



Integration challenges of non-European immigrants in Europe: study case of Albanian immigrants in Italy

Anisa Jenishaj

University of Tirana, Albania

Abstract

The analysis of integration problems for third-country nationals' migrants in Europe is a research priority and a difficult challenge for European integration policy, immigrants and host societies. Those migrants have migrated to Europe through asylum applications for security, political or economic reasons, illegal routes, work and employment applications and student visas. They have subsequently faced legal difficulties, barriers to integration in the labor market, segregation and marginalization, ethnic and racial discrimination and stereotypes and obstacles in building social networks with locals.

This paper uses qualitative methods and discusses sociological approaches and theories that explain integration problems of third-country nationals' migrants, based in the study case of the Albanian immigrant's integration experience in Italy. According to Eurostat, Italy is ranked as one of the European countries with a high number of immigrants, especially after 1990, that constantly reassessed its fragile integration policy and multicultural practices, and also faces big challenges in the integration of non-European immigrants. Meanwhile Albanians are among the largest economic and poor immigrants in Europe, especially in Italy.

Among the factors hindering the integration of Albanian immigrants in Italy, based on the experiences of interviewed immigrants cross-referenced with literature findings, are: experiencing discrimination and stereotypes, the perception of Albanians as criminals, traffickers and savages by locals and public opinion through the media, the long process of naturalization and obtaining Italian citizenship, problems with renewing the residence permit, the difficulty of finding work, performing low-skilled and poorly paid jobs, the inclusion of Albanian children in Italian schools, the challenge of separation from the family of origin, the lack of ethnic and cultural identity, experiencing cultural confusion and the sense of 'non-belonging' and difficulties with mastering high levels of the Italian language.

Keywords: integration, third-country national's migrant, challenges, Albanian immigrants, discrimination

1. Introduction

The integration of migrants has become a pressing issue in Europe due to the significant increase in migration flows over the past two decades. Migrants are more vulnerable to social exclusion than native populations, particularly in areas such as employment, education, health, and social services (European Platform for Rehabilitation, 2016, p. 2). Vulnerable groups—including third-country nationals (TCNs), refugees, beneficiaries of international protection, low-skilled migrants, women, unaccompanied minors, migrants with disabilities, and irregular migrants—face heightened risks. This situation necessitates coordinated actions by both origin and host countries to manage migration flows and design inclusive integration policies (European Court of Auditors, 2018, p. 9).

Host countries are tasked with accommodating migrants, safeguarding their rights, and informing them of their obligations while implementing appropriate integration strategies aligned with national and EU regulations. Conversely, countries of origin must monitor national policies and advocate for fair treatment of their citizens abroad. Migrants themselves are expected to demonstrate a willingness to integrate by respecting the host society's rules and values without necessarily relinquishing their own identities. This includes investing in language acquisition, skills development, and personal growth. Integration outcomes, however, vary considerably across migrant categories, with vulnerable groups like TCNs facing particular challenges stemming from both host country policies and individual circumstances.

This paper focuses on third-country nationals, a priority group in European migration discourse. The European Commission defines integration as "a two-way process based on mutual rights and corresponding obligations of legally resident third-country nationals and the host society, which provides for full participation of immigrants" (Branger, 2005). Vulnerable migrant groups (TCNs) are those more exposed to exploitation, abuse, discrimination, or exclusion due to their personal or social circumstances (IOM, 2020: pp. 36-38). Challenges confronting TCNs include legal and political barriers, labor market marginalization, and discrimination. Given the increasing number of labor migrants from third countries, scholars such as De Bruycker (2019, p. 148) stress the need for harmonized EU migration frameworks, particularly for highly skilled migrants.

Most vulnerable TCNs reside in five EU countries—Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and the UK—which host nearly 77% of the total migrant population (European Court of Auditors, 2018, p. 8). This study focuses on Italy, specifically on Albanian immigrants, who constitute one of the largest TCN groups in the country. Although Albania is geographically and culturally European, it is not a member of the EU, EEA, or Schengen Area; hence, Albanians in Italy face integration barriers similar to those experienced by other TCNs.

Using cross-analysis and thematic analysis, this study examines the integration experiences of long-term Albanian immigrants in Italy, drawing on both literature and empirical evidence from 25 in-depth interviews.

The originality of this paper lies in its specific focus on the perceived integration experiences of long-term Albanian immigrants in Italy—a relatively underexplored group in European migration literature. Despite their significant presence and prolonged residence, the Albanian diaspora has received limited focused analysis concerning subjective integration

experiences. While previous studies have addressed general integration barriers for TCNs, this paper advances the discussion by combining sociological theory with empirical data, revealing nuanced, context-specific challenges faced by Albanians in Italy. It contributes new insights into how socio-demographic factors—such as education level, employment type, and language proficiency—intersect with integration obstacles. Additionally, it highlights the influence of evolving public perceptions and transnational ties on the integration trajectory, offering a fresh dimension to existing scholarship.

2. Methods

To address the study's objectives, a qualitative methodology was employed, combining a comprehensive literature review with in-depth interview data. The theoretical framework was developed through consultation of official statistical sources, European Commission reports, analytical studies, and sociological theories on migrant integration.

The empirical component consists of 25 in-depth interviews with long-term Albanian immigrants who have resided in Italy for over five years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, applying specific criteria to ensure variation across age, gender, migration period, education level, employment status, legal status, and reasons for migration. This approach aimed to capture a wide range of integration experiences and barriers.

Participants were contacted via Albanian community organizations, social networks, and personal referrals to ensure diversity and representation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via online video calls (WhatsApp), lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. Interview questions focused on personal experiences of integration barriers in Italian society, covering areas such as employment, social relations, language proficiency, discrimination, and legal challenges.

Two primary research questions guided the study:

1. What are the main integration challenges faced by third-country national immigrants?
2. What specific integration challenges do Albanian immigrants in Italy encounter?

Interview transcripts were anonymized, coded, and analyzed using open coding and thematic identification techniques. A thematic analysis approach was employed to triangulate empirical data with literature findings, enabling comparative insights across different immigrant profiles and contexts. This combined coding and theoretical analysis facilitated a comprehensive understanding of key integration barriers faced by TCNs, with particular emphasis on the Albanian immigrant group in Italy.

3. Sociological perspective theories of migrant integration

Sociological approaches, both classical and contemporary, provide important frameworks for understanding the challenges migrants face in adapting to host societies. These approaches consider integration as a dynamic process shaped by social, economic, and cultural factors.

Historically, assimilation theory dominated much of the twentieth-century discourse on cultural integration. This theory posits that diverse ethnic groups gradually adopt a shared culture, eventually gaining equal socio-economic opportunities as natives. This process often implies the fading of original cultural patterns in favor of those prevalent in the host society (Algan et al., 2012, p. 4).

Structuralist perspectives emphasize how disparities in socio-economic opportunities create barriers to integration. Unequal access to wealth, employment, housing, education, power, and privileges often obstruct the social integration of ethnic minorities and migrants (Egede et al., 2023).

Many studies have analyzed immigrant integration using both qualitative and quantitative methods. For instance, Depalo et al. (2006) examined social relations between immigrants and natives, finding that migrants from non-EU countries are disadvantaged in social interactions. Even when controlling for age, education, family size, and employment, these migrants socialize less with natives. Education was found to shape social activities, with more educated migrants engaging less with immediate neighbors and more with the broader community (pp. 14–15). These findings resonate with the experiences of Albanian immigrants in Italy explored later in this study.

Berry's acculturation model offers a significant conceptual tool by identifying different integration strategies: separation (rejecting host culture in private life), integration (adopting aspects of the host culture while maintaining original culture), and assimilation (replacing original culture with host culture) (Matsumoto & Juang, 2022). Both Berry's model and structuralist approaches inform the analysis of integration challenges faced by TCNs, including Albanians. These frameworks support the use of cross and thematic analysis in this paper.

Recent theories emphasize institutional roles, such as education systems, labor markets, and legal frameworks, in facilitating or hindering integration (Koopmans, 2010). The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) exemplifies comprehensive evaluation tools that compare integration policies across countries, highlighting inclusive practices like access to long-term residence, education, and anti-discrimination measures (Huddleston et al., 2020). Koopmans (2013) suggests that civic integration models mandating language and civics courses improve labor market outcomes for TCNs.

Additionally, gendered and intercultural perspectives have gained prominence. Research by Boccagni and Schrooten (2022) highlights intersectional challenges faced by female TCNs, including labor market discrimination, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited access to training and language education. Gender norms in both origin and host societies shape migrant women's integration, often directing them towards informal or care-sector employment.

Contemporary integration research also underscores intercultural competence and mutual adaptation. Zapata-Barrero (2022) advocates moving beyond unidirectional assimilation toward pluralist models featuring mutual accommodation, intercultural dialogue, and shared public spaces. He critiques both assimilationist and multicultural models as insufficiently flexible in increasingly multiethnic societies.

Recent studies reinforce the importance of both relational capital and individual motivation in migrant integration. Paoloni et al. (2024) found that immigrant entrepreneurs in Italy rely on personal networks to navigate labor market barriers. Meanwhile, Impicciatore and Molinari (2025) show that motivation and agency significantly influence employment outcomes, suggesting that integration is shaped not only by structures but also by migrants' internal drivers.

Institutional obstacles, such as complex legal procedures, non-recognition of qualifications, and inconsistent enforcement, remain key challenges for third-country nationals (TCNs) in host countries. Sociological research highlights how these barriers reflect structural inequalities

rather than individual shortcomings (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2016; Bommes & Geddes, 2000). Vulnerable groups, particularly undocumented or newly regularized migrants, are often excluded from essential services due to bureaucratic opacity and limited legal support.

Scholars recommend simplifying administrative procedures, recognizing foreign skills, expanding civic orientation programs, and involving migrants in policymaking to reduce institutional exclusion (Scholten, 2011; Huddleston et al., 2020). A rights-based, multi-level governance approach is viewed as essential for inclusive integration.

4. Barriers Facing Third-Country Migrants in Europe

Third-country migrants encounter multiple integration challenges across the EU. The European Union is tasked with ensuring fair treatment of legally residing TCNs and developing integration policies that grant rights and obligations comparable to EU citizens. Such policies should also combat discrimination and promote inclusion in economic, social, and cultural spheres (Adam & Thym, 2019, p. 74).

OECD data (2023) reveal that TCNs face higher unemployment rates, overqualification, and housing insecurity compared to natives and intra-EU migrants. The European Commission (2011) identifies critical challenges including low employment, especially among migrant women; rising unemployment; high levels of overqualification; educational attainment gaps; and public concerns about migrants' integration (p. 3)

The European Platform for Rehabilitation (2016) highlights difficulties TCNs face in labor market access shortly after arrival due to national policies, long waiting times for documentation, and obstacles to validating diplomas and previous work experience. Cultural differences, discrimination, and stereotypes based on religion and values further hinder integration. Albanian immigrants interviewed in this study confirm experiences of ethnic discrimination and stereotypes. Reports by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2022) reveal institutional racism and bureaucratic barriers that impede integration despite formal policies.

Global migration trends indicate around 200 million migrants worldwide, many facing health challenges linked to their countries of origin, migration journeys, and poor living conditions (Gushulak et al., 2010). TCNs particularly experience physical and mental health issues due to these factors (European Platform for Rehabilitation, 2016)

Hellgren (2015) argues that integration barriers relate to immigrants' capacity to participate equally within their communities and the ethnic majority. Language skills and education are essential, but discriminatory practices often block access. Cortinovis and Carrera (2018) describe TCNs as experiencing "precarious integration," caught between partial inclusion and structural exclusion. Mancosu and Vegetti (2020) emphasize the impact of negative public attitudes and anti-immigrant discourse, which hamper civic participation and labor market integration.

EU-supported integration initiatives in member states focus on employment, education, and social inclusion. These include internships, professional skills training, language education, and social activities fostering migrant-society interactions (European Court of Auditors, 2018, p. 10).

To improve TCN integration, including for Albanian migrants, policymakers should prioritize expanding language education tailored to labor market needs, facilitate access to employment and social participation, strengthen legal support services for diploma recognition and job orientation, and enforce anti-discrimination policies supported by public awareness campaigns (Hellgren, 2015; European Platform for Rehabilitation, 2016; FRA, 2022; Mancosu & Vegetti, 2020).

5. Case study of Italy: Challenges for Third-Country Migrants in Italy

Italy is recognized for adopting a multicultural integration model encouraging diversity and intercultural coexistence. Italian policies promote inclusiveness, particularly in education, emphasizing mutual dialogue and coexistence (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2021).

In the mid-1990s, the ‘Three-year Document of Migration Policy Planning’ outlined priorities and integration measures for 1998–2000 (European Commission, 2025). Later, the Commission for immigrant integration policies identified key dimensions including demographic characteristics, relations with origin communities, inclusion in education and work, and living conditions (Laurano & Gianturco, 2019).

Italy’s last national integration strategy was implemented in 2005, followed by the 2017 National Integration Plan for Persons Entitled to International Protection, prioritizing interreligious dialogue, language training, education, labor inclusion, and vocational training (European Commission, 2025).

Since 2012, immigrants aged 16+ must sign an ‘Integration Agreement’ as a condition for residence permit renewal. Language tests and civic knowledge assessments measure integration success (OECD, 2014, p. 49).

Labor market challenges persist, with immigrants facing a dual labor market: overall low employment rates but relatively higher immigrant employment, raising questions on targeted integration policies. Italy’s integration policies are considered fragile (OECD, 2014).

Key challenges for TCNs in Italy include:

1. Language barriers affecting employment and belonging (Ghio et al., 2022).
2. Social exclusion and discrimination (Mariani et al., 2023).
3. Regional disparities in integration policies (Campomori & Caponio, 2016).
4. Discrimination impacting identity and integration strategies (Oshodi, 2023).
5. Varied treatment of immigrant categories post-EU enlargement (Barbulescu, 2019).

TCNs in Italy face labor market discrimination, non-recognition of foreign qualifications, complex hiring bureaucracy, and exploitative sectors pushing many into informal employment despite official quotas (IncludeU, 2024).

Improving integration requires strengthening adult language education tailored to labor market needs (OECD, 2014; Ghio et al., 2022), harmonizing regional integration policies (Campomori & Caponio, 2016), and enforcing anti-discrimination measures through policy and community engagement (Mariani et al., 2023; Oshodi, 2023).

6. Integration barriers of Albanian immigrants in Italy

This study's sample comprised 25 long-term Albanian immigrants living and working in Italy. The data were anonymized, coded, and thematically analyzed to compare integration challenges.

Among participants, 56% were female and 44% male, with age distribution across 20–59 years. Migration periods varied: 36% migrated between 1990–2000 due to political instability and economic hardship; 32% between 2000–2010 primarily for family reunification and better opportunities; and 32% post-2010 citing improved living conditions, education prospects, and dissatisfaction with Albania's institutions.

Regarding education, 60% held higher education degrees (eight completed in Italy, seven in Albania), while 36% had no formal education. Employment included skilled labor (8 participants), unskilled labor (13), and unstable or part-time jobs (4). Ten participants initially migrated illegally, mostly in the 1990s. Over half had acquired Italian citizenship.

Key integration barriers of Albanian immigrants in Italy identified include:

- **Economic Barriers:** Overqualification is widespread. Even those educated in Italy often hold jobs below their skill level due to prejudice against Albanians and non-natives. Many face informal labor market reliance and low-skilled employment.
- **Social Ties Barriers:** Only a minority maintain strong social or familial ties with Italians, often linked to higher education, Italian language proficiency, or marriage to Italians. Others rely on Albanian community networks, which support job searches and bureaucratic navigation but may limit broader integration. Meanwhile better integration is associated with strong social capital and meaningful social anchors among local communities. (Dahinden, 2011; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016).
- **Prejudice and Discrimination:** Negative stereotypes portraying Albanians as criminals or involved in trafficking were common, especially before 2010. These prejudices, fueled by media and irregular migration flows, have diminished somewhat due to Albania's EU candidate status and positive Albanian community efforts but remain significant obstacles.
- **Language and Social Barriers:** While some have strong Italian skills, many struggle with language proficiency and adapting to social customs, including differing gender roles and socialization habits.
- **Political and Legal Barriers:** Legal discrimination affects those who migrated irregularly, with lengthy documentation processes and bureaucratic hurdles. Political participation remains low due to distrust in institutions.

Based on the findings, the following integrated policy measures are recommended to address integration barriers for Albanian and other third-country migrants in Italy:

1. **Improve Labor Market Integration:**
 - Facilitate recognition of foreign qualifications.
 - Enforce anti-discrimination laws rigorously.
 - Reduce reliance on informal employment by streamlining bureaucratic procedures for work permits and hiring.
2. **Enhance Language and Education Programs:**

- Expand tailored adult language education to improve labor market access and social inclusion.
- Support educational initiatives that consider migrants' diverse backgrounds.
- 3. Strengthen Social Integration:
 - Promote intercultural exchange programs to build social capital with both local Italians and immigrant communities.
 - Facilitate community-based events and mentorship programs, particularly targeting migrants with weaker local ties.
- 4. Combat Prejudice and Improve Public Perceptions:
 - Launch media and public awareness campaigns emphasizing migrants' positive contributions.
 - Regulate media portrayals to reduce stereotypes.
- 5. Support Cultural Adaptation:
 - Provide culturally sensitive counseling and family support to address conflicts arising from differing cultural norms, especially regarding gender roles.
- 6. Increase Political Participation:
 - Build trust in institutions through transparency and migrant engagement.
 - Inform migrants about voting rights and civic involvement opportunities.
- 7. Simplify Legal and Bureaucratic Processes:
 - Improve transparency and reduce processing times for documentation and residence permits.
 - Provide legal assistance to migrants navigating bureaucratic systems.

7. Conclusion

Integration barriers for third-country nationals, particularly Albanian immigrants in Italy, are multifaceted and shaped by legal status, socio-economic factors, discrimination, and social ties. Education level, language proficiency, and employment type strongly influence integration outcomes, confirming structuralist and acculturation theories.

Albanians face specific challenges related to prejudice, labor market exploitation, and legal obstacles linked to irregular migration history. While public perceptions have improved post-2010, persistent overqualification and limited access to skilled employment remain concerns.

By adopting policies that promote qualification recognition, combat discrimination, strengthen social capital, simplify legal processes, and foster civic participation, Italy and other EU countries can advance more inclusive integration frameworks. These steps are essential for reducing inequalities and enabling migrants to contribute fully to their host societies.

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