

Albania 2015

Time-pass: Coffee Culture amongst young unemployed Albanians

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Department: Geography

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With second year exams completed, the summer of 2015 was fast approaching. Before I knew it, I was sipping on my caramel latte at Gatwick airport, waiting for my gate to be announced. Grateful to have been successful in my application for a Queen Mary Expedition Fund, I was to travel to Albania in order to further explore the field where my dissertation is based on.

Each of us is something or someone in life and we have the opportunity to choose who we want to be for ourselves. Finding a job is just the starting point of a long journey. In recent years, young men and women have faced increasing uncertainty in their search for a decent job. According to data from the Albanian institute of statistics, youth unemployment rate for 15-29 year olds was 33.9% (INSTAT, 2014). But what is most shocking about these statistics is that the largest number of youth is found outside the labor market and labeled with the status "discouraged". Despite their western aspirations, employment prospects for young people in Albania remain bleak. Young people are increasingly adapting ideals about 'dream jobs' to the uncertain realities of the labour market. Dreams of becoming lawyers, doctors, or astronauts are being replaced by the reality of high youth unemployment.

It is not difficult to find a young person in Albania who passes the time due to unemployment. In the absence of activities, the majority of young people in Albania spend their days in bars and café's. In walking the streets of Tirana at all hours, it is apparent that the many bars and café's are booming with business. There is an evident café' culture endemic to Albania, whereby café's and bars have become meeting points or spaces of timepass.

The Republic of Albania has faced many challenges throughout its turbulent journey of transition towards an open-market economy after the fall of communism in 1990. Perhaps this is why Albanian people appreciate and enjoy life by socializing. Or perhaps, the coffee culture is simply a repercussion of the lack of employment opportunities available. Regardless, going into coffee shops has somewhat become a ritual for many Albanians. You would not know of the hardships faced by the country by observing the packed out café's and bars. Despite being one of Europe's most impoverished countries characterised by low average income and high unemployment, young men and women seem to have adopted a life of leisure consuming macchiato's in chic bars. They dream of wealth and fetishize American living. Thus perhaps the pleasure of a 30p macchiato compensates somewhat for the restricted dreams.

In interviewing and talking to people, there is no denying that poverty and unemployment are widespread. Talks of frustration towards a wasted generation and a failing state are heard amongst the city hubbub. In striving for economic growth, it is imperative that governments are sensitive to unemployment as it indicates under-utilized human capital. The financial and social costs of unemployment such as poverty, poor health, crime and social exclusion are extremely problematic in Albania. What is more, labour market crisis experienced in Albania have often spilled over into neighbouring countries such as Greece and Italy.

Efforts to reduce unemployment have been widely debated amongst policy makers. The Albanian Ministry of Social Welfare and Youth rank unemployment as the number one problem as expressed by Albanians. With a motto of 'higher skills and better work for all women and men', the National Strategy of Employment and Professional Skills (2014-2020) intends to facilitate job searching for job seekers and ease the process of hiring employees for employers. However many young people feel that not enough is being done. Young graduates express that they are educated, yet unemployed. They express frustration at a lack of meritocracy and transparency. The phenomenon of grade bribery and buying diplomas has eroded meritocracy as those who have the finances secure both exceptional grades and stable employment. Power and knowing the right people at the right time is of paramount importance in the hunt for a job. In order to have a chance in the labour market, social networks and building relationships with influential or powerful people is a necessity. This form of corruption in Albania means that hiring practices are based on connections and money rather than potential and skills. What is more, services offered by the National Employment Service in Albania are regarded as useless. In the words of one interviewee: 'you register as unemployed only to be told that there are no vacancies that match your requirements'. This illustrates that there is a lack of trust and a pessimism towards services aimed towards integrating people into the labour market.

In unison the people I encountered throughout my visit in Albania, strongly emphasised the role of social networks. For both workers and employers, social networks and personal contacts are of paramount importance. In their search for employment opportunities, job-seekers use their social networks extensively. In trusting information provided by role models in their social network, people's aspirations and access to training and employment opportunities are shaped. More than half of young people in Albania turn to family and friends in order to find work. Young people timepass until an opportunity for employment arises. Erald, a law graduate aged 26, highlighted that he found his job as a trainee solicitor through conversating with an old friend. This social networking according to my observations, mainly took place over a macchiato in café's. Therefore, in contrast to the west where economic efficiency is prioritised, in Albania, socialising is central. Perhaps getting a coffee with an acquaintance is driven by an intention to market yourself. Perhaps coffee is more powerful than initially perceived.

To conclude, I would like to express my gratitude for the Queen Mary Expedition Fund for allowing me to gain sufficient knowledge with regards to youth unemployment. My visit to Albania has proven to be invaluable providing me with primary data which I gathered through my interviews with locals and secondary data from policy documents, statistics provided by INSTAT, local institutions such as regional councils and Education Directories and job centres will be useful in identifying the scale of youth unemployment and thus will be utilized as instruments throughout the study. I am really glad with the outcome of my research and am now currently writing up my dissertation.