

# Labour market profiles of Albanian migrants in Italy: Evidence from Lombardy 2001–2015

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## Abstract

Albanian migration to Italy represents one of the most intense and iconic East-West migration flows of recent decades and a paradigmatic case of intra-Mediterranean migration. This paper uses a unique data set collected by the Lombardy region's Observatory of Integration and Multiethnicity in 15 annual cross-sectional surveys over the period 2001–2015. Analysis of this data set enables us to address three questions: first, what are the main factors influencing the labour market performance of Albanian migrants in Lombardy compared with other migrants? Second, what were the differential effects of the post-2008 economic crisis on migrants' employment stability? Third, were there any significant gender differences in labour market profiles and outcomes? Our main finding is that Albanian migrants have a lower probability of (long-term)unemployment and irregular employment and higher probability of employment compared with other migrants, an effect that is partially attributable to the different structural composition of the Albanian migrant group.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Albanian migration to Italy, which started in the early 1990s, was one of the most significant human events of the post-socialist transition in Europe and helped to define 'a new map of European migration' wherein, for a time, the Southern European countries took centre stage (King, 2002). Images of overcrowded boats with thousands of Albanians fleeing to Italy to escape a country collapsing into political and economic chaos dominated the media and became part of the global iconography of migration in the 1990s (King & Mai, 2002). On the Italian side, the arrival of the Albanians came at a crucial moment, when the country was trying to re-establish its status as a major player within the European Union, including becoming a member of the eurozone and the Schengen area of free movement. Following its long-standing history of emigration, Italy had manifestly turned into an immigration country, becoming the paradigmatic case of the so-called 'Southern European model' of irregular migration and segmented labour market incorporation (Ambrosini, 2013; Bonifazi, 2013; King & Konjhodzic, 1996).

Albanians also represent one of the most important communities for which we can assess, to some extent, the Italian economic model of immigrant differential integration over the longer term. In less than two decades, the profile of Albanian migrants switched from individual pioneers, mainly young men, to settled families. They have progressed from being one of the most stigmatized groups, stereotyped for their roughness and alleged criminal tendencies, to one of the most successfully integrated and almost invisible groups (King & Mai, 2008; Melchionda, 2003; Romania, 2004). Thus far, however, little is known from a more rigorous, quantitative standpoint about their integration into the Italian labour market. Assessing whether Albanians have advantage over other migrant groups in terms of lower unemployment, and better access to legal employment, especially in the aftermath of the economic crisis, and whether these advantages exist for both men and women in the labour market, are all important unanswered questions.

To address these issues, we focus on the North Italian region of Lombardy. We choose this region for two reasons. First, Lombardy is the richest and most populous region in the country. With a population of 10 million, it contributes one-fifth of the whole Italian economy and performs well above the national average in terms of all the major economic and employment indicators (Baussola, 2007). Moreover, its per capita GDP is 35 per cent above the European average. The region has a diversified economy, with long-standing industrial strength and dynamism, including thriving service industries, and a productive agricultural sector. The regional capital, Milan, is the most important urban economic centre in Italy and a financial capital of European significance. Lombardy is also the Italian region with the highest concentration of immigrants (1.3 million in 2018), including Albanians (107,000).

Second, Lombardy's Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity (ORIM) produces a unique data set, not available for other Italian regions or at the national level, which enables us to perform analyses to evaluate the relative success of Albanians on the regional labour market. In fact, Lombardy is the only European region to produce original and representative annual survey data on migration. For this paper, we draw on the ORIM data for the period 2001–2015, in order to address three research questions:

1. Do Albanians display a better integration into the Lombardian labour market compared with other migrants?
2. Did the economic crisis impact differently on Albanian migrants compared with other migrant groups?
3. Is the labour market performance of Albanians in Lombardy, in terms of their responses to questions 1 and 2, differentiated by gender?

The structure of the article is as follows. The next section provides an overview of migrants' positioning in the Italian labour market. Then, we outline the specificities of Albanian immigration to Italy. Data and methods follow. A section on our empirical results is subdivided into descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis, taking in turn the four key dependent variables of unemployment, irregular employment, long-term unemployment and employment. The article is rounded off by a concluding discussion and some policy implications.

## MIGRANTS IN THE ITALIAN LABOUR MARKET

Between the early 1990s and approximately 2010, migration into Italy was characterized by a high degree of irregular entry, difficult-to-control borders and periodic retroactive amnesties for legalizing irregular migrants (Zincone, 2006). The insufficient generational replacement among low-skilled workers and the decreasing number of Italians willing to work in sectors such as agriculture, the building industry and low-skilled service jobs acted as pull factors, embedding migrant workers in these sectors without much opportunity for occupational mobility and exposing them to discrimination and other forms of maltreatment (Allasino et al., 2004; Colombo & Dalla Zuanna, 2019). With a labour market already segmented by gender, education and above all ethnicity, and a long-established and flourishing informal economy, Italy was ripe for the further incorporation of migrant workers, especially in sectors and areas characterized by precarity, low wages and seasonal work regimes such as agriculture, construction and tourism. However, for the immigrants, structural obstacles blocked their progress. There was a mismatch between the types of job on offer and the migrants' qualifications and experience, and they largely remained confined to poorly paid, insecure and socially devalued jobs (Fullin & Reyneri, 2011; Venturini & Villosio, 2006).

Against a backdrop of slow wage assimilation to the levels of Italian workers and limited support from welfare agencies, male migrants were less likely to be unemployed than local workers, at least until the onset of the crisis (Fellini & Fullin, 2016; Venturini & Villosio, 2018). On the other side of the gender divide, the fast ageing of the Italian population, combined with a weak welfare state and the growing emancipation of Italian women wanting to concentrate on their careers, is factors which have attracted female migration to Italy, above all to work in the domestic cleaning and elderly care sectors (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2015, 2019).

In general, the barriers that migrant workers face are related to language, cultural factors, ethnic and racial discrimination, and weaker job-related social networks. Women have to confront the additional difficulty of balancing childcare and employment, with, once again, minimal help from the welfare state. Where childcare facilities are available, they are usually too expensive for migrants to afford (Bonizzoni, 2013). Migrant workers in Italy typically experience an initial downgrading in their job market position followed by occupational immobility (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2019; Fellini & Guetto, 2019). Upward mobility is estimated to affect only 10 per cent of migrants, mostly those with better professional status in their country of origin who have acquired sector-specific skills and who have assimilated better into Italian society through longer stays (Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2019).

When we come to think about the effects of the economic crisis on immigrants, including differentiated gender effects, the general picture presented by Venturini and Villosio (2018) acts as a useful guide. Their analysis pertains to all migrants from countries poorer than Italy, including the 13 new member states which joined the European Union since 2004. They first confirm the picture summarized above, namely that foreign workers are heavily concentrated in low-paid, low-quality jobs in Italy's ethnically segmented employment market, with men mainly in construction and industrial jobs, and migrant women in the homecare and healthcare sectors. This disadvantage of occupying the lower echelons in a segmented labour market nevertheless brought certain advantages for many migrant workers, when compared to so-called 'native' workers, largely because the Italian economy had become structurally dependent upon them. Their number grew from 1.71 million in 2008 to 2.14 million in 2013, according to Italian Labour Force Survey data quoted by Venturini and Villosio (2018: 2345).<sup>1</sup> This growth was much stronger for female migrant employees (by 55.2%) than for men (23.7%), reflecting the fact that the crisis had a more marked impact on male employment in construction and manufacturing, than on female employment in the domestic and care work sectors. Yet, 'native' Italian male workers lost their jobs in construction and manufacturing industry at a faster rate than migrant workers who, as a result, became even more concentrated in low-skilled, poorly paid and insecure jobs (Bonifazi & Marini, 2014; Venturini & Villosio, 2018).

## ALBANIAN MIGRATION TO ITALY

Since 1990, Albania has become a country of mass emigration, in relative terms witnessing an exodus with few modern parallels. By 2011, around 1.4 million Albanians were living abroad, compared with a population of 2.8 million residing in Albania (INSTAT, 2012). The emigration was most intense during the 1990s, with Italy and Greece the main destinations. These two close-by EU countries offered the best possibilities for clandestine border crossing and access to income-generating employment, albeit on precarious terms. Emigration continued at a lower level into the 2000s and 2010s, with phases of waxing and waning, and the range of destinations broadened to other countries in Europe, notably the UK and Germany, as well as the USA and Canada. Recent survey data on potential migration—asking people about their intentions to migrate—indicate that more than half of 18- to 40-year-olds see their future outside the country (King & Gëdeshi, 2020). According to the International Organization for Migration's latest *World Migration Report*, Albania stands 12th in the world for the relative scale of its emigration (IOM, 2020: 27). It should be noted that most of the countries ahead of it in the ranking are small island states in the Caribbean and Pacific.

The Albanian migration to Italy had several characteristics which, ultimately, help to account for the results of our quantitative analysis presented later. First, a combination of geographical, historical and cultural factors played a crucial role in triggering and then shaping the migration. Prior to the communist era, Italian colonial influence had been strong in Albania, controlling most sectors of the economy, replanning the layout of the capital Tirana and culminating in the wartime occupation of the country by Mussolini's Fascist regime (Mai, 2003). And yet, after 45 years of authoritarian communist rule following the liberation of Albania from the Italian and German Fascists, many Albanians viewed Italy as a kind of capitalist paradise, an image created by the secret viewing of Italian TV during the latter years of the communist period (Mai, 2001). Obsessive watching of Italian shows and news reports, oriented Albanians' cultural preferences towards Italy, producing a kind of 'Italophilia' (King & Mai, 2009), at the same time nourishing Albanians' familiarity with the Italian language. In this way, a process of anticipatory socialization had already taken place before the Albanians arrived on Italian shores.

Second, the character of the migration to Italy matured rapidly. The initial arrivals involved better-off and better-educated individuals from Tirana and other urban centres in the coastal region—areas that also received the strongest TV signals from Italy. Aided by regularizations in 1995, 1998 and 2002, this initially 'irregular' migration became more settled and family reunions soon followed. As a result, the demographic composition of the Albanian migrant population rapidly matured, with a more-or-less equal sex ratio (105 males per 100 females in 2017) and a large share of children (28% under 18s), either brought from Albania or born in Italy as the second generation.

Third, the chronology of Albanian migration to Italy has been a twisting sequence of hospitality and welcome, followed by rejection and negative stereotyping, succeeded finally by a degree of acceptance and integration. The initial stance of welcome reflected the geopolitical atmosphere at the end of the Cold War: Albanians arriving in Italy in 1990 and 1991 were seen as political and economic refugees fleeing a collapsing communist state. In the colonialist and masculinist rhetoric of the time, they were seen as 'our Adriatic brethren' (Zinn, 1996), 'sons of the same sea... racially similar and sharing common aspirations' (Perlmutter, 1998: 211). King and Mai (2008: 107-108) recorded some extraordinary acts of kindness and generosity towards the destitute Albanians in Apulia, their main region of arrival in the South of Italy, in the early 1990s.

But the honeymoon was short-lived. Already by 1992, Albanians were generally viewed with a mixture of fear and rejection, stigmatized as rough, uncivilized and prone to criminality. According to King and Mai (2008: 109-125; 2019), they were framed by mass media and majority political forces as the main 'constitutive other' against which the alleged progress, civility and European identity of the Italian nation and its political leaders could be measured.

This 'Albanophobia' on the part of large sections of Italian society contrasted with the 'Italophilia' of Albanians, and it was the latter's quiet persistence, getting on with the job of settling, surviving and integrating,

that has turned the tide in the new millennium (King & Mai, 2009). As a result, Albanians have evolved into one of the most successfully integrated migrant groups in Italy, thanks to their strong aspiration to 'become like Italians' (Romania, 2004). Their language proficiency, somatic similarity to Italians and tactics of keeping a low profile (including masking their Albanian identity) have been key factors behind their integration. Indeed, assimilation is probably a more accurate term in their case. Romania (2004) argues that Albanians have adopted a silent process of *social mimetism*—imitating Italians and creating an aura of ethnic invisibility as a strategy to overcome stigmatization and prejudice. On the other side of the coin, this adaptation strategy has resulted in a lack of community identity, with few ethnic associations and activities. For most Albanians in Italy, life revolves around strong but atomized family structures.

Beyond the demographic normalization of the Albanian migrant population in Italy and its strategy of conscious assimilation, there are several other indicators of the advanced level of structural incorporation achieved by Albanians, according to data from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (see Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2016). In terms of residence rights, 71 per cent of Albanians hold a long-term EU residence permit compared with a figure of less than 60 per cent for all non-EU migrants living in Italy. Albanians are also the leading group in terms of acquisition of Italian citizenship and have higher than average rates of intermarriage with Italians.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Albanians are the migrant group whose geographical distribution in Italy most closely matches that of the Italian population, indicating a high level of spatial integration (for details, including maps, see King & Mai, 2008: 90–95). Although in the early years of immigration most Albanians arrived (and many settled) in the Southern region of Apulia, over time there has been a shift northwards to regions with stronger economies, none more so than Lombardy, where currently 21 per cent of the Albanians in Italy are living.

## DATA AND METHODS

As noted in the Introduction, we used data collected by ORIM, Lombardy's Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity. Since 2001, ORIM has carried out an annual, regionally representative face-to-face survey of the population with a foreign background (for details, see Baio et al., 2011). The survey is unique in Italy for its inclusion of naturalized, legal and irregular migrants from the main sending countries and regions (Eastern Europe, Asia, South and Central America, Africa) aged 15 years and above living in Lombardy.<sup>3</sup>

The survey collects a set of fixed socio-demographic variables, including country of origin and information on family composition, labour market participation and income, plus an in-depth thematic section that varies each year. The survey is designed according to the Centre Sampling Method, a probabilistic technique developed to collect representative data from populations with a foreign background, irrespective of individuals' 'legality' of presence (Baio et al., 2011).

For our analysis, we used a pooled data set of 15 cross-sectional surveys from the start of the survey period in 2001 until 2015; we terminated the analysis at the latter date because the reduction in the sample size of more recent surveys endangered the comparability with older waves. The total sample comprised 101,501 migrants, of whom 8701 were from Albania (8.6%), with 16,862 (16.6%) coming from other Eastern European countries, mainly Romania, Ukraine and Moldova. The remainder were from other, non-European, countries in Asia, Africa and Central and South America.<sup>4</sup>

Three labour market performance indicators were selected to investigate Albanians' profiles in comparison with other migrants: unemployment, informal or irregular employment and employment. These dependent variables were defined and coded as follows: 'unemployed' (1 'yes', 0 'no'—reference category) only for 'active' migrants;<sup>5</sup> 'irregular employment' (1 'yes', 0 'no'—reference) applied only to legal migrants given that 'illegal' ones by definition only have access to informal jobs and 'employed' (1 'yes', 0 'no'—reference category). For all models, we included the dummy 'Albania' (1 'yes', 0 'other migrants'—reference) to assess the performance of Albanians compared with other migrants. In order to check for consistency, we introduced a fourth dependent variable

'long-term unemployment', defined as the persistence of unemployment over the last two years (available only for the later period of the crisis).

We adopt a comparative approach by performing four sets of models, one for each dependent variable and each model replicated for Albanian men and women separately.

Considering that dependent variables are available only for a selected group of migrants—economically active individuals for 'unemployed' and employed for 'irregular employment'—the estimates of a standard probit model could be biased, whereas estimates based on the Heckman probit model take into account the potential selection bias (Heckman, 1976). Therefore, when the selection equation and the dependent variable were correlated, we used the Heckman variation; otherwise, we used the probit model.

We estimated predicted probabilities comparing Albanians with non-Albanians for some key covariates (length of stay, legal status, education and period of analysis) keeping all the other variables at their means. We presented the predicted probabilities with their confidence intervals that, following Goldstein and Healy (1995), are adjusted so that non-overlap of confidence bars indicates statistically significant difference at  $p < 0.05$  level.

The following control variables were included in the models: age (and its squared term); years since migration (and squared); education (three levels: 1 'primary or none'—reference, 2 'high school', 3 'university degree'); and legality of stay (0 'legal'—reference, 2 'illegal'). To control for each respondent's family characteristics, we used two variables. The first relates to having a partner and/or cohabiting, with three categories coded (0 'not having a partner'—reference, 1 'partner abroad', i.e. married but not cohabiting, and 2 'living with a partner in Italy'). The second variable refers to the presence of cohabiting children, and it measures if the respondent has children and/or is cohabiting with them (three categories coded as 0 'childless'—reference, 1 'all children in Italy', and 2 'children but not all in Italy').

We incorporated three time periods into the analyses to investigate the differentiated effects of the crisis on labour market performance: 1 pre-crisis 2001–2007; 2 the first post-crisis years 2008–2011; 3 the later post-crisis period 2012–2015 when, in Italy, the effect of the crisis was stronger (Bonifazi & Marini, 2014; Venturini & Villosio, 2018).

## RESULTS

In [Table A1](#) (in appendix), we show the descriptive statistics related to the variables used in the multivariate analysis. The most striking difference between Albanian migrants and other migrants is related to the educational level and family composition with the former being slightly less educated and having more frequently their partner and children in Italy compared with all other migrants.

We present in [Table 1](#) the survey statistics, cross-tabulating gender and area of migrant origin against the three time periods. Then, we move to the multivariate analyses of the four dependent variables: unemployment, irregular employment, employment and long-term unemployment. [Table 1](#) sets out a simple descriptive display of unemployment and employment rates, percentage of irregular employment and long-term unemployment related to the two groups of our analysis—Albanians and other migrants—disaggregated by gender and sequenced across the three periods of pre-crisis and earlier and later post-crisis.

We find that, for males, Albanians have the lowest unemployment and long-term unemployment rates, the highest employment rates and the lowest shares of irregular workers across all three time periods. Both migrant groups record rising unemployment (and decreasing employment) rates over the time periods covered. Still, only the Albanian men have a decreasing share of irregular workers in the transition from pre- to post-crisis.

The evolutionary pattern for women is rather different. First, unemployment and irregular work percentages for females are higher than for men, and employment rates are lower, for both migrants of Albanian origin and other nationalities and across the three time periods. The same trend also exists in relation to long-term unemployment which is higher for Albanian females, compared with their male co-ethnics, whereas the opposite holds

TABLE 1 Labour market indicators by gender, area of origin and period, Lombardy Region, 2001–2015

	Males		Females	
	Albanian	Other migrants	Albanian	Other migrants
Percentage of unemployed migrants among active migrants				
Pre-crisis (2001–2007)	5.98	9.60	11.30	12.52
First-period crisis (2008–2011)	7.21	12.40	13.34	12.68
Second-period crisis (2012–2015)	12.07	18.59	16.81	16.15
Percentage of irregular workers among active and legal migrants				
Pre-crisis (2001–2007)	5.33	6.03	17.53	12.23
First-period crisis (2008–2011)	3.13	5.85	13.92	10.64
Second-period crisis (2012–2015)	4.79	9.33	11.35	11.94
Percentage of long-term unemployed migrants among active migrants				
Second-period crisis (2012–2015)	7.04	12.23	12.75	9.58
Percentage of employed migrants				
Pre-crisis (2001–2007)	90.42	87.20	65.48	66.80
First-period crisis (2008–2011)	85.02	82.84	54.85	64.67
Second-period crisis (2012–2015)	80.83	74.98	56.05	60.97

Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data.

for females of other nationalities. Second, Albanian women's unemployment rates and trends are similar to that of the other female migrants, and if anything, are higher than the other women in the post-crisis period. Third, the increase in unemployment rates for women across the crisis is proportionately less than for men. Finally, examining the trends in irregular employment, these generally remain stable for all migrant groups, and actually fall quite sharply for Albanian women only.

The net result of this descriptive analysis is that, although Albanian female unemployment rates are higher than those of Albanian men, they were less affected by the crisis. We suggest that this occurs because women were employed in sectors, such as care work and other domestic and personal services, that were less dramatically affected by the crisis compared with male-dominated sectors such as construction and industrial production.

We now move to a more detailed multivariable analysis for unemployment, long-term unemployment, irregular employment and employment.

Table 2 is the reference point for this part of the analysis. We need to stress that in this table, for men we used a probit model for unemployment and employment whereas for the model where the dependent variable is represented by irregular work we used a Heckman correction in order to take into account the selection due to employment status. For women, we used a Heckman correction for the unemployment model to correct for self-selection into the labour force and a probit model for irregular work and employment. We show only results related to the effect of being Albanian. Therefore, we show only the odds ratios estimated for the variable Albania, separately for gender.<sup>6</sup>

## Unemployment

Table 2 shows that Albanian men have a lower probability of unemployment than other migrants when controlling for compositional effects. The long-term unemployment model confirms this result. In order to grasp the

TABLE 2 Probit coefficients and significance

	Unemployment	Irregular work	Long-term unemployment	Employment
Albanian men vs. other men	-0.2776***	-0.1458***	-0.2414***	0.2176***
Albanian women vs. other women	-0.6636	0.1689***	-0.1476	0.0318

Notes: significance levels: \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , models for unemployment and long-term unemployment among women and for irregular work among men apply the Heckman correction. The models control for educational level, age and its squared, length of stay, children, partner, period of analysis and only for unemployment and long-term unemployment for legal status.

Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data.

difference between Albanians and all other migrants, we present predicted probabilities in Figure 1 that helps us to highlight some crucial points.

For men, having a tertiary education is a protective factor against unemployment, although the impact on the predicted probability is rather small. As expected, undocumented migrants have a higher probability of unemployment because their status limits the possibilities of finding a job. Yet, an undocumented Albanian migrant has the same unemployment probability as a regular migrant from another country. Moreover, and more revealingly, the use of the pooled data set for all migrants allows us to observe the effect of conjunctural economic trends, which consists of a general and progressive increase in unemployment incidence through the two post-crisis periods

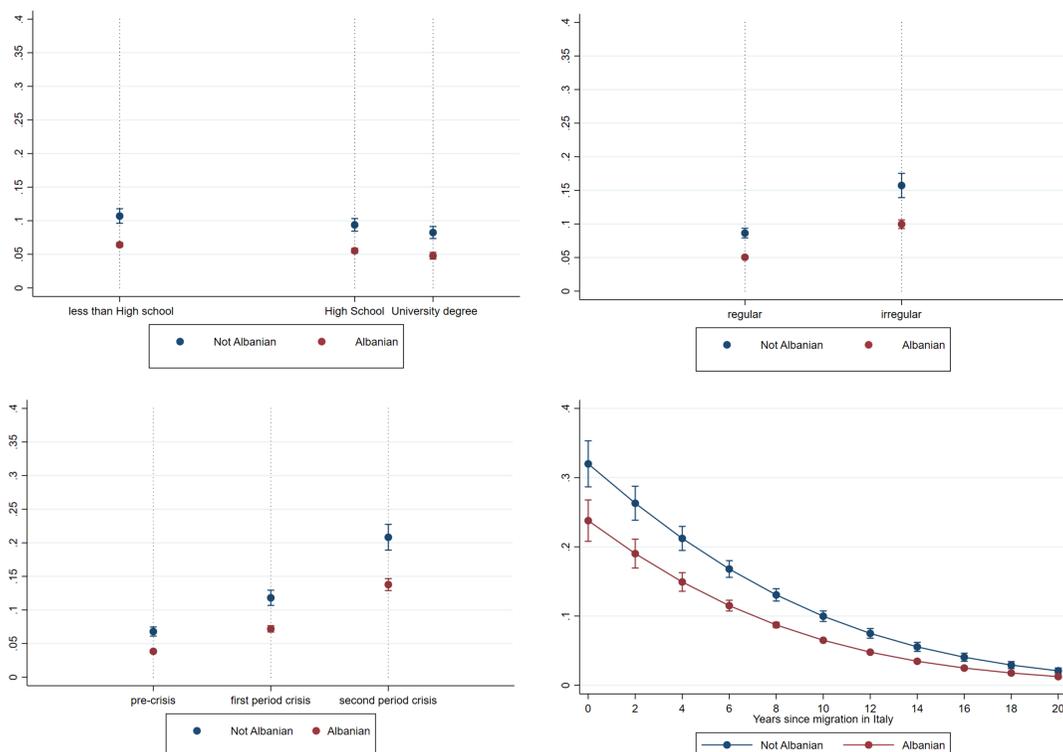


FIGURE 1 Predicted probability of unemployment among men by educational level, legal status, period and length of stay. Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data

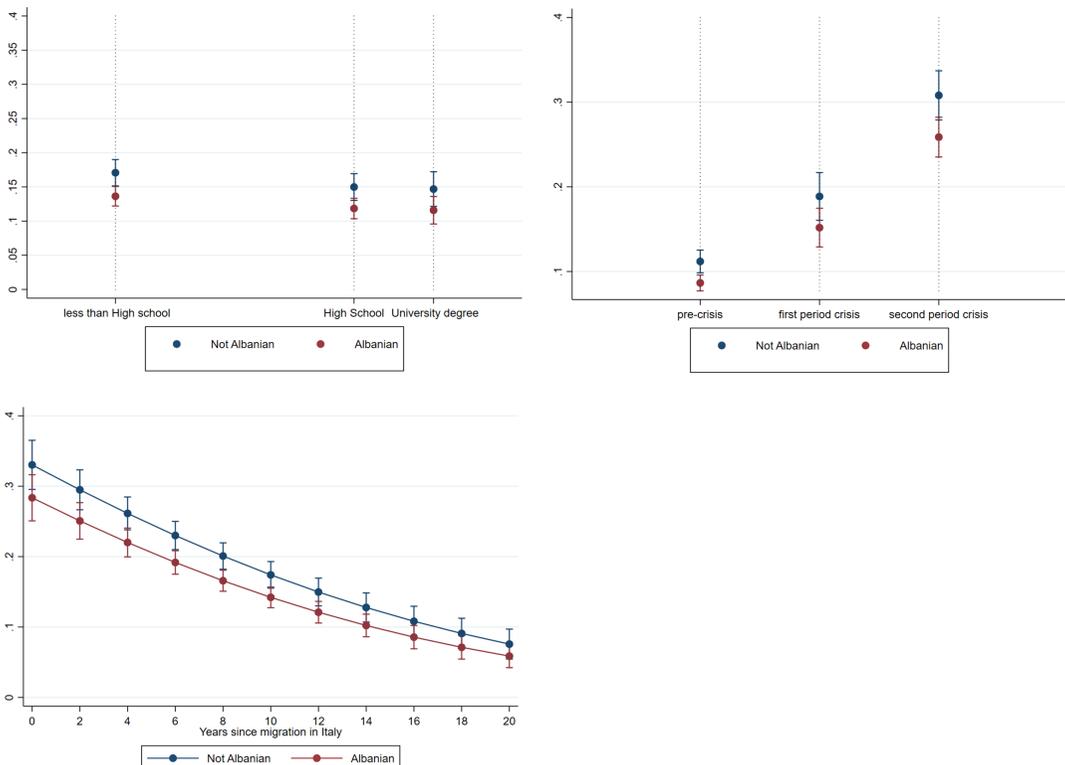
(2008–2011 and 2012–2015). The crisis had, however, a lower impact on Albanian men compared with other migrants. The length of stay considerably reduces the probability of unemployment, showing Albanians' advantage at all durations as compared to migrant men of other nationalities.

For Albanian women, we tested the effect of self-selection in the labour force. We found evidence of this selectivity in the analysis. The selection equation indicates<sup>7</sup> that higher educated women and migrants without a partner with them in emigration have a higher probability of being active. By contrast, women with a cohabiting partner and those surveyed during the crisis have a lower predicted probability of participation in the labour market. Interestingly, being Albanian does not entail a different probability of being active compared with other migrant women. Bearing this in mind, the model and the predicted probabilities (see [Figure A1](#) in the Appendix) show that Albanian women are not statistically different from other migrant women. Unemployment decreases with duration of stay, but it increases due to the economic downturn during 2011–2015. Education among women does not have a protective effect; moreover, legal status only slightly reduces the unemployment probability.

The models with the dependent variable 'long-term unemployment' confirm these results, with a better performance among Albanian men whereas no difference is found among women (see [Figures A2](#) and [A3](#) in the Appendix).

## Irregular employment

The model for irregular employment (fitted only onto legal stayers) shows that the probability of irregular work among Albanian men is lower compared with all other immigrants ([Table 2](#)).



**FIGURE 2** Predicted probability of irregular work among men by educational level, period and length of stay. Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data

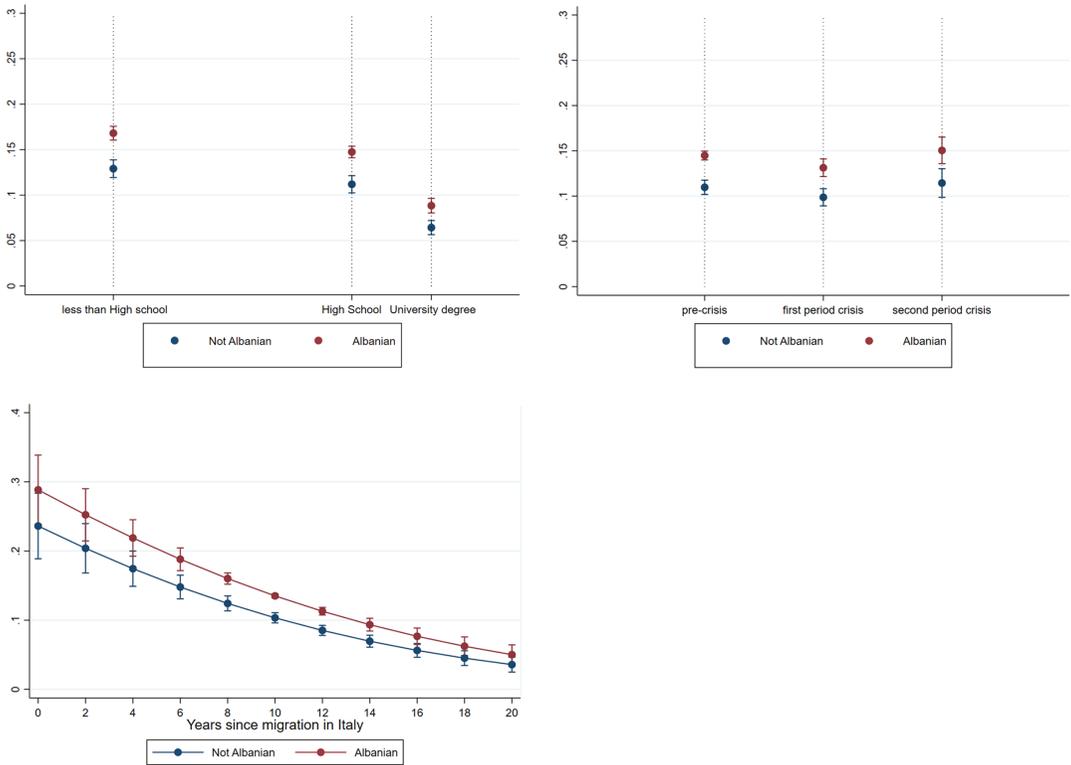


FIGURE 3 Predicted probability of irregular work among women by educational level, period and length of stay. Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data

To consider the positive effect of selection in the employment status, we included a selection equation into the model, which produced a significant result only for men. Bearing in mind that we are considering only legal migrants in this model, our results show that being Albanian decreases the probability of being irregularly employed. The model further indicates that Albanian men have a lower probability of irregular employment before the crisis and in the second crisis period, while their advantage is less evident during the first period (Figure 2). Higher educational level did not help male migrants in preventing irregular employment. Albanian men with a medium-high length of stay have a lower probability of being irregularly employed than other migrants, but recent Albanian migrants do not differ from others.

For Albanian women, a completely different picture emerges (Table 2 and Figure 3). Albanian women have a higher but still slight probability of being irregularly employed compared with other women. Education has a protective effect on irregular employment. Interestingly, Albanian women with a medium-high education appear to be more exposed to irregular employment than other migrant women with the same level of education. The crisis did not significantly impact the probability of irregular employment among women. Although irregular employment is quite frequent among recently arrived women, both among Albanians and among other female migrants (3 out of 10), non-Albanian female migrants are less involved in irregular jobs when controlling for years since migration, showing an overall lower level of irregularity compared with Albanian females.

### Employment

The model for employment (Table 2) basically confirms the result obtained for unemployment; Albanian men perform better compared with other immigrants as they have a higher probability of being employed when controlling

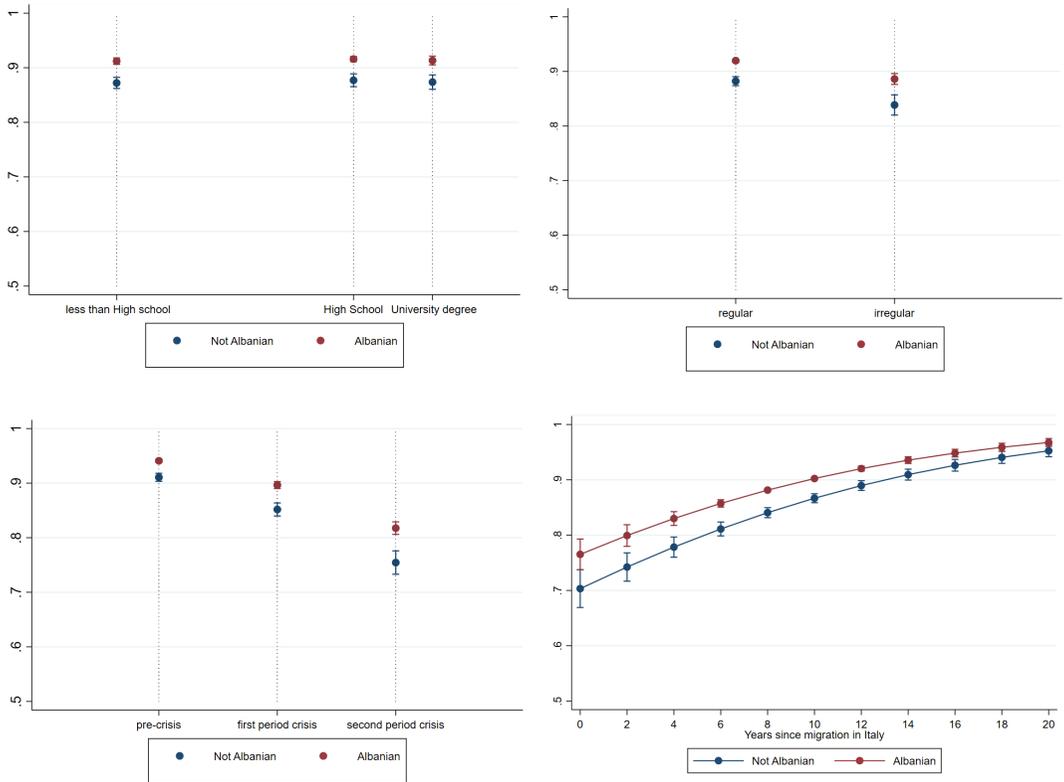


FIGURE 4 Predicted probability of employment among men by educational level, legal status, period and length of stay. *Source:* Authors' elaboration of ORIM data

for compositional effects. Figure 4, for example, shows that employment increases with duration of stay and decreases because of the effect of the economic downturn during 2011–2015. Legal status reduces employment probability for both Albanians and other migrants, but still, an undocumented Albanian migrant has the same employment probability as a regular migrant from another country. For Albanian women (Table 2 and Figure A4 in the Appendix), we do not find any statistically significant difference from other migrant women.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have focused on Albanians' labour market outcomes in the Italian region of Lombardy, using a unique survey data set from the region's Observatory on Integration and Multiethnicity to answer three questions. The questions concerned the profile of Albanians' labour market integration as measured by three dependent variables related to unemployment, employment and irregular work across the 15 years spanning the economic crisis and a fourth dependent variable (long-term unemployment) for the second period of the crisis and the extent to which the trends observed are differentiated by gender. The performance of Albanians in Lombardy was compared with that of all other migrants (except those from the EU15 and other economically advanced countries).

Taken in the round, our results indicate a better integration of Albanian workers into the Lombardian labour market, with lower unemployment and higher employment rates and less irregular employment and long-term unemployment compared with other migrants. This outcome is partly attributable to the different structural composition of the Albanian migrant population, as revealed by the predicted probabilities. To be more specific, this structural composition has a positive effect in reducing the probability of unemployment for both men and women

of Albanian background and on lowering the incidence of irregular employment among Albanian women, when compared to other migrants. Nevertheless, Albanians better performance in the Italian labour market, when compared to the other migrants, could not be attributed solely to the structural element: an Albanian male worker, regardless of his socio-demographic characteristics, has a lower probability of unemployment, irregular employment and long-term unemployment and a higher probability of employment. When we came to examine the relative impact of the economic crisis, we found this to be broadly the same across the two groups under consideration—Albanians, all other migrants—namely an increase in unemployment for both men and women although this was lower for Albanian men as compared to men of other nationalities, whereas we found less impact of the crisis on the probability of irregular employment for Albanian men only.

In sum, our analysis shows that the Albanian community in Lombardy is better integrated in the labour market, compared with other migrants in the region. This is all the more remarkable considering its earlier stereotyping as a rejected migrant community allegedly characterized by backwardness, violence and criminality. These characteristics were already proven to be largely false in an earlier study by Bonifazi and Sabatino (2003), since when Albanians' rather remarkable integration journey from stigmatization to self-activated assimilation has continued. Key factors driving the speed of this transformation and helping to explain its success have been Albanians' overall good knowledge of the Italian language, supported by a phonetic ability to eventually erase any trace of a foreign accent, their cultural orientation towards Italy and their anticipatory socialization prior to arrival, their somatic invisibility and their strategy of identity encryption and mimetism (King & Mai, 2009; Pittau et al., 2009; Romania, 2004).<sup>8</sup>

There is one aspect of our findings which is less easy to explain. The social atomization of the Albanian population in Italy which is the result of their tactics of individualized and family-based assimilation means that they are not able to trade on the advantages to access ethnicized labour market niches. Albanian women have to compete in a highly segmented and gendered Italian labour market where the most commonly available positions for female migrants—in domestic work and the care sector—are often tightly controlled by ethnic, often female, networks which assume an active role as gatekeepers, favouring the employment of co-nationals (Barbiano di Belgiojoso & Ortensi, 2015, 2019).

An issue which remains to be commented on is the extent to which the findings for Lombardy can be generalized for the rest of Italy. The most likely answer is 'to some extent', but we need to refine this statement. As pointed out in the Introduction, Lombardy is Italy's largest region economically and demographically: it accounts for one-fifth of the Italian economy, 1 in 6 of the Italian population and 21 per cent of the Albanians living in Italy. The region has a broad representation of the economic activities present in the country as a whole—heavy and light industry, financial and other services, diversified agriculture and extensive tourism resources in mountains, lakes and historic cities. It has a major metropolis (Milan) and a well-developed hierarchy of medium-sized and smaller towns. Geographically, it contains part of the fertile North Italian Plain, extensive mountain ranges and several large lakes. It is, however, very different from some of the regions of the so-called 'Deep South' of Italy like Calabria and Basilicata, or the large island regions of Sardinia and Sicily. In these southern regions, Albanians are much less present, due to the shortage of job opportunities which, where they exist, are more in the informal labour market. As a result, as Avola (2015) has shown, in the South migrants are more likely to face an 'ethnic penalty' whereby they are more confined to poor-quality, low-wage jobs than they are in the North of Italy.

What can be said with some authority is that, as the core region of the rich North of Italy, Lombardy enjoys greater economic stability than the rest of Italy and has usually led economic and social trends observed at the national level—such as entrepreneurship and business practices, social and other fashions, and demographic trends such as ageing and fertility decline. As a result of this combination of large size, economic and social advancement, diverse geography and ahead-of-the-curve behaviour, some researchers subscribe to the expression 'Lombardy as a laboratory for the analysis of Italian trends' (see Gabrielli et al., 2019; Mussino et al., 2015; Riva & Zanfrini, 2013). Hence, Lombardy can be hypothesized as both representative and a portender of future trends at the national level.

The debate on migration in Italy is intensely polarized between supporters of policies aimed at heavily limiting immigration on the one hand, and on the other hand those who underline the need for immigrant workers, and their families, to supply labour to critical shortage areas of the economy and to counteract the effects of

ageing and low fertility among the Italian population. This debate is constantly instrumentalized in the fluid landscape of Italian politics: issues of numbers, clandestine arrivals and cultural impacts are prominent in political discourse and the media. As a now well-established and largely integrated group, Albanians no longer feature in these policy and political discussions. Instead, they can be held up as a 'model' group which overcame initial stigmatization and obstacles to become accepted. An intermediate stance, between policies of closing borders and those aimed at easing migration, may be to create preferential routes of legal migration for citizens of countries in the European neighbourhood area such as Albania. The positive labour market profile documented in this study supports the further development of bilateral agreements between Italy and Albania, which should also enhance the rights of migrants in terms of social benefits such as pensions, to improve their livelihoods in later life.

## PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://publons.com/publon/10.1111/imig.12896>.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Data Regione Lombardia, at <https://dati.lombardia.it/>.

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## ENDNOTES

1. In 2015, the total number of foreign employees was 2.4 million with an increase of 2.8 per cent compared with 2014 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2016).
2. Data on intermarriage often reflect the gender imbalance of the particular migrant community. Albanians rank second (after Moroccans) for marriages between Albanian men and Italian women. For Albanian women, intermarriages with Italian men are, in fact, numerically more common but Albania ranks sixth after Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Brazil and Moldova—all migrant communities with a marked female majority.
3. Excluded from the survey are the EU15 countries, Malta, Cyprus, Norway, Switzerland, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan.
4. To be clear about the definitions of the samples surveyed: 'Albanian background' is defined as country of birth (as for all other migrant groups); 'other migrants' does not include Albanians.
5. The sum of employed persons and those who are unemployed but available for work.
6. The completed models are available upon request.
7. The model is available upon request.
8. Some of these factors have also been relevant to Albanians' integration into the economy and society of Greece, the other main destination for Albanian migration. However, the anti-Albanian racism and stigmatization were even heavier in Greece, due to complex factors associated with the relations between historically antagonistic neighbouring states, with the result that the socio-occupational mobility of Albanians in Greece is less than in Italy (Carletto and Kilic, 2011).

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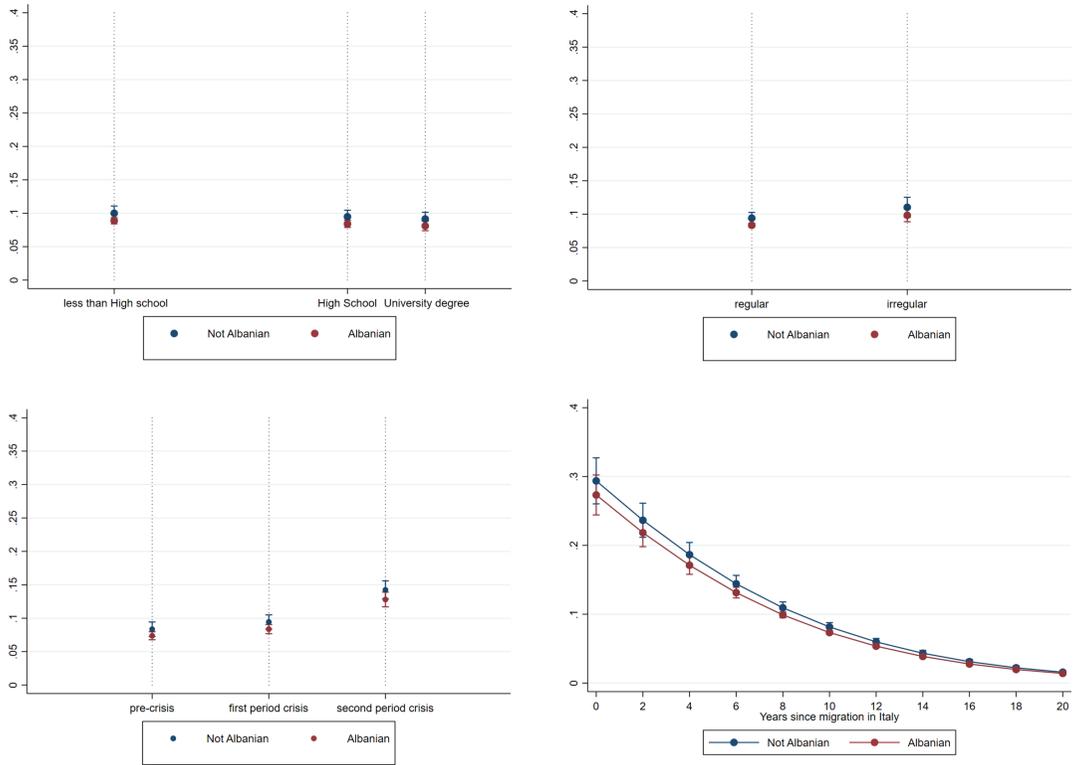
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## APPENDIX

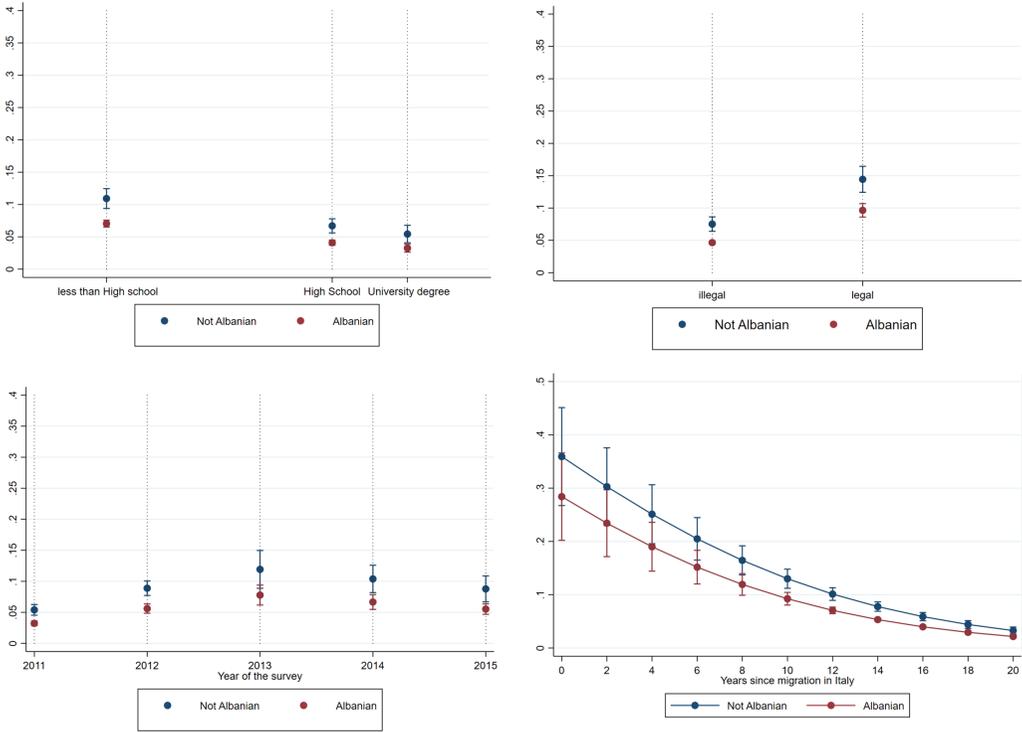
**TABLE A1** Descriptive statistics, Lombardy Region, 2001–2015

	Albanians	Other migrants
	Percentage	Percentage
Educational level		
Less than high school	42.98	42.92
High school	45.97	42.17
University degree	11.55	14.91
Children		
Childless	45.40	41.91
All children in Italy	46.60	36.09
Other	8.00	22.00
Partner		
No partner	39.79	39.69
Partner in Italy	53.61	45.31
Partner abroad	6.59	14.90
Legal migrants	85.37	82.98
Period of the survey		
Pre-crisis	53.63	52.25
First-period crisis	31.22	30.81
Second-period crisis	15.14	16.95
Length of stay in years mean (St.dev.)	7.93 (4.90)	8.04 (5.93)
Age in years mean (St.dev.)	33.49 (10.10)	34.56 (9.47)

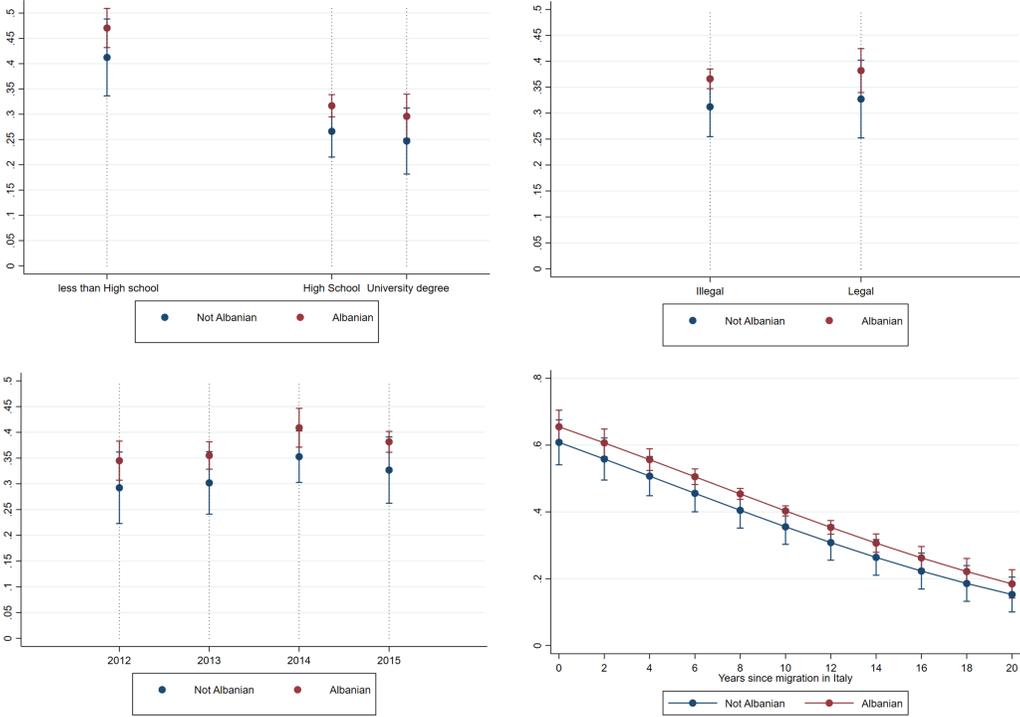
Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data.



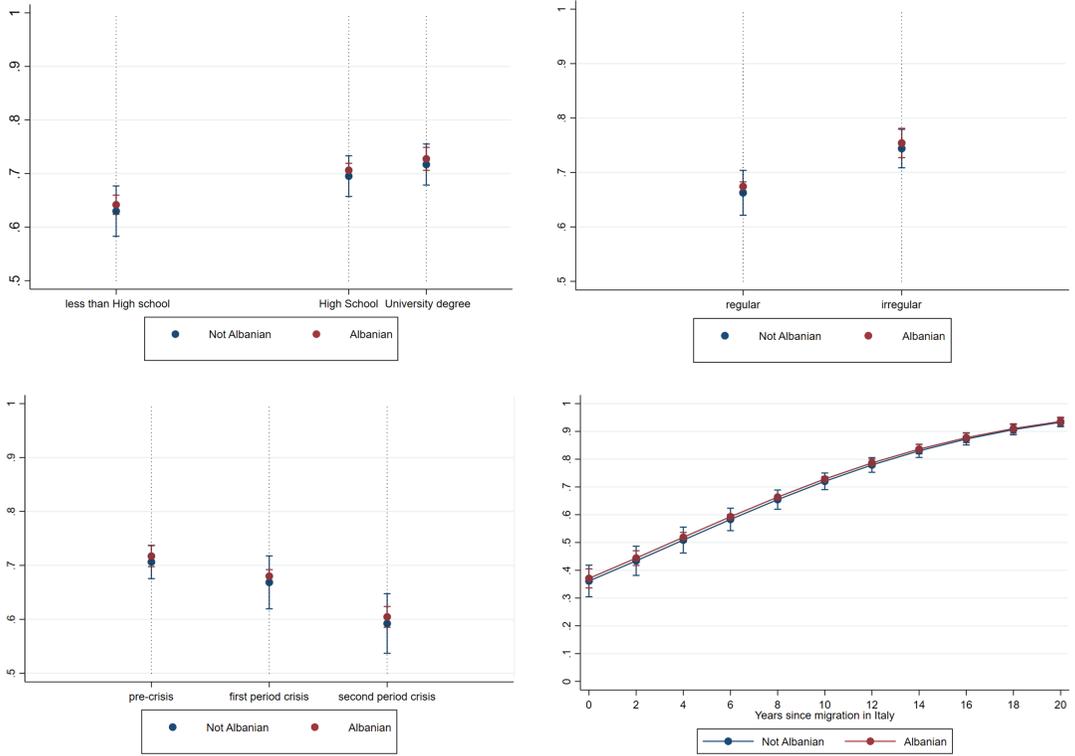
**FIGURE A1** Predicted probability of unemployment among women by educational level, legal status, period and length of stay. *Source:* Authors' elaboration of ORIM data



**FIGURE A2** Predicted probability of long-term unemployment among men by educational level, legal status, year of the survey and length of stay. *Source:* Authors' elaboration of ORIM data



**FIGURE A3** Predicted probability of long-term unemployment among women by educational level, legal status, year of the survey and length of stay. *Source:* Authors' elaboration of ORIM data



**FIGURE A4** Predicted probability of employment among women by educational level, legal status, period and length of stay. Source: Authors' elaboration of ORIM data