and social groups. As mentioned, Albania is a well-documented country which has preserved its 'shame and honour' and such deep roots often hinder the safe and stable reintegration of many victims, leaving them in social isolation.

3.2. Accepting the Victim Status

Victims' acknowledgment of their own exploitation or abuse is often obscured by layers of personal, societal, and psychological challenges (UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023). The interviewee illuminated that immediate reporting of abuse is rare among victims due to fears of retribution, economic dependency, absence of family support, and societal judgment (LAW1). This hesitancy to self-identify as a victim is nuanced; however, increased awareness and interaction with supportive organizations can encourage a shift towards acceptance and a readiness to seek assistance (SW3). The complex dynamics surrounding victim identification, especially among minors, are influenced by a myriad of factors that include misinterpretation of their plight, manipulation by traffickers, and emotional bonds formed with exploiters. Minors might not recognize or admit to their exploitation, partly due to a misunderstanding of their situation or normalization of their experiences (SW1; Zimmerman & Watts, 2003). Adults also find it more difficult at times to accept the status, sometimes due to shaming or them feeling 'below' other individuals. This phenomenon is more apparent in males (SW3), as women have shown to be more open to accepting the status relating it as being pushed to such lengths due to family issues, bad friends (SW1). Women were also more prone to requiring the status to possibly gain some form of help and support (SW2). The stigma surrounding trafficking and abuse victims compounds the difficulty of embracing and openly discussing their victim status. Creating an environment of support and non-judgement is pivotal in aiding victims to understand and accept their experiences, facilitating their journey towards recovery through rehabilitative and reintegration services. Research on trauma corroborates that victims often resort to denial or normalization of their abuse as a defence mechanism to mitigate trauma. This behavioural response can stem from a misplaced loyalty towards the trafficker, fear of retaliation, shame, and a wish to diminish or forget the past, sometimes viewing the

denial of 'victim' status as empowering. However, this reluctance presents legal obstacles upon their return to Albania. Victims are required to provide police statements upon return, but many offer inaccurate accounts, denying their exploitation or failing to identify traffickers due to fear of information passed on to the traffickers, lacking trust in authorities and/or being wrongly prosecuted. Under Albanian legislation, providing false information to the authorities constitutes a criminal offense, resulting in the prosecution of some victims due to their non-cooperation (Ramaj, 2023). This was also highly put towards by the UK government highlighting that "The onus is on the person to credibly evidence that they face such a risk." (UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023 section 3.2.1)

Moreover, avoidance and denial of traumatic experiences hinder emotional healing. Recognizing trauma is essential for effective therapeutic intervention; without acknowledgment, therapy's effectiveness is significantly reduced. For victims of sex trafficking, denial complicates essential health screenings for sexually transmitted diseases. Thus, while serving as a coping strategy, such resistance leads to legal complications within the Albanian legal framework and obstructs psychological healing and healthcare access (Hopper & Hidalgo, 2006).

3.3. Main Barriers to Re-Integration

3.3.1. Social Stigma and Discrimination

The pervasive issue of social stigma and discrimination was underscored in all interviews. One social worker articulated the problem of societal judgment, particularly in educational settings where victims are inadvertently exposed and labelled by their association with rehabilitation centres. This form of identification not only segregates but also stigmatizes them, a situation that is especially acute in rural areas where traditional norms may deepen the victims' isolation and self-awareness of their plight (SW1; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021). The social worker lamented, "It is present, and we are currently a judgmental society" (SW1), highlighting the prevalent prejudicial attitudes within society.

In Albanian society, the violation of traditional norms concerning sexuality and marriage by women leads to profound stigma and societal ostracization, rooted in concepts of honour and shame. This deeply entrenched societal view significantly impacts the lives of women who deviate from these norms, as well as victims of trafficking upon their return, exacerbating their vulnerability and isolation (Schwandner-Sievers, 2010; Marion, 2012). Efforts to address these challenges are complicated by the patriarchal structure, where women's autonomy is severely restricted, and actions deemed as dishonourable can lead to extreme familial and social sanctions (Kushi, 2015; Nixon, 2009). The reintegration of these women into society is hindered not only by pervasive stigmatization but also by systemic failures to protect and support them adequately, underscoring the need for societal and legal reforms. This complex situation calls for compre-

hensive measures to dismantle the stigmatization and provide meaningful support to affected women, aiming to foster an environment where women's rights and dignity are respected and upheld. The lack of family support was identified as a primary issue. Victims without familial backing miss out on financial, housing, and emotional support, forcing shelters to extend their stay, particularly for minors. Yet, this is a temporary fix, as the long-term challenge of finding sustainable living arrangements post-shelter remains unresolved (SW1).

3.3.2. Psychological Trauma

Victims often endure severe psychological trauma, necessitating extensive mental health support to address PTSD, depression, and anxiety. The current mental health services in Albania are largely seen as insufficient to meet these needs (PSY1, LAW1).

3.3.3. Economic Dependency and Lack of Opportunities

Economic vulnerability is both a cause and consequence of trafficking. Limited employment opportunities further exacerbate this vulnerability, compelling victims to re-enter hazardous situations (International Labour Organization (ILO, 2022)). This has also been apparent in younger ages with a recent increase in juvenile crimes due to the lack of financial options (SW1). Another concerning issue that stems from the lack of economic opportunities is that there is also a portion of married women (who are jobless) that depend economically on their husbands, who think "where am I going to go if I say that my husband has physically abused me" (LAW1).

3.3.4. Legal and Institutional Challenges

Despite legal progress, victims encounter bureaucratic obstacles and inadequate legal protections. The inefficiency of post-communist institutions and complex judicial processes discourage victims from seeking justice and accessing essential services (FRA, 2021).

3.3.5. Limited Access to Services

A critical shortage of comprehensive support services, such as healthcare, counselling, and shelter, remains a significant barrier. These services are often geographically inaccessible and ill-suited to the specific needs of trafficking victims (ILO, 2022; Interview insights). According to the UK government reports (UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023), there should be shelters providing support for up to 2 years for high risk returning individuals and specialised individuals providing psychological support. However recent reports of individuals have revealed a different reality. To currently state: *"We do not have any specialized institution to train psychiatrists. The existing ones work on private clinics and the cost of such service is very high. The VoT-s can not afford to have this service."* Employment and housing remain real challenges for VoTs, the support offered by NGO-s do usually does not continue for longer than 6 months. Facing the stigma and social isolation are also serious challenges for the victims of traffick-

ing to find support. Furthermore, there is a continuous lack of services which were further highlighted by the reported interviews of previously returned individuals. [UK Visas and Immigration Report \(2023\)](#) highlighted that the returned individual would be greeted and supported upon their arrival on the airport. However, interview insights from previously returned victims of trafficking reported that such support was inexistent. To quote, one of the victims said that “*it was just me and God*” (PSY1), therefore further hindering the realities from what is reported.

Moreover, the healthcare provision aspect raises concerns, particularly for victims of trafficking, as highlighted by the UK [Albania Travel Advice \(2024\)](#). It states: “Medical and dental facilities (including those for accident and emergency use) are very poor, particularly outside Tirana. Make sure you have adequate travel health insurance and accessible funds to cover the cost of any medical treatment abroad, evacuation by air ambulance and repatriation.” This statement underlines the alarming condition of healthcare services, suggesting that trafficking victims may face significant challenges in receiving adequate medical treatment.

3.3.6. Risk of Re-Trafficking

The continual risk of re-trafficking is a pressing concern, highlighting the necessity for enduring support mechanisms ([UNODC, 2021](#)).

3.3.7. Legal System Challenges and Victim Intimidation

The study also touched on the referral system’s shortcomings in addressing trafficking and abuse cases. A social worker pointed out that while state organizations might identify sexual abuse/trafficking cases, exploitation for economic reasons, like begging, is often misclassified, impacting the effectiveness of Albania’s referral system (SW1).

The situation for vulnerable women, particularly survivors of trafficking and modern slavery, seeking reintegration into Albanian society presents significant challenges. The process of settling in a new area is fraught with difficulties, as highlighted by the [USSD Albania Report on Human Rights Practices \(2022\)](#), which outlines the bureaucratic hurdles involved in accessing public services due to stringent requirements for civil registration. This system exacerbates the vulnerability of women trying to evade their aggressors, as it complicates the process of finding employment without revealing their identity. The economic landscape, characterized by low wages and high living costs, further diminishes their capacity to live independently and securely.

The legal framework, while offering the right to choose and declare one’s residence, mandates the disclosure of an exact address to access public services, a requirement reiterated by the Minister of the Ministry of Interior. This policy, aimed at improving service delivery, inadvertently penalizes those who, for safety reasons, cannot comply. The procedural requirement to physically apply for an ID, involving personal identification measures, adds another layer of difficul-

ty for individuals who have been out of the country or are trying to maintain a low profile (LAW1).

Acknowledging the unique risks faced by Albanian citizens, particularly women survivors of trafficking upon their return, organizations like Hestia and the Joint Committee on Human Rights have called for more nuanced approaches in assessing Albania as a 'safe' state. These perspectives emphasize the need for guarantees of safety and protection for vulnerable groups before any return policies are implemented, highlighting the broader implications of legislation like the Illegal Migration Bill on individuals' well-being and mental health.

The situation in Albania, as depicted through various reports and articles, illustrates a complex interplay of challenges in combating organized crime, corruption, and ensuring the protection of vulnerable populations. Despite legislative frameworks and efforts to strengthen the judicial system, corruption remains a pervasive issue affecting all levels of government, undermining the efficacy of legal processes. The Home Office [Country Policy and Information Note \(2022\)](#) on Albania acknowledges improvements in police conduct but also highlights concerns regarding corruption in judicial procedures, which can be opaque and influenced by corrupt practices.

The enduring legacy of organized crime, tracing back to the collapse of pyramid schemes in 1997, has seen a continuous evolution with criminals forming networks to consolidate power, influence territories, and engage in illicit activities for financial gain and social status. This situation is exacerbated by the symbiotic relationship between certain politicians and criminal elements, seeking mutual benefits through financial support and manipulation of electoral processes.

The European Union's report on Albania points to some progress in fighting corruption and organized crime but emphasizes the need for sustained political will and consistent action, particularly in securing convictions against high-level officials to dismantle the culture of impunity. The specialized structures against corruption, such as SPAK and the anti-corruption courts, are steps in the right direction but require further strengthening to enhance their investigative and prosecutorial capacities.

Reports of corruption within the police force, as well as the involvement of high-ranking officials in criminal activities, underscore the challenges in enforcing laws and protecting citizens. This is particularly concerning in light of the significant role organized crime plays in driving Albanian migration to other European countries, facilitated by networks involved in drug trafficking and money laundering.

Amnesty International's report on violence against women in Albania highlights another dimension of the problem, with widespread domestic violence and a lack of effective implementation of protection orders. This situation points to a broader issue of societal attitudes and the need for comprehensive strategies to address the root causes of gender-based violence.

Overall, the information presented paints a picture of a country grappling with deep-seated issues of organized crime, corruption, and violence against women. While there have been some improvements, significant challenges remain in ensuring the rule of law, protecting vulnerable populations, and fostering a culture of accountability and transparency. The international community's support, alongside domestic efforts, is crucial in addressing these challenges and advancing Albania's path towards stability and justice.

3.3.8. Economic Instability and Bureaucratic Inefficiency

Victims' economic instability is compounded by the state's bureaucratic inefficiency, which hinders their ability to register as job seekers or apply for government assistance, thereby increasing the likelihood of re-trafficking (LAW01; ILO, 2022).

3.4. The Psychological Support

Trafficking victims have the right to a health card that covers basic medical services in Albania, but there are significant gaps in coverage, particularly regarding medication and specialized treatments (Ramaj, 2023). One of the interviewees specifically highlighted that an individual had requested assistance regarding their mental health and the hospital (the name of the institution will be kept confidential due to publicity reasons) responded by saying that they did not offer such services (PSY1).

The cost of medication, often essential for treating health complications arising from trafficking experiences, is a notable concern due to the low income of many victims (Ramaj, 2023). While most organizations and some shelters offer psychological counselling services to victims, the quality, frequency, and accessibility of these services vary (Albania: Trafficked Boys and Young Men, 2019). State-provided psychotherapy services appear to be insufficient and infrequent, with victims often requiring more specialized and consistent psychological support than is currently available (Ramaj, 2023). The Albanian government recognizes the need for comprehensive healthcare for VOT, including mental health services, covered by state insurance (Home Office, 2022).

This is intended to integrate victims into the public health system, offering a range of medical services at no cost to the victim. However, there seems to be a lack of specialized services tailored specifically to the needs of trafficking victims (Home Office, 2022). Both NGOs and government shelters provide some level of psychological counselling, but there's a reported lack of specialized mental health support tailored to the unique needs of trafficking victims (Home Office, 2022). The existing support, while valuable, may not fully address the complex psychological issues resulting from trafficking experiences. Long-term solutions for victims with severe mental health issues are difficult to achieve, indicating a gap in the availability of suitable accommodations and specialized care for those with enduring psychological needs (Home Office, 2022). There are significant cultural and social barriers to seeking psychological support in Albania (Home

Office, 2022). Mental health support is a relatively new concept, and seeking such help can be stigmatized, making individuals reluctant to access the services they need. Efforts are being made to incorporate psychological support subtly into broader services to overcome these barriers.

Victims of trafficking commonly face a range of psychological challenges, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), persistent states of anxiety, fear and paranoia, as well as a loss of hope that positive change can ever return to their lives (SW3). Apart from the previously mentioned psychological impacts, victims returning from conflict zones also frequently encounter issues like low self-esteem, distrust, isolation, family abandonment, stigmatization, indoctrination, mental disorders, and deviant behaviour (SW2).

Previous research has highlighted that being victimised and unprotected within own home community and society and/or the country that they are seeking asylum and protection, leaves the persons, with the belief that they are worthless, helpless, disempowered, and inferior in their own cultural context (Cloitre, et al., 2020: p. 71). This is not a choice but is recognised in PTSD and Complex PTSD as, symptoms associated to a person's trauma.

In order to reduce their trauma symptoms, medication in and of itself does not support the client, and NICE guidance states that when working with severe escalations related to trauma and mental health, therapy is imperative in tandem. Unfortunately, treatment is not available should they returned to Albania, as supported by the experiences from the individuals (PSY1).

When we mention the suicide, the mental health will continue to decline if this period of limbo is prolonged further. It may result in a suicide attempt as we have seen an increase of these amongst asylum seekers in recent years. ... Somatic symptoms that manifest, in relation to anxiety, depression become meshed together with PTSD or Complex PTSD symptoms, including varying manifestations of suicidality (Aizik-Reebs et al., 2022).

Recent information on the 'Trafficking of Men and Boys' (Albania: Trafficked boys and Young Men, 2019) have stated that NGO organisations in Albania that are specifically for men and boys are so limited that they do not have the funding or capacity to support those in need. Clearly, the true reflection on the lack of resources in Albania would severely jeopardise the psychological and physical health of persons returning, placing them at severe risk of potential harm. According to the same report it states that: "Psychotherapy is not yet a profession regulated by law and is too costly, because it is offered only within the private sector of services. The community centres of mental health show low standard and offer mostly psychiatric services only for severe psychological problems like schizophrenia or high developmental disabilities" (p. 175). Taking into consideration the cultural norms, stigma of mental health and masculinity (for men) means that, to remove recognised victims of trafficking from the UK and relocate them, renders them visible and even more so vulnerable, due to their identity as a victim. Consequently, 'Shame' in this instance is directly related to hav-

ing no resources or social recourse, due to being identified as a victim of abuses, that sit in absolute contradiction, [for male victims], to versions of masculinity in terms of their home culture and beliefs (Briere & Scott, 2015). In this context it is important to note that the research evidence indicates that prolonged immigration uncertainty has an adverse effect on mental health and on quality of life (Phillimore & Cheung, 2021).

3.5. The Case of Trafficked Women

In the landmark case guidance of TD and AD by the Upper Tribunal (UT), a critical acknowledgment was made regarding trafficked women from Albania (UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023). The Upper Tribunal recognised these women as belonging to a particular social group (PSG) under the Refugee Convention, attributing this classification to their unique vulnerabilities and societal perceptions in Albania, as highlighted in the UK Visas and Immigration Report, 2023. This status is rooted in the immutable characteristic of their trafficking experience, which shapes their distinct identity within the Albanian social fabric. Conversely, trafficked men, despite sharing the immutable characteristic of trafficking, are not viewed as a distinct PSG due to differing societal identities and perceptions in Albania.

Reintegration for trafficking victims largely hinges on family support, encompassing emotional, psychological, and financial assistance. However, victims often face early family conflicts and reluctance, complicating their reintegration efforts. Single mothers, in particular, grapple with compounded challenges such as financial instability, childcare responsibilities, and the need for employment, exacerbated by a lack of family support. Cultural norms and societal expectations, especially pronounced in rural regions, impose restrictions on women's independence and autonomy. Women and girls are often stigmatized and blamed for their predicaments, facing societal and familial rejection for deviating from traditional roles, such as through divorce or rejecting arranged marriages (LAW1; Ramaj, 2023; PSY1).

These societal norms also affect single mothers' and women's ability to live independently, hindered by limited employment opportunities and inadequate salaries that fail to cover living costs. The societal barriers extend to education, limiting women's employment prospects and autonomy. Urban areas, like Tirana, present additional challenges with high living costs, limited financial and housing support, and sparse social housing options, particularly in rural municipalities. The cultural milieu, especially in northern regions, often pressures women into forced or arranged marriages, tying their value to marital status and family roles. This societal framework devalues single women and those seeking independence or escaping abusive relationships, with divorce being culturally unacceptable in many communities, even in instances of domestic violence. Such cultural and financial constraints further alienate women from receiving familial support, complicating their journey towards independence and safety.

3.6. Recent Changes

The interview highlights that the UK's classification of Albania as a "safe country" has not markedly impacted the operational realities or the influx of victims managed by the organization. This designation, from the interviewee's perspective, seems to have minimal effect on the day-to-day challenges faced by those working with victims of trafficking and abuse within Albania. The number and nature of cases encountered by the organization remain consistent, suggesting that the "safe country" status is more pertinent to the political sphere of migration policies rather than the practical aspects of victim support and rehabilitation services in Albania. There is an expressed apprehension regarding how the UK's perception of Albania as a "safe country" might influence decisions regarding asylum or protective measures for Albanian nationals. The concern is that this label could deter the provision of asylum, overshadowing the nuanced realities of victims' needs for support and services in Albania. The dialogue underscores a disconnection between the political narratives surrounding the "safe country" designation and the ongoing efforts to aid and reintegrate trafficking and abuse victims within Albania (SW1).

3.7. Current Statistics

Below (Table 2) are a few statistical observations from available online sources and some further information gathered from the interviews:

3.7.1. Trends in Cases and Services

Increase in Diversity of Services: Over the years, the organization has consistently expanded and diversified the types of services provided to victims. Starting with temporary/emergency sheltering and psychological/legal assistance in 2018, the services have grown to include safe accommodation, medical support, vocational training, and even economic empowerment by 2021. By 2022, the organization further expanded its services to include online psychological counseling and increased emergency housing capacity.

Educational Programs and Community Awareness: There's a significant focus on educational programs and community awareness campaigns. Starting with informing over 1,100 youths and 600 community members in 2018, the outreach expanded significantly by 2020, with 200 youth and 4,000 community members participating in informative and awareness activities. This trend highlights the organization's commitment to not only providing direct support to victims but also engaging in preventive measures through education and awareness.

3.7.2. Achievements and Notable Changes

Reintegration and Support for Victims: One of the notable achievements across these years is the reintegration of victims into society. In 2019, 370 victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and family violence were included in the reintegration program, with a significant number of children also supported. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the organization continued to

Table 2. Vatra Centre online report statistics (available at: <http://www.qendravatra.org.al/>).

Year	Cases Handled	Types of Services Provided	Educational Programs/Campaigns	Achievements/Notable Changes
2018	405 cases of trafficking victims/potential victims, victims of violence	Temporary/emergency sheltering, psychological/legal assistance, health care, educational support, social-cultural activities, professional training, employment training and mediation, business development support, monitoring, and follow-up	Informed over 1100 youths and 600 community members	39 potential victims and 3 children identified by the mobile unit; Reported to Vlora Police Directorate and Responsible Authority at the Ministry of Interior; 80% of these cases included in the long-term reintegration program.
2019	413 cases of trafficking victims/potential victims, victims of violence	Sheltering, psychological/legal assistance, health care, educational support, social-cultural activities, professional training, employment and business support, monitoring, and follow-up	Informed over 1242 students and over 2000 community members	370 victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and family violence included in reintegration program, of which 293 were new cases for 2019; 98 children of these victims were also supported.
2020	96 survivors of trafficking supported with reintegration services, 53 children of former victims supported, 277 survivors of domestic/gender-based violence supported	Safe accommodation, psychological support, medical support, legal support, support in education, vocational and recreational activities, support for children of victims, family relations strengthening, employment counselling, vocational training, micro-business establishment, long-term monitoring	200 youth and 4000 community members participated in informative and awareness activities	Despite COVID-19 challenges, continued provision of comprehensive services; introduction of online counselling; expansion of mobile units; assisted return from Serbia and Switzerland; significant support for victims despite pandemic; emergency support for 82 families affected economically by the pandemic
2021	347 cases supported (327 victims of violence and 20 offenders)	Legal and psychological services, sheltering in Vatra centre and rented apartments, medical assistance, educational support, vocational training, employment mediation, economic empowerment support	Educational needs assessment and support for 71 children and youth, victims of trafficking and family violence with school supplies for the 2021-2022 school year	Financial support for housing rent for 47 victims and 71 of their children, professional training in aesthetics, sewing, cooking, hairdressing, hydraulic and barbering for 25 beneficiaries, employment training for 14 beneficiaries, employment mediation for 85 beneficiaries with successful employment and monitoring for 44 in various sectors
2022	Over 50 trafficking victims and over 300 victims of domestic and gender-based violence received support	Emergency accommodation, psychosocial support, legal aid, health care, educational support, vocational training, assistance in social reintegration and employment	Awareness campaigns reached thousands, including students, community members, and professionals	Expanded services to include online psychological counselling, increased capacity for emergency housing, enhanced vocational training programs, strengthened partnerships for employment placement of beneficiaries

provide comprehensive services, including the introduction of online counselling and emergency support for families affected economically by the pandemic.

Expansion of Services: The organization has shown adaptability and growth, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The introduction of online counselling, expansion of mobile units, and provision of emergency support in 2020 are testament to their commitment to supporting victims despite challenging circumstances. By 2021 and 2022, the organization had not only continued these services but also enhanced vocational training programs and strengthened partnerships for employment placement, showcasing a continuous evolution in response to the needs of the victims and the context.

3.7.3. Conclusion

The data reveals a clear trajectory of growth in both the scope of services provided and the scale of outreach and educational programs. The organization has made significant strides in supporting victims of trafficking and violence, with an emphasis on comprehensive care, reintegration into society, and preventive measures through education and awareness. The adaptability shown, especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores a resilient and proactive approach to fulfilling their mission. The increased focus on economic empowerment and employment mediation by 2021 and 2022 highlights a long-term vision for the sustainability of the support provided to victims, ensuring they not only recover from their immediate circumstances but also build a foundation for a more stable future (Table 3).

3.7.4. Funding Trends

Variability in Total Funds: There is noticeable variability in the total funds received year over year. The organization received its highest funding in 2020 (EUR 360,952.24) and its lowest in 2019 (EUR 187,361.55). This fluctuation could be attributed to varying project needs, donor priorities, or external economic factors.

Currency Conversion Impact: The data shows total funds in both EUR and USD, highlighting the impact of currency conversion on funding values. For

Table 3. TjeterVizion financial support (available at: <https://www.tjetervizion.org/general-5>).

Year	Total Funds EUR	Total Funds USD	Top Donor	Top Donor Contribution EUR	Top Donor Contribution %
2018	301,611.30	345,250.10	Sanzeno	106,267.59	35.23
2019	187,361.55	211,602.82	GIZ	57,260.02	30.56
2020	360,952.24	442,778.58	Sanzeno	93,181.49	25.82
2021	311,066.68	352,322.28	UNICEF	98,404.40	31.64
2022	368,835.62	393,573.97	ERT/UE	157,146.13	42.61

example, the total funds for 2020 in EUR show a significant increase when converted to USD, indicating a favorable exchange rate or perhaps a stronger reliance on donors contributing in USD during that year.

3.7.5. Top Donors and Contributions

Diverse Funding Sources: The organization has received support from a variety of top donors over the years, including Sanzeno, GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), UNICEF, and ERT/UE (European Reconstruction Team/Union Européenne). This diversity in funding sources suggests the organization has a broad appeal and is capable of securing funds from different sectors, including both governmental and non-governmental entities.

Top Donor Contributions: The percentage of total funds contributed by top donors varies each year, with the highest percentage contribution being 42.61% from ERT/UE in 2022. This indicates a significant reliance on a single donor in that year, which could pose a risk if funding priorities change. Conversely, the lowest percentage contribution from a top donor was 25.82% by Sanzeno in 2020, reflecting a more diversified funding base that year.

3.7.6. Notable Observations

Increasing Trend in Top Donor Contributions: There is a general increasing trend in the percentage of funds contributed by the top donors, from 35.23% in 2018 to 42.61% in 2022. This could suggest an increasing reliance on major donors, which might affect the organization's financial sustainability if these key donors reduce their contributions.

Impact of Strategic Partnerships: The presence of notable donors like UNICEF in 2021 and a significant contribution from ERT/UE in 2022 highlights the organization's ability to establish strategic partnerships. These partnerships not only bring financial support but can also enhance the organization's credibility and access to networks.

3.7.7. Conclusion

The financial overview from 2018 to 2022 shows an organization that experiences year-to-year variability in funding but has successfully attracted significant contributions from a variety of donors. The reliance on major donors has increased, underscoring the importance of maintaining strong relationships with these entities while also striving for a diversified funding base to ensure financial stability and resilience against potential fluctuations in donor priorities or economic conditions.

Table 4 provides a comprehensive overview of family violence data over the years 2019, 2020, and 2021. Analysing the data, we can observe some trends and significant differences across the years:

Increase in Cases: There's a noticeable increase in the total number of cases reported in cities from 1304 in 2019 to 1452 in 2021. Similarly, cases in villages and suburbs also show an upward trend, indicating an overall increase in reported family violence cases.

Table 4. Albania Ministry of Justice data on domestic violence (available at: <https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/statistika/>).

Year	2019	2020	2021
Residence			
City	1304	1369	1452
Periphery	335	355	380
Village	756	910	963
Age			
0 - 15	23	20	24
16 - 18	35	37	50
19 - 25	280	307	364
26 - 35	638	712	698
36 - 45	643	617	661
46 - 55	349	411	483
55+	417	530	515
Gender			
Female	1651	2069	2215
Male	744	565	580
Marital Status			
Single	301	320	320
Married	1595	1785	1814
Divorced	294	266	376
Cohabitation	106	146	164
Widow(er)	99	117	121
Number of Children			
None	411	413	471
1 Child	594	560	611
2 Children	755	904	1015
3 Children	389	481	461
4+ Children	163	242	203
Educational Level			
No Schooling	72	90	109
Primary (1 - 5 grades)	189	204	238
Basic (1 - 9 grades)	1105	1299	1259
Secondary	856	844	942
Higher Education	162	197	247

Continued

Employment Status			
Unemployed	933	844	929
Public Sector	92	140	162
Private Sector	463	635	651
Self-Employed	367	419	452
Student	25	32	47
Schoolchild	34	42	54
Pensioner	200	241	219
Protection Order Requests			
Approved	1571	1596	1696
Denied	291	347	342
Dismissed	526	489	552
Interrupted	7	7	7
Family Relation to Aggressor			
Spouse	1337	1420	1528
Sister	14	40	48
Brother	109	124	133
Child	212	268	242
Parent	165	172	175

Age Groups: The age group of 26 - 35 consistently reports the highest number of cases across all three years, suggesting this age group is particularly vulnerable to family violence. The least affected age group is 0 - 15, but it's worrying that such young ages are affected at all.

Gender: Females are overwhelmingly the victims in these cases, with their numbers significantly higher than males across all three years. The gap between female and male victims appears to be slightly increasing, with female victims rising from 1651 in 2019 to 2215 in 2021.

Marital Status: Married individuals are the most affected group, with a slight increase in reported cases over the years. This could suggest that marital relationships are a common context for family violence.

Children: There's an increase in cases reported by families with two children, which is the highest reported group in 2021. This might indicate stress or issues in larger families contributing to instances of violence.

Education Level: Individuals with 9-year education consistently report the highest number of cases, which might reflect socio-economic factors related to education levels.

Employment Status: Unemployment seems to be a significant factor, with the highest number of cases reported by unemployed individuals across all three

years. This suggests economic stress could be a contributing factor to family violence.

Protection Orders: There's a steady increase in the number of protection orders granted, from 1571 in 2019 to 1696 in 2021, indicating perhaps a growing awareness or willingness to seek legal protection against family violence.

Relationship with the Abuser: The spouse is consistently the most common perpetrator, with an increasing trend in the number of cases involving spouses as abusers. This highlights the need for targeted interventions in marital relationships.

These trends suggest a need for continued and focused efforts to address family violence, particularly targeting the most vulnerable groups identified in the data (e.g., women, married individuals, and those in specific age groups). The increase in cases and protection orders granted could reflect both an increase in incidents and a growing awareness and reporting of family violence, which is a positive sign towards addressing this issue.

Through the interviews it was reported that in 2023, there were a total of 82 cases, out of which 51 - 52 are new cases. Twenty cases involved individuals being sheltered, and there were 2 foreign cases from the Middle East, with no cases from England. Additionally, there has been an increase in cases involving juvenile males with minor to medium criminal levels (SW1).

Furthermore, from 2012 to 2019, there have been a total of 45 voluntary returns to Albania. The returns in recent years have predominantly been from Syria, consisting of 30 men, 7 women, and 8 children. Furthermore, through government missions from 2019 to 2022, 37 individuals were returned to Albania, including 10 women and 27 children. It's noteworthy that during this period, no men were returned (SW3). Overall, children constitute the highest number of returnees from conflict zones, totaling 35 children. Based on information from the Coordination Center against Violent Extremism, individuals departed for conflict zones during the years 2012-2016. The total number of departures was 144, which included 79 men, 27 women, and 38 children (SW3).

4. Conclusion

The findings of this research underscore a critical gap between policy designations and the on-the-ground realities faced by victims of trafficking and domestic violence in Albania. Despite Albania's efforts to align with international standards and the enactment of comprehensive legal frameworks, the lived experiences of returned victims highlight persistent challenges in ensuring their safety, rehabilitation, and reintegration. The designation of Albania as a "safe country of origin" by the UK, intended to streamline asylum processes, inadvertently overlooks the nuanced vulnerabilities and risks these individuals continue to face. This study's insights into the socio-cultural and legal challenges underline the importance of a victim-centred approach that prioritizes the complex needs of trafficking and domestic violence survivors over geopolitical considera-

tions.

Effective victim support and protection mechanisms require a multifaceted strategy that transcends legislative reforms to include economic empowerment, psychological support, and societal reintegration. The collaboration between governmental bodies, civil society, and international partners is pivotal in creating a conducive environment for the recovery and empowerment of victims. Furthermore, the research highlights the need for ongoing, evidence-based evaluations of anti-trafficking frameworks and victim assistance programs to adapt to the evolving dynamics of trafficking and migration.

Albania continues to be classified as a Tier 2 nation, despite its efforts to combat human trafficking (Balidemaj, 2019). Factors such as widespread poverty, a general lack of awareness, and a noticeable lack of collaboration between the Albanian government and other important societal structures, like NGOs, significantly hinder progress in combating this issue. Challenges within the Albanian judicial system, including inefficiency, corruption, and external pressures, further exacerbate the situation: “Judges earn a salary of under 10,000 euros (\$11,700) annually, but Albania’s High Inspectorate of Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflicts of Interest (HIDAACI) found that one in three judges declared assets over 250,000 euros (\$293,000). Some judges disclosed millions in assets” (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2022). The evolution of international laws on human trafficking has shown limited success in adequately protecting victims, primarily because these laws do not fully address the gravity of the offenses involved, rendering them insufficient for effectively preventing human trafficking. Wilson, Walsh, and Kleuber (2006) argue that one of the primary hurdles is educating state and local prosecutors on the nuances of human trafficking. They emphasize that a comprehensive approach involving law enforcement, the judiciary, health professionals, business entities, and social workers across various sectors is essential for the effective implementation of international legislation against human trafficking.

The Council of the European Union has recently assumed a more assertive role in addressing trafficking issues. It mandates that all member states actively work to prevent human trafficking by enhancing their criminal laws and improving victim protection measures. The appointment of a trafficking coordinator by the Council aims to ensure adherence to international legal standards on trafficking across member states. With the inclusion of 146 countries in the Palermo Protocol, there is a growing global consensus on the responsibilities of states to prevent trafficking, bring traffickers to justice, and safeguard their victims (Balidemaj, 2019). Furthermore, the development and enforcement of laws aimed at protecting victims and purging supply chains of trafficking-related activities are ongoing efforts to bolster the fight against this heinous crime.

To address the entrenched issue of corruption within the Albanian judicial system, comprehensive reform measures are essential. Firstly, strengthening the vetting process for judges and prosecutors to ensure their integrity and accoun-

tability is crucial. This could be modelled on successful international practices, such as those implemented in some EU member states, where independent oversight bodies conduct rigorous background checks (Balidemaj, 2019). Secondly, enhancing transparency and public accountability in the judiciary through the establishment of monitoring mechanisms, including civil society participation, can serve to deter corrupt practices. Training and sensitization programs for judicial officers on human trafficking and corruption's adverse impacts on these cases will also be critical in fostering a more robust judicial response to trafficking. Lastly, promoting international cooperation and assistance in capacity building for the judicial sector can facilitate the exchange of best practices and support Albania in meeting international standards in combating human trafficking and corruption.

In conclusion, while Albania has made significant strides in addressing human trafficking and domestic violence, the designation of the country as "safe" should not obscure the realities of those who have suffered within its borders. A re-evaluation of this designation, informed by comprehensive research and grounded in the experiences of victims, is crucial for ensuring that policies and interventions are truly reflective of their needs and rights. This study calls for a renewed commitment to protecting and supporting victims, advocating for policies that are as dynamic and multifaceted as the challenges they aim to address.

The study would also like to highlight that the main limitations within this study stand that the study was not able to gather a full evidence-based approach from the main support services established in Albania thus limiting the study's reach. Furthermore, the study would also like to acknowledge that due to the reason as to why the study was built, there might be the possibility of an unconscious bias which is to be taken into account.

On that note, an important aspect for future research to consider would be the use of more neutral information. Seen as this topic does touch on a political and legal basis, both the researcher and the UK government possess the possible unconscious bias for a certain outcome and portrayal of the situation. Therefore, future studies should be conducted with a reminder that the use of external and less involved factors could produce a clearer and more neutral basis.

Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of this research, as individuals and scholars, we encountered visible manifestations of animosity towards institutions designed to aid victims of abuse and trafficking, such as graffiti that conveyed negative and abusive messages. Additionally, the investigation revealed a lack of uniformity in data collection practices among different organizations, each generating and assessing their own data independently. This inconsistency could present challenges in accurately understanding the situation and effectively measuring progress. Furthermore, the ease with which the locations of these establishments could be determined raises potential security concerns, especially given the ap-

parent hostility towards such facilities and their beneficiaries. These observations, made during the research process, are not definitive conclusions but highlight areas that warrant further examination due to the potential issues they represent.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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