

Negotiating Mobility: Sociocultural Grammars of Albanian Irregularised *Kurbet*-Migration to the United Kingdom

Dorian Jano* 

Irregularised migration from Albania to the United Kingdom emerges as a governance-produced status, negotiated through socioculturally mediated practices, rather than as a criminal propensity. Drawing on digital-historical ethnography with Albanian migrants who entered the UK via irregularised routes (2015–2020) and a Bourdieusian relational approach, this article explores how emic grammars of kurbet (obligatory sacrifice), kanun (reputational ordering) and besa (commitments of trust) shape the interpretation and moral evaluation of mobility. Through repeated enactment, these grammars sediment as dispositions within a mobile habitus (endurance, reputational vigilance, reciprocity expectations) and mobilise resources (trust guarantees, route knowledge, embodied resilience) that become capital only when recognised as valuable within specific fields (kinship, diaspora, brokerage, algorithmic field). Yet, within UK border-labour regimes, often mediated through intermediaries, the same resources are misrecognised as illegality or commodified as priced intermediation, producing ambivalent effects that normalise risk and recalibrate moral obligations. The article contributes a relational theory-of-practice account that links irregularisation to field-specific regimes of recognition and valuation.

Keywords: Albanian migration, irregularisation, kurbet, cultural capital, moral economy, migration infrastructure

* DISFOR, University of Genoa, Italy. Address for correspondence: dorian.jano@edu.unige.it.

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Introduction

Albania has been described as a ‘country on the move’ (Carletto, Davis, Stampini and Zezza 2006; Vullnetari 2012) and a ‘laboratory for the study of migration’ (King 2005: 133). Beyond demographic shifts or economic necessities, mobility has operated as an enduring social practice, deeply embedded in historical narratives and collective imaginaries (Nicholson 2004: 878). Since the late Ottoman period, Albanian trajectories have been shaped by cyclical episodes of mass exodus amid political and economic instability (King, Dalipaj and Mai 2006: 412–413) and by periods of enforced immobility under restrictive regimes, most notably during the isolationist communist era (Carletto *et al.* 2006; King 2005; King and Mai 2008; Vullnetari 2012). These collective dynamics intersect with individual mobilities for work, education and family reunification (Vollmer 2023), producing layered assemblages of movement and enforced stasis that cannot be reduced to a single, linear causal register.

Since the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, more than half of Albania’s population has left a country that has fewer than three million inhabitants. Cross-border movement remains a defining feature of Albanian social life, sustained by enduring mobility aspirations and the routinisation of multiple ‘exit’ strategies, including irregularised and, at times, clandestine pathways (King *et al.* 2006: 413–414). Nearly 60 per cent of Albanian adults report an intention to leave (Esipova, Pugliese and Ray 2018) and about one in seven would consider irregularised routes (Balla 2023: 32).¹ The United Kingdom (UK) has become an increasingly key destination within this landscape (King *et al.* 2006: 413). In 2022, approximately 12,300 Albanians attempted irregular entry, representing 28 per cent of all small-boat arrivals (Migration Observatory 2022). This marked increase was quickly politicised through securitising and criminalising narratives. Regardless of later fluctuations in arrivals, Albanian mobility has been discursively framed as an ‘invasion’ and linked to organised crime, constructing ‘Albanian migrants’ as dominant actors in drug smuggling, human trafficking and other illicit economies.² Such rhetoric does not merely misdescribe migration but also constitutes mobility as a threat and legitimises the escalation of restrictive bordering, punitive enforcement and the administrative production of irregularity.

Against the prevailing criminalising conjuncture, this article is situated within critical migration and border studies, challenging state-centric categories and the methodological nationalism that sustains them (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Because political discourse can obscure the underlying dynamics of migration (Kearney 1997: 324), we foreground migrants’ situated knowledge and the sociocultural grammars through which mobility is made meaningful and morally assessable in practice. Albanians draw on a layered lexicon of mobility (*kurbet* from the Turkish–Arabic *gurbet*, the more formal *mërgim* and the Euro-Atlantic loanwords *emigrim/emigrant* and *refugjat*) which indexes distinct moral connotations (loss, sacrifice, necessity) as well as differentiated registers of citizenship and belonging (Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003: 944–945). As an emic grammar, *kurbet* names a long tradition of temporary work mobility (Hristov 2015: 32; Markov 2013: 248; Nicholson 2004: 878) and, more broadly, denotes a state of being-in-the-world rather than a legal or administrative category (Papailias 2003: 1064). To maintain the focus on contemporary processes of irregularisation while retaining the *longue durée* of Albanian mobility, we employ the compound *kurbet-migration* as an analytic term that reads present-day movement through *kurbet*’s moral economy and its idioms of endurance and obligation, without collapsing vernacular categories into state classifications.³ We treat *kurbet-migration* relationally by tracing how it is mediated through *kanun* and *besa* as emic grammars that render mobility morally intelligible and organisationally actionable, structuring practices of kinship reciprocity, brokerage and reputational adjudication that often function as informal infrastructures

coordinating access to routes and intermediaries within transnational fields governed by border-labour regimes (Hajrizi 2011: 46; Papailias 2003: 1064; Voell 2003: 89–92).⁴ Attending to these emic grammars allows us to ask whether and how historically rooted patterns of ‘life in motion’ are being reproduced or transformed as they encounter contemporary bordering and labour valuation regimes (Hristov 2015: 34).

The article proceeds in four parts. It first develops a theoretical framework linking irregularisation, the autonomy of migration and emic grammars to border-labour regimes of recognition. It then outlines the digital-historical ethnographic design, including ethical considerations and limitations, before presenting findings on *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa* as gendered and generationally recalibrated moral-reputational infrastructures, on tactical mobilities under border fortification, on commodified solidarity and brokerage and on digital technologies as infrastructures of connectivity, coordination and (in)visibility. The conclusion synthesises the article’s contributions to debates on irregularisation and briefly sketches non-securitising implications.

Situating the debate: Irregularisation, the autonomy-of-migration and sociocultural grammars

Critical governance scholarship shows how irregularisation is produced through border, visa and asylum regimes that securitise mobility and organise differential inclusion and deportability (de Genova 2002; van Liempt, Schapendonk and Campos-Delgado 2023). Securitising discourse constructs hierarchies of permissible mobility and legitimates policing, deterrence and criminalisation. At the same time, security bureaucracies produce administrative anxieties and threat continuums that reorganise inclusion/exclusion beyond humanitarian reason (Bigo 2002). These governance logics operate alongside labour-market demands, producing a mixed regime of internal/external controls and ‘fencing’/‘gate-keeping’ strategies, such that intensified border fortification coexists with selective workplace porosity (Triandafyllidou and Ambrosini 2011). Ethnographic political economy further details how enforcement becomes embedded in market and institutional networks, producing a counterproductive ‘illegality industry’ in which (non-)state actors can reproduce – and profit from – the very irregularity which they publicly denounce (Andersson 2016).

Governance-only accounts can obscure migrants’ practical tactics and solidarities. The autonomy-of-migration perspective foregrounds migrants’ collective capacities to assemble tactical repertoires (alternative knowledges, situational solidarities and adaptive mobilities) through which state-controlled movement is navigated, circumvented and contested (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). These tactics are grounded in practical moral reckonings of necessity, obligation and fairness, including vernacular claims to legitimacy articulated under surveillance, through practices of subversion such as mimicry and opacity (Scheel 2025). States respond with ambivalent moral stances that combine repression with selective compassion (Fassin 2005), producing probationary regimes of deservingness, where irregularised migrants must accumulate proofs of reliability and social worth to access conditional inclusion (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascareñas 2012).

To bridge governance-centred accounts of irregularisation with autonomy-of-migration perspectives without reducing migrants’ practices to ‘culture’, a relational Bourdieusian approach can specify how sociocultural grammars operate as practical sense linking tactics, moral evaluations and the field-specific conditions under which action becomes intelligible and recognised as valuable. Emic grammars (such as *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa*) provide socioculturally resonant idioms and repertoires through which mobility (loss and separation, obligation, honour and trust) can be narrated and rendered morally intelligible in practice (Mai and Schwandner-Sievers 2003; Voell 2003: 90–92). Read in Bourdieusian

terms, these grammars sediment as durable, transposable dispositions that generate perceptions and practices without conscious calculations or obedience to explicit rules, yet they can become misaligned with transformed conditions and thus require recalibration (Bourdieu 1990: 52–63). Migrants' resources become capital only through field-specific processes of recognition, mediated by institutions and social relations rather than carried as inherently valuable assets (Erel 2010: 645–649). Resources validated as social or symbolic capital within family, diaspora or brokerage fields may be misrecognised or actively devalued within state and security fields structured by securitising and classificatory logics, where practices rooted in sacrifice and obligation are reclassified as illegality or threat (Bigo 2002: 70–76). Accordingly, even where emic repertoires endure as embodied orientations, the dispositions and resources they generate are continually contested and differentially valued across fields, producing asymmetric recognition regimes in which the same orientations yield divergent effects depending on field-specific criteria and power relations (Bigo 2002: 74–76; Erel 2010: 645–649).

Researching *Kurbet*-migration: Digital ethnography, oral histories and reflexive limitations

To explore how irregularisation is produced and negotiated through governance pressures, tactical agency and sociocultural mediations, we adopt a digital ethnographic design that integrates historical reconstruction through oral-history testimonies (King and Vullnetari 2016: 198, 200) with the analysis of digitally mediated testimonies and platform-based traces (Pink *et al.* 2016: 109–111) in order to trace how vernacular moral claims, reputational signals and bordering logics circulate across time and socio-technical environments.

Fifteen semi-structured interviews (60–110 minutes) were conducted in Albanian with migrants who entered the UK via irregularised routes (2015–2020), subsequently lived and/or worked undocumented for several years and later obtained lawful status through legal routes, in some cases facilitated by employment sponsorships. Participants were predominantly men aged 23–40 from northern Albania, with diverse schooling backgrounds.⁵ Recruitment combined purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with key informants in personal networks and expanding through peer referrals until thematic saturation was reached, operationalised as the point where interviews added no new analytic themes (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006). Interviews were conducted through end-to-end encrypted video-conferencing and instant-messaging applications (Zoom, WhatsApp, Signal), enabling secure and sustained mediated ethnographic engagement across distance while acknowledging reduced interactional density and richness relative to co-present modes of fieldwork (Pink *et al.* 2016: 13). In parallel, we analysed publicly accessible platform materials, including user-generated posts, videos, comment-thread interactions and artistic representations circulating on social media (TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook), alongside mediated interview formats and investigative reporting (Murthy 2008) that documented and mediated the experiences of Albanians travelling to the UK. We treated these textual and visual materials as 'digital ethnographic traces' embedded in socio-technical environments, extracted migrant testimonies and critically assessed how platform affordances, editorial selectivity and media framing jointly shape visibility, circulation and credibility (Gray, Gerlitz and Bounegru 2018).

The analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach, moving iteratively between the ethnographic materials and the study's analytic commitments (Braun and Clarke 2019). Transcripts and digital artefacts were initially coded grounded in participants' lexicon (*kurbet*, *besa*, *kanun*, *sacrifice*, *obligation*, *risk*, *intermediation*, *solidarity*) and subsequently organised into higher-order analytic categories and theoretical constructs (moral economies, solidarity networks, commodification). We treat themes as

interpretive patterns generated through reflexive engagement and iterative refinement across cases. We adhered to project ethical guidelines and GDPR, obtaining informed consent after providing detailed information on research purposes, data usage, confidentiality protections and withdrawal rights.⁶ We implemented enhanced confidentiality measures, including pseudonymisation, removal of identifying details, encryption and anonymised transcripts – and explicitly informed participants that no information would be shared with immigration authorities. Participants were offered the opportunity to review excerpted transcripts and to withdraw any statements which they felt compromised their safety or dignity. The inclusion of digital materials was restricted to publicly shared content – avoiding private posts – and we remained attentive to the risks of re-circulation and stigmatisation (Murthy 2008). The researcher's partial insider positionality (Albanian) facilitated rapport and interpretive nuance around emic grammars, while necessitating continuous reflexivity to avoid romanticising solidarity or moral obligations. We maintain a constructivist epistemology, prioritising situated accounts of participants over the researcher's preconceptions.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, the purposive sampling strategy and relatively small sample size constrain generalisability. Second, the predominance of male participants from northern Albania, who have at least a secondary education, introduces epistemic blind spots regarding women, regional origins and others with lower educational attainment. Third, the retrospective nature of interviews entails recall bias, as participants reconstruct journeys undertaken years earlier, potentially smoothing over hardship or amplifying particular narratives. Fourth, because the study includes individuals who successfully regularised their status, survivorship bias is likely, underrepresenting those deported, indefinitely detained or trapped in protracted irregularity. Fifth, ethical and methodological boundaries shaped our inquiry as we did not solicit detailed accounts of post-arrival employment in legally sensitive sectors (e.g., cannabis cultivation), both to protect participants from potential legal exposure and because such questions exceeded the scope of our ethics approval.⁷

Mobilising *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa*: From emic grammars to mobile habitus and convertible capital

Participants mobilise *kurbet*, *kanun* and *besa* as flexible interpretive–evaluative schemas through which mobility is narrated, evaluated and justified under conditions of constraint and risk.

Kurbet, historically codified as 'journeying far... to support the family back home,' carries a moralised script of pride, courage and sacrifice (King 2005: 135), articulated through expressive repertoires such as songs, sayings and memorial verses (Papailias 2003: 1064; Pistrick 2010: 29). It is an affectively dense and constitutively ambivalent register, narrated both as painful loss and as a source of prosperity, development and well-being (Bon 2017: 302–303). *Kurbet*-migration can thus legitimate high-risk mobility and simultaneously sustain moral claims to dignity and contribution. Gender is constitutive of this grammar. The Albanian adage, *burrin e njeh kurbeti, gruan e njeh djepi* (literally: *kurbet* knows the man, cradle knows the woman), casts *kurbet*-migration as a masculine identity-ground (Dimitriadis 2022: 177; King *et al.* 2006: 413; Papailias 2003: 1064; Pistrick 2010: 30, ft 1). Men still describe *kurbet*-migration as the quintessential ritual of masculine responsibility and adulthood: 'Prison or the army don't make you a man; what makes you a man is taking responsibility for someone else...we absolutely want to be someone's hero' (Fatlum 2023). This gendered schema aligns with earlier UK-bound mobility patterns in which men were positioned as primary economic actors and women's entry was frequently channelled through subsequent family reunification (King *et al.* 2006: 418; Vathi 2010; Vullnetari 2012:

78). Nonetheless, recent evidence indicates a more heterogeneous *kurbet*-migration landscape where women and children are increasingly present, thereby actively unsettling the binary allocation of movement to men and care to women (Dimitriadis 2022; Markov 2013: 251; Vollmer 2023). Women's accounts register the simultaneity of constraint and agency, where mobility is lived through ethical ambivalence and affective burden: 'I put my son's life at risk, and for that I truly feel guilty' (Kupsi 2023). Youth testimonies further elucidate how *kurbet*-migration becomes embodied as a disposition of early responsibility within a habitus of provision (Vathi 2010): 'By the time we were 14 or 15, we already had to think about providing for the household' (Fatlum 2023) ... and... 'I would sacrifice myself so that my sister... and my brother... could have my help in paying for their education' (Florin 2023), illustrating how obligation-driven risk is moralised as care and provision and become symbolic capital when validated as moral worth and 'proper responsibility' by and within familial regimes of value. Interlocutors narrate the intergenerational transmission of *kurbet*-migration – 'My father emigrated several times... almost all my cousins live abroad now' – embedding mobility within familial memory and aspiration (Fatlum 2023). Departure is understood as a rite of passage and participation in a moral economy of provision, where hardship becomes legible as duty for kin and household futures, rather than an individualised 'choice' (King *et al.* 2006: 413–414). Yet contemporary narratives signal an emergent hybridisation of moral economies and neoliberal subjectivities, where collective obligation sits alongside self-making. Lumjan (2025) presents *kurbet*-migration as both a necessity and a pathway to personal advancement: 'Having completed university and being unable to find employment... forced me to take the only immediate solution to create opportunities for myself and at the same time to help my family'. This recalibration reflects a shift in *kurbet*-migration, reframing it as duty-cum-entrepreneurial self-making rather than pure sacrificial obligation, a configuration echoed in the accounts of Gjergji (2023), Xhoi (2024) and Fatlum (2024), who emphasise self-realisation through departure.

Kanun, Albania's customary legal code rooted in tribal organisation and patriarchal values, provides classificatory distinctions (honour/dishonour, loyalty/betrayal, insider/outsider) and assigns moral weight to actions and relationships. It operates not as a static 'rulebook' but as 'an internalised system of predispositions, a kind of framework and set of guidelines for social action', through which actors interpret, judge and legitimate social worth (Voell 2003: 89). Thus, *kanun* functions both as grammar that classifies conduct through honour and obligation and as habitus that disposes actors to perceive and act through those classifications. Yet scholars caution against treating *kanun* as a totalising explanatory framework, emphasising instead that it operates as a contextually activated repertoire whose idioms and prescriptions are selectively mobilised and pragmatically reworked into 'mutated' forms across specific social conditions (King *et al.* 2006: 416). In this sense, *kanun* is best understood as a flexible repertoire that becomes a practical resource for organising obligations, honour, loyalty, hospitality and dispute, especially where formal governance (state/legal field) is absent, distrusted or experienced as arbitrary (Rochester 2024: 90–94). In diasporic, transit and informal mobility, *kanun*-derived dispositions are mobilised as reputational resources that organise access to support and routes, enable trust-based brokerage and discipline disputes through guarantees and expectations of obligation (Arhin 2016: 83; Leman and Janssens 2012: 174–176). These reputational resources become symbolic capital when recognised by co-ethnic networks, brokers and community gatekeepers in informal governance settings, whose recognition converts 'being known as honourable' into credible access and cooperation. Interlocutors confirm that *kanun* persists as an evaluative schema but is pragmatically recalibrated: 'Before, they [conflicts] were resolved with murder; today... with fines, big money' (Fatlum 2024). This selective adaptation sustains *kanun*'s ethical idioms of honour and obligation while

contesting violent elements as legitimate authority. Still, patriarchal and generational hierarchies persist, concentrating gatekeeping power among male elders and established migrants (King *et al.* 2006: 420–429).

Embedded within the *kanun* logics of honour, *besa* is defined as ‘a verbal agreement’ creating an ‘unbreakable bond of trust and loyalty’ (Rochester 2024: 90). In diasporic narratives, *besa* also serves as a comparative interpretive–evaluative schema through which hosts and migrants judge moral reliability and honour associated with keeping one’s word, a key counterpoint in boundary-making narratives of sameness and otherness (King and Mai 2008: 180). Beyond moral comparison, *besa* also operates as a practical trust infrastructure. Albanian migrants in Greece rely on word-of-mouth arrangements grounded in *besa* to secure employment (Papailias 2003: 1067), while intermediaries may rely on reputation and deferred payment to stabilise high-risk journeys, including illicit transit infrastructures (Kosic and Triandafyllidou 2003: 1004). As a disposition, *besa* entails embodied promise-keeping and, at the extreme, readiness to protect others even at high personal cost (Hajrizi 2011: 46). Historically activated to offer sanctuary and safe passage to anyone seeking refuge, most notably to Jews during World War II (Rochester 2024: 90–91), *besa* continues to provide hospitality, shelter and protection and also to organise cooperation in ‘grey’ fields where trust is scarce by producing credible commitments that can be practically mobilised. Testimonies reiterate *besa*’s normative force within migrant groups: ‘When you give your word [*besa*], you will keep it’ (Fatlum 2024). *Besa* can become symbolic capital insofar as it is recognised as a credible commitment (King and Mai 2008: 180) and, in other fields, as a pledge that ties personal honour to collective projects (Rochester 2024: 92), thereby raising the stakes of breach, since failing to keep *besa* risks a loss of honour and social standing and may trigger reputational sanctions, including the withdrawal of network support or exclusion from communal cooperation (Voell 2003: 92).

Tactical mobilities under fortification: Routes, risks and improvised agency

Albanian journeys to the United Kingdom evidence tactical agency as improvisation within state architectures of control. Intensified policing iteratively reshapes the cartographies of movement.⁸ Traditional direct trajectories via Italy, France and/or Belgium to Calais and Dunkirk have given way to circuitous multi-border itineraries that transit Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and northern France – or via Spain to the southern UK coasts (Piranjat 2022a). These tactical reconfigurations require navigating serial checkpoints while concealed in commercial lorries or train carriages (Arben 2024; Dasar 2024), demonstrating the embodied resilience that enacts the *kurbet*-migration grammar’s valorisation of endurance as moral fortitude. Sea crossings in overcrowded, inadequate dinghies are perilous passages, with capsizing a recurring risk (Ajsberg 2025; Piranjat 2022b).⁹ Air travel constitutes a third strategy, often pursued after failed land or sea attempts. Migrants typically use forged EU passports – primarily from Italy or Greece – and employ double-booking tactics, scheduling simultaneous flights to EU and UK destinations; they present the EU-bound ticket at security checks before boarding the UK flight with falsified documentation (Shala 2024). Detection risks remain high. Interlocutors reported interceptions in Spain and Germany due to linguistic incongruence with the claimed nationalities (Arben 2024; Florin 2023).

Tactical innovations spread through networked circulation. Migrants hide in train and subway facilities, cut access points into lorry roofs, then reseal them with adhesive (Fatlum 2024; Florin 2023) and use paprika or coffee to mask scent traces from sniffer dogs (Glauk 2024; Kingsley 2022). Temporal strategies are equally crucial. Crossings are timed to coincide with periods of heavy rain that impair

surveillance equipment or during security shift changes, when vigilance is compromised (Gjergji 2023). Real-time coordination via WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram enables quick plan adjustments, allowing for rapid recalibration as routes shift and risks intensify.

State bordering practices render mobility into an inherently punitive ordeal. Intensified surveillance infrastructures, such as barbed wire, electric fencing, motion sensors and thermal cameras, do not deter passage but compel escalated bodily risk. Florin (2023) recounts navigating 7 security zones with barbed and electric wire, cutting nets underwater while evading guards and cameras: 'One of us was seen by the cameras and the alarm went on ... they chased us'. Gjergji (2023) describes climbing a light pole to avoid triggering alarm-equipped netting, risking severe injury: 'I jumped ... risking either breaking a leg or breaking my head, depending on how I landed'. Such testimonies demonstrate how fortification infrastructures externalise harm. Danger becomes a prerequisite for passage, not an exceptional incident – and affective harms permeate the route. Encampments near Calais are depicted as traumatic 'waiting zones' of precarity; an investigative journalist recounts: 'The night I spent in the camp... There were 2 armed fights, constant gunfire, children crying and families distressed' (Harlicaj 2022). Channel crossings are narrated as physical and psychological ordeals: 'The journey across the Channel was torture. It was cold, stormy and incredibly frightening' (Artan 2022).

Post-arrival, protracted legal uncertainty, inadequate protections and exclusion from regularisation pathways sustain conditions of deportability and systemic exploitation. UK detention facilities operate as sites of structural violence (Bateman, Karaj and Perriguer 2022), where carceral logics of confinement (concrete cells, restricted communication and indefinite temporalities) are masked by performative recreational amenities (fitness, ping-pong, tennis, PlayStation), often described by interlocutors as 'soft prisons' (Ajsberg 2025; Fatlum 2023). Deaths and suicide attempts across ostensibly 'non-detention' accommodation and immigration removal centres, exemplified by the December 2023 suicide aboard the Bibby Stockholm barge, underscore how the UK's hostile, carceral migration regime produces structural violence, where prolonged uncertainty, isolation and the systemic neglect of mental health precipitate acute psychological harm and, at its extreme, fatal consequences (MiCLU 2023; Wheeler 2024). For families, especially mothers travelling with young children, structural violence intensifies through gendered vulnerability. The imperative to protect dependents heightens psychological burdens, while stigmatising discourses frame these journeys as 'illegal' acts of desperation rather than expressions of agency constrained by exclusion (Ada 2022; Kupsi 2023).

Commodifying solidarity: From kin reciprocity to priced intermediation

Albanian mobility is sustained through layered solidarities that include familial-diasporic networks, contingent migrant mutual aid and increasingly commodified intermediary services, exposing a shift where *besa*-based trust and *kanun*-based loyalty coexist with transactional logics that price risk and quantify obligation (Alban 2024). Solidarity forms a hybrid moral economy where reputational sanctions, payment-upon-arrival agreements and kin-brokered introductions illustrate how gift and price intermix under constraint.

Familial bonds and diaspora connections serve as solidaristic infrastructure, providing tangible support such as financial assistance, housing and employment pathways, as well as the emotional resilience vital for survival in hostile environments (Carletto *et al.* 2006; Hoxhaj 2022; King and Gëdeshi 2020: 144). These networks mobilise resources grounded in kinship obligations which, within family/diaspora fields, are recognised as legitimate reciprocity. 'Solidarity comes not in the form of words of empathy but with a decisive to-do list, categorical imperatives prescribed in quasi-military

fashion' (Ypi 2022). Established relatives provide shelter and jobs and fund travel costs amounting to thousands of pounds (Glauk 2024; Lumjan 2025). Florin (2023) reports, for instance, that his cousin provided emergency aid during transit in Belgium. Beyond kinship, migrants organise contingent acts of solidarity and trust-building among fellow travellers. When familial networks fail, hometown ties often take hold. One migrant sheltered his travel companion after his relatives did not appear: 'I wouldn't leave him stranded on the road and I brought him to my hotel' (Ajsberg 2025). Migrants share food, shelter, route intelligence and reliable contacts; they also collaborate to decipher transit schedules and coordinate crossings (Gjergji 2023). Yet collective strategies have unintended consequences. Large, coordinated movements attract border surveillance, amplifying detection risks and rendering solidarity networks more vulnerable to detention. This tension between intra-collective solidarity and state surveillance shapes migrant experience, rendering mutual support vital yet insufficient against securitised regimes that criminalise collective passage.

Restrictive border regimes intensify reliance on informal networks that operate as commodified infrastructures of mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Intermediaries, often labelled 'smugglers' in public discourse, are described by participants as infrastructural necessities under closure.¹⁰ They organise underground crossings, arrange alternative routes and secure essential documents, often using payment-upon-successful-arrival models that blend trust-based commitments with economic exchange. Lumjan (2025) recounts lorry crossings with payment deferred until safe arrival, while Glauk (2024) notes that his uncle released the fee only upon secure entry into Bristol. 'Without them [intermediaries], it's nearly impossible to cross. The borders are too tight; you need someone who knows the system' (Florin 2023). Albanian intermediaries often recruit co-ethnics through kinship ties and clan networks, drawing on *kanun*-derived loyalty and reputational guarantees to secure high-risk journeys (Leman and Janssens 2012: 170–172). This reliance signals the 'commodification of solidarity,' a reconfiguration where social relations organised through reciprocity and *besa*-trust become partially mediated by monetary exchange, yet remain anchored in reputational guarantees, as failed passage invites collective sanction within transnational migration networks. A 15-year-old boy's testimony epitomises this dynamic: 'I had to borrow £4500 from relatives in Belgium to buy my place on the boat' (Reid 2023). Fees are differentiated. Lorry crossings cost £4500–£5500 per attempt, while sea crossings, though cheaper, carry a lethal risk (Glauk 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, prices surged to £20000–£30000 per journey, intensifying financial extraction among vulnerable individuals (Lumjan 2025).¹¹ Accommodation providers offer reduced rates with 'supplementary assistance', framed as a form of solidarity, yet also transactional. As one intermediary put it: 'For every day you remain in the hotel, the fee you are owed might be reduced... It is better to wait until the sea calms and, by 2 a.m., I will bring you a taxi' (Piranjat 2022a). These arrangements are calibrated and negotiated, transforming moral obligation into a commercialised service with explicit terms.

Intermediary accountability diminishes under market logics. Informal verbal agreements prevail, rendering migrants as disposable consumers within volatile crossing markets. Interlocutors recount switching intermediaries after failed attempts (Glauk 2024; Kupsi 2023) or enduring confinement in lorry cabins for days, without ventilation or food (Florin 2023). Such experiences expose the ruthless logic of commodified mobility, where social bonds are recast as transactions and human connections are stripped of moral and social dimensions, signalling a deeper reconfiguration of *kurbet*-migration social relations in transnational spaces. Arben (2024) diagnoses a field-shift: '*Kanun* and *besa* are steadily eroding because, once monetary exchange becomes involved, there must be someone trusted by both parties... If it were by *kanun* or by *besa*, there would be no need for intermediaries'. What erodes

is not the moral idioms themselves but their capacity to regulate mobility, as price and quasi-contractual arrangements displace honour-based obligation.

Digital technologies as infrastructures of connectivity, (in)visibility and risk

Digital technologies increasingly mediate contemporary *kurbet*-migration, reshaping practices of mobility, kinship and sociocultural reproduction. Social-media platforms and messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok), together with GPS tracking, form an essential mobility infrastructure that stitches fragmented itineraries and enables tactical coordination (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Migrants now leverage digital tools to coordinate their journeys, receive real-time updates during perilous crossings (Florin 2023), communicate *en route* (Arben 2024) and document their experiences through selfies (Lumjan 2025). Digital communication sustains affective proximity: 'I talk to my parents every day, even from thousands of miles away...they send me photos of the house... it feels like I'm still there with them' (Xhoi 2024), producing a sense of co-presence that tempers the emotional costs of being far from home. Yet the same platforms that afford coordination and affective proximity also expose migrants to intensified risks, deceptions and surveillance. On TikTok and other platforms, crossings are advertised as 'safe' and 'affordable' routine services, which can normalise risk and facilitate deception (Kupsi 2023; Lumjan 2025). Digital mediation further reconfigures the politics of visibility and bordering, as platform traces circulate beyond intended audiences, becoming material for criminalising media narratives and tools for state agencies to conduct risk profiling, surveillance and targeted deportation. Digital participation thus remains a contested space where migrants' tactical autonomy is continually renegotiated against their growing legibility to securitised bureaucratic and policing regimes.

Digital infrastructures are not just channels through which journeys are organised, lived or traced. They have also become public arenas where sociocultural norms are interpreted, contested and rearticulated. Online comment threads, emojis and hashtags operate as algorithmically legible proxies for collective emotion and emergent forms of solidarity (Oltmann and Espinoza-Vasquez 2024). Visual culture constitutes a particular potential modality of this rearticulation. In a widely circulated diptych, the young artist Shazart (2024) demonstrates how emic grammars traverse platform publics, generating counter-hegemonic imaginaries of *kurbet*-migration. The first panel depicts the 1991 exodus towards Italy, with tens of thousands of Albanians clinging to a cargo ship amid post-communist turmoil. The second panel reprises this collective choreography, as Channel crossers carry an inflatable dinghy along the shoreline, dressed in orange life vests (see Fig. 1). Through deliberate compositional echoes, the artwork constructs transgenerational continuity, recoding irregularised mobility as a historical extension of *kurbet*-migration repertoires. As these images circulate across TikTok, Instagram and Facebook, they elicit platform-specific affective responses. The trending hashtag #eksodi2022 [exodus 2022] amplifies collective indignation, while emojis like the 'heart on fire' or 'clapping hands', alongside single-word affective markers such as '*dhimbje*' (pain), '*dëshpërim*' (despair) or '*shpresë*' (hope), condense complex moral judgments about sacrifice and courage into algorithmically sortable signals that feed back into which narratives gain visibility and which remain marginal. Platform algorithms thus constitute a distinct field in which narratives and visual representations shaped by sociocultural grammars are validated and ranked through engagement-based metrics (e.g., visibility, likes, shares, hashtag circulation). Unlike other fields, where face-to-face judgments prevail, the algorithmic field treats affective resonance and virality as value, reshaping which *kurbet*-migration stories become legible and who is positioned as a credible narrator, often privileging sensational accounts rather than

quotidian endurance. By filtering and amplifying accounts of loyalty, exploitation and suffering, platforms also shape how younger generations learn what counts as acceptable *kurbet*-migration, what a 'true' *besa* entails under commodified conditions and whether *kanun*-derived hierarchies should be upheld or contested in transnational spaces. Visual memory-work, such as Shazart's paintings, functions as an epistemological intervention by re-situating contemporary border precarity within the *longue durée* of Albanian mobility as a sedimented response to recurring structural violence.

Figure 1. Artistic Diptych Counter-Narrative of the 1991 Albanian Exodus and Contemporary Channel Crossings



Source: Shazart (2024); reproduced with permission from the artist.

These dynamics position digitally mediated practices as a contemporary layer within the transnational field of Albanian *kurbet*-migration. Digital infrastructures reshape how emic grammars are transmitted and enacted, reconfiguring dispositions (coordination and risk assessment) and shifting how fields recognise resources (trust guarantees, reputational signals and route knowledge) as capital within algorithmically governed regimes of visibility and value. In so doing, they intensify field ambivalence by broadening access to information and solidarity while simultaneously deepening exposure to deception, exploitation and surveillance.

Conclusions

The UK's immigration system does not find criminals – it creates them. It projects criminal intent well before any criminal act has occurred. But it is hard to explain any of this to someone who has not experienced first-hand the cruelty, the contempt, the moral arbitrariness of the immigration authorities. And even those who have experienced it tend to forget (Ypi 2022).

Ypi's (2022) insight, grounded in lived experience, underscores how the UK immigration regime can pre-emptively criminalise mobility. Building against this criminalising conjuncture, the current article argues that Albanian irregularised migration to the United Kingdom must be understood as governance-produced irregularisation within and through punitive border-labour regimes, amplified by securitising discourses and hostile-environment logics, rather than as deviance or surplus mobility. It shows how mobility is also a socially situated practice mediated by historically sedimented sociocultural dispositions that travel, are revalued and transform across uneven transnational fields.

Taken together, the findings support a three-level relational model linking emic meaning-making (*kurbet*, *kanun*, *besa*), incorporated dispositions within a mobile habitus and the field-specific recognition (or misrecognition) through which resources become convertible capital (Erel 2010). Empirically, this model clarifies how endurance and obligation legitimate high-risk routes under border fortification; how *besa*-based commitments and *kanun*-inflected reputational ordering regulate access to intermediaries while being reconfigured through priced intermediation and the commodification of solidarity; and how digital platforms operate simultaneously as infrastructures of coordination and as fields of visibility that intensify exposure to surveillance and criminalising narration. The core ambivalence lies less in the grammars themselves than in the uneven regimes of valuation, where the same practices and signals can be recognised as honourable obligation in kinship/diaspora fields, commodified as priced intermediation within brokerage fields and reclassified as 'illegality' in the UK border-security field.

Overall, this article contributes a relational theory-of-practice account of irregularised mobility that brings emic grammars into dialogue with governance-produced border-labour fields – and specifies how agency, valuation and moral economies are co-constituted under restrictive regimes. For Albanian scholarship specifically, the article analytically updates *kurbet* beyond a historical idiom of departure by theorising it as a contemporary grammar of obligation/endurance, while tracing *kanun* and *besa* as travelling reputational infrastructures that are recalibrated, contested and stratifying across transnational and diasporic fields rather than simply 'persisting' or 'disappearing'. Two non-securitising policy implications follow. First, since intensified enforcement tends to restructure mobility by deepening reliance on risk and intermediaries, harm reduction requires widening regulated mobility channels (including circular labour schemes and transparent regularisation pathways) to reduce exploitation and price-mediated risk (King *et al.* 2006). Second, because criminalising framings operate

as symbolic power that legitimates punitive escalation while obscuring structural constraints and migrants' moral economies, a decriminalised public discourse becomes a necessary condition for humane and workable policy design (Dimitriadis 2023).

More broadly, the article offers portable analytics for studying irregularised migration elsewhere by centring socioculturally situated practices within border-labour regimes of governance and valuation and by tracing how grammar-inflected resources are differentially recognised, commodified or disqualified as capital across transnational fields. This approach enables relational accounts of mobility, vulnerability and political contestation that move beyond criminalising frames.

Notes

1. A 2023 nationally representative survey found that 14 per cent of respondents would consider using irregular means, such as a dinghy or a lorry. This finding derives from the question: 'Would you try using a dinghy or a lorry to sneak into the UK?' (Balla 2023: 32).
2. In 2022, British officials employed highly charged and stigmatising rhetoric to describe Albanian arrivals, referring to an 'invasion on our southern coast', 'the illegal migration problem' and 'very harmful, serious and organised criminality' (Dimitriadis 2023). As one senior law-enforcement official testified before the Home Affairs Committee: '...there is a huge amount of very harmful, serious organised criminality in the UK committed by Albanian criminal gangs. Whatever sort of criminality you can think of – the most serious sort – there are Albanian criminal gangs dominating in those markets, whether it is drug smuggling, human trafficking, guns or prostitution' (Home Affairs Committee 2022: 10).
3. Nicholson (2004: 878) also shows that early post-1990 labour migration was widely understood as a continuation of earlier patterns of seasonal and long-distance work mobility (including Ottoman-era traditions and pre-World War II migration) and was popularly named '*the new kurbet*'.
4. *Kanun* denotes Albanian customary law associated with honour and social ordering, while *besa* refers to keeping one's word and trust (Hajrizi 2011; Papailias 2003: 1064; Voell 2003: 89–92). While *besa* is widely invoked as an ethical idiom of trust, it is reported to be used more explicitly in northern Albania and less explicitly in the south, where it may operate more as an implicit behavioural expectation than a formally invoked concept (King and Mai 2008: 180).
5. The demographic profile of participants, mainly younger, educated men from northern Albania, broadly aligns with recent trends in Albanian migration identified by King and Gëdeshi (2020) and Balla (2023). However, the sample is biased towards males with at least a secondary education.
6. This research is part of the SOLROUTES project (Solidarities and Migrants' Routes Across Europe at Large), which has received ethics approval from the University of Genoa (*Comitato Etico per la Ricerca di Ateneo – CERA*). The ethnographic sub-project Node Albania: Beyond Irregular Pathways, Cultural Frameworks, Solidarity Networks, and Agency in Albanian Migration to the UK was subsequently approved by the SOLROUTES Scientific Committee for Ethnographic Research and Ethics (SCERE) on 24 September 2024. All participants have been pseudonymised to ensure confidentiality and full compliance with research ethics protocols.
7. One participant briefly alluded to the involvement of a family member in criminalised labour sectors ('weed's house'). We did not probe further, as documenting labour exploitation in

- criminalised economies requires specialised legal safeguards and trauma-informed protocols to avoid reinforcing stigmatising narratives that conflate Albanian ethnicity with illegality.
8. For detailed accounts of earlier waves of Albanian migration to the UK, including route trajectories, see King *et al.* (2006): 418–419.
 9. In December 2022, an Albanian migrant was among 34 survivors of a Channel-crossing disaster when a dinghy sank while *en route* to the UK. Although physically unharmed, he was left severely traumatised, illustrating the intense psychological and physical toll of such journeys (Top Channel 2022).
 10. Interviews indicate that Albanian migrants typically refer to these actors as intermediaries (*ndërmjetës*), a term that carries no inherently negative or derogatory connotations. By contrast, public discourse frequently labels them smugglers or traffickers (*kontrabandistë/trafikantë*), reframing their role through registers of exploitation rather than solidarity.
 11. Recent research confirms a market price differential for underground crossings: small-boat journeys cost between £2500 and £4000 (or €3000–€4700) per person, while truck crossings for Albanian migrants have surged to £20000–£25000 (€23600–€29500). For other nationalities, the highest reported truck price travel was £17000 (€20000). This economic disparity helps to explain the dramatic rise in small-boat crossings, particularly among Albanians, who constituted the largest proportion of Channel crossings in 2022 (see also GI-TOC 2024).

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ORCID ID

Dorian Jano  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2896-5571>

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