

Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki, Greece: processes of economic and social incorporation

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***Abstract** This paper addresses the complex issue of Albanian migrants' economic and social incorporation in a Greek city, Thessaloniki. The empirical base of the research is 30 in-depth interviews with Albanian migrants. Migrants' integration is seen in a dynamic perspective, which examines different contexts of incorporation: the policy framework, the labour market context, the socio-spatial environment, and the role of social networks. Exclusion and integration of migrants in the host country are seen as dynamic processes, which may be contradictory but operate in parallel. Incorporation thus becomes the process through which immigrants, despite structural and institutional obstacles, build their lives in the host society; it is strongly conditioned by time and it may also take place-specific characteristics.*

KEYWORDS: ALBANIAN IMMIGRANTS; THESSALONIKI; SOCIAL EXCLUSION; INTEGRATION; LABOUR MARKET

Aims, methodology and analytical framework

The second largest city of Greece, Thessaloniki has thus far attracted little academic interest regarding its recent experience of immigration, with two notable exceptions (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001; Pavlou 2001). This paper is an attempt to cover the gap in the existing literature. It aims to contribute to knowledge about both the dynamics of Albanian migration and the urban dimension within the 'Southern European immigration model' (King 2000).

Immigrants today are considered to be a social group living in particularly vulnerable conditions, threatened by, or facing exclusion from, the dominant institutions in host societies. This general 'rule' is well reflected in Southern Europe (Anthias and Lazaridis 1999; King 2000) and particularly in the Greek case (see Iosifides and King 1998; Lazaridis 1999; Lazaridis and Psimmenos 2000; Psimmenos 1998). However, the extent of immigrants' incorporation within the host society's structures is not simply a linear function of 'cultural adjustment' or 'labour market integration'; it is a much more complex issue and takes place at different levels which are in constant and dynamic interaction with each other. Furthermore, it depends on the characteristics of the particular place where immigrants settle and organise their lives. The objective of this paper is to analyse various processes and mechanisms of social incorporation and social exclusion of a particular migrant group in a specific locality: Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki. In that sense, this study is not about the extent to which Albanian immigrants are 'excluded' or 'integrated', but rather about the processes of exclusion and incorporation and the ways in which migrants organise

their lives in a specific local social formation. The discussion unfolds through a dialectic analysis of incorporation, which is studied in opposition to its contradictory force, social exclusion. The basic research questions underlying the study are built upon the following dipole:

- What are the obstacles posed by structural and institutional factors to the social incorporation of Albanian migrants in Greece and Thessaloniki?
- How and to what extent do immigrants overcome such obstacles, and how do they manage to organise their lives (in terms of work, residence, interpersonal relationships, etc.) in the host country and in the specific locality where they are found?

Material for this study derives from an extensive period of fieldwork research conducted in Thessaloniki between September 2001 and July 2002. The basic source used is a sample of 30 in-depth interviews with immigrants from Albania; these interviews were taken during December 2001–July 2002. The topics covered in the interviews included arrival in Greece, labour market experiences, housing, legal status and access to welfare services, social life, identity issues, racism and unfair treatment. The sample was selected with the use of the snowballing method. It is therefore a non-representative sample and, given its size, any quantitative generalisation is impossible. However, ethnographic analysis of this kind, including participant observation over a longer period, can reveal interesting qualitative elements which apply to the whole Albanian community, especially when compared to what is known from the existing literature. As King *et al.* (1998: 159) put it, the ‘real experts on migration’ are the migrants themselves and qualitative analysis of interviews may help us to ‘capture the full richness of the human experience of migration’. By analysing the migrants’ own experiences and perceptions on the basis of the structural and institutional context of the locality where they live we can conceptualise their ‘lifeworld’; that is, the dynamic process through which individual migrants and households ‘build’ their lives in the destination place (see Lazaridis and Psimmenos 2000: 170–1). The empirical findings of my interview sample can be discussed in comparison with other relevant studies about Albanian immigrants in Greece. For Thessaloniki, the main comparison is with a large survey conducted during 2000 which contains information about 500 Albanian households, in total some 1,297 individuals, published in Labrianidis *et al.* (2001).¹

All interviews took place between the interviewees and the author. Most were with individuals, but six were with couples or with other family members present. All interviews were tape-recorded, and then transcribed and translated into English. I should acknowledge potential problems associated with this strategy, such as the issue of my own positionality (as a member of the ‘host society’), the language of the interview (Greek), and the possibility that my interlocutors might have given somewhat more ‘diplomatic’ answers to some of my questions than they would have given, say, to an Albanian researcher. I return to this issue briefly in the conclusion.

Of the interview sample of 30 migrants from Albania living and working in Thessaloniki, half were men and half women. Seven were in the age group 20 to 29 years, 15 between 30 to 39 and eight between 40 to 49. Twenty of them were married, and 18 had children. Eleven of them were of ethnic Greek origin, including Vlachs. Eight were Orthodox, five Catholic and six Muslim (one atheist), although about half mentioned that they were not religious, or that they

'believe in God, not in the Church'. A large share (11) came or originated from Korçë and another six persons were from Tirana. The majority arrived during the first half of the previous decade (13 before 1992 and nine between 1993–96), while only two came after 2000. Regarding the reasons for emigration, 17 said that economic factors drove them to leave the country, and another four mentioned instability and the political situation in Albania. Eight had relatives and friends in Greece before they came and five mentioned their Greek origins as one of the factors that shaped their decision.

The above features of the interview sample reflect the considerable heterogeneity of the Albanian population in Greece and Thessaloniki. Despite commonly shared characteristics, there are differences relating to the place of origin (urban-rural, North-South), to ethno-cultural background (ethnic Greeks or Vlachs versus Albanians) or to religious identity (Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic), but also to gender and class divisions or educational qualifications. These differences are certainly connected to the pre-migration context but crucially determine migrants' lives in the host country and, after all, suggest that by no means can Albanian immigrants in Greece be conceived as a distinct and homogeneous social group. For the purposes of this study, however, they are in a sense treated as such in full awareness: the aim is to examine the processes of incorporation/exclusion and hence the heterogeneity of the target population can help us to understand the common patterns and the general mechanisms through which these processes operate.

The analytical framework used draws on the theoretical insights and explanatory patterns of the 'modes of incorporation' (governmental policy, civil society/public opinion, ethnic community/social networks) or 'modes of integration' (market exchange/economic restructuring, redistribution/welfare, reciprocity/social networks) proposed by Portes (1995) and by Musterd *et al.* (2000) respectively. To these, I add the spatial 'face' of social exclusion/incorporation (Musterd *et al.* 2000).² Based on the above, I examine the parallel but opposing processes of social incorporation and social exclusion at four different, though interconnected, levels:

- Legal-political: I focus on the effects of the policy framework regarding both legal status and basic welfare services on the incorporation of Albanian immigrants.
- Socio-economic: I analyse immigrants' economic integration in relation to the productive and employment structure of Thessaloniki.
- Socio-spatial: I discuss the housing conditions of the immigrants, their residential distribution in the city and their experiences of discrimination in relation to the specific socio-spatial features of Thessaloniki.
- Finally, I examine the operation of formal and informal social networks and the extent to which they influence immigrants' lives in the city.

In each of the following four sections of the paper, the first part of the heading consists of a typical quote taken from my interviews.

'We didn't have any papers and it was very difficult ...' The legal-political context of immigrants' incorporation

The political context in the host country is regarded as the most influential factor regarding the social incorporation of immigrants. By this I do not refer only to

immigration policy, which obviously determines the legal framework regarding conditions of entry, residence and employment, and defines measures (if any) for the integration of immigrants in the institutions of the host society. This latter issue reveals another aspect of policy which is very important – welfare. The extension of welfare regimes to include immigrants is probably one of the most controversial problems that challenge destination countries (see Ribas-Mateos 2001). At a time of increasing migratory pressures on the one hand, and of a deepening crisis of the welfare state on the other, governments are faced with escalating xenophobic reactions and with an already present migrant population living in a socially vulnerable position.

It is not the aim of this section to examine Greek immigration policy. Much has already been written on this (see, for instance, Baldwin-Edwards and Fakiolas 1998; Triandafyllidou 2000). What is important here is to analyse the effects of immigration policy on the incorporation process of Albanians in Greece. This requires a special reference to their subjective understanding of their legal status and to how this status influences their lives. Before discussing the material from the interviews, though, it is necessary to outline briefly the main features of government policy towards immigrants.

The massive influx of immigrants, especially from Albania, at the dawn of the 1990s found the Greek government totally unprepared, since the existing legal framework at the time dated from 1929 (Law 4310). The New Democracy (conservative) government replaced the old legal framework in order to deal with the new situation (Law no. 1975 of 1991). This law determined all matters relating to the entry, work and residence of immigrants in Greece throughout most of the decade. It was characterised by a strict ‘police’ logic, which left the majority of immigrants under clandestine status and therefore partly contributed to their stigmatisation (Karydis 1996). An early measure enacted by the PASOK (centre-left) government was a bilateral agreement signed with Albania, regulating the ‘invitation’ of Albanian workers on a (temporary) seasonal contract basis (Law 2482/1997). This first step was followed by the first regularisation programme, which started in 1998. In total, 376,641 immigrants applied for this, of whom 241,561, nearly two-thirds, were from Albania. The main criticism that the programme evoked has to do with the separation of the process in two stages, which complicated the process and deterred many from applying (Baldwin-Edwards and Fakiolas 1998). In the meantime, measures regarding the legal status of ethnic Greek Albanians had been undertaken: anyone who could legally prove his/her Greek origin could now get the ‘Special Identity Card for Ethnic Greeks’. Recently, a new Immigration Bill has been passed (Law 2910/2001), which offers a second opportunity to clandestine immigrants. This second regularisation, too, has been problematic, and data have been slow to emerge on its full outcome (for some interim results see Fakiolas 2003).

According to Baldwin-Edwards and Fakiolas (1998), Greek immigration policy in general operates on a triangular basis, as three basic factors shape decision-making: an institutional-bureaucratic one, characterised by traditional structures and xenophobic attitudes; a modernising/technocratic one, which sees immigration as a fact and starts to rethink Greek citizenship; and the factor of external relations with the Balkan countries on the one hand, and with the European Union on the other. Furthermore, the political discourse on immigration reflects the exclusionary construction of the Greek national identity, which defines the

concept of 'Greekness' mostly on the basis of religious, linguistic and genealogical criteria, rather than on civic ones (Triandafyllidou 2000).

Among the 30 interviewees, 17 entered the country legally, most with a tourist visa and two using forged documents. The rest came illegally, crossing the mountains on foot together with other people, in some cases with the assistance of guides or traffickers. Only one had a clandestine status at the time of the interview. Fourteen of them possessed a Green Card and another six had the so-called 'Green Card Certificate', a temporary document issued pending the issue of the normal Green Card. Eight were owners of the 'Special Identity Card Certificate', the stay permit for ethnic Greeks, while only two had managed to acquire Greek citizenship and have an ID card (one of them after her marriage to a Greek). Even some of those who entered the country legally with a visa extended their stay 'illegally'. Hence, the majority remained under clandestine status, some for about a decade. Ethnic Greeks had differential, more beneficial treatment from the beginning, although not as institutionalised as it currently is.

In general, most of the interviewees experienced the controversies of the fragmented and reactionary governmental policy. On the other hand, they had also to confront the particular malfunctions and the high level of bureaucracy characterising the Greek public sector (on this see Psimmenos and Kasimati 2003). The process of regularisation itself was marked by several problems. The ones mentioned most frequently by the interviewees were:

- The financial costs of legalisation: each applicant, including children, had to pay a fee of 50,000 drachma (150 Euros).
- Several documents required for the application procedure (birth certificates, etc.) had to be issued by the Albanian authorities, forcing immigrants to travel back to their country and complicating the whole process.
- Unregistered employment, which still is the case for the majority of immigrants, forced many to buy the social security stamps required, since they could not get them by any other means, increasing further the total cost of legalisation.
- Delays in issuing the Green Cards led to abnormal situations. For instance, a card valid for a year could be delayed more than six months. A solution adopted during the last regularisation programme (June 2001) was to issue a Green Card Certificate, an official document that immigrants could use until the acquisition of the Green Card. However, owners of this document are not allowed to travel abroad and return to Greece.

Regarding access to welfare services, more precisely access to health and education facilities, most interviewees did not face serious problems. Access to public health, in particular, depends on one's eligibility for the social insurance system, something which is not the case for the majority of immigrants. Twenty of the interviewees had social security at the time of the interview, a percentage which may not be representative of the overall situation of Albanians' employment in Greece. However, more than two-thirds of the interview sample got social security recently, either in order to be regularised, or immediately after regularisation. In one case, the husband of an interviewee, who used to be an agricultural worker in the past, continued to be registered in the Farmers' and Agricultural Workers' Social Security Fund (OGA), after having moved to the city and taken up non-agricultural work. Given the widespread phenomenon of many immigrants actually buying the social security stamps that are necessary

for their regularisation, we can assume that the above example reflects a strategy developed by some in order to get access to health and other welfare services. Another common strategy is to rely upon one member of the family who does have social security and can cover the other household members' access to health services. Survey data uncovered that 57 per cent of the Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki have social security, but it is 'partial', which means that it covers only public health insurance (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001: 231). Although this percentage is not that high, it does challenge what is generally believed about the widespread unregistered employment of most immigrants in Greece.

Obviously, having an illegal status and lacking social security and health insurance has excluded many immigrants from the free services that public hospitals offer. In many cases they had to pay what a Greek citizen can have for free. However, there are many examples of informal help from the personnel in Greek hospitals, and there is also the option of using the emergency hospitals. Most problems reported were about malfunctions of the Greek system of public health, problems of bureaucracy and isolated events of discriminatory attitudes of some Greek employees. Lack of relevant information (or of access to information) was found to be an additional factor contributing to the limited use of certain benefits and rights regular immigrants are entitled to.

On the other hand, only a few obstacles were posed to the schooling of Albanian children, and these were mostly related to the bureaucratic procedures of registration (notably the issue of birth certificates from the Albanian authorities). In 2000, there were 59,059 Albanian pupils registered in nursery and primary schools and in secondary education in Greece, while 4,483 immigrant children of all nationalities were studying in the high schools of the Thessaloniki prefecture (*To Vima* newspaper, 5 November 2000).

Probably the most outstanding feature of the repressive 'non-policy' of the Greek state regarding immigrants' incorporation has been the issue of illegality. Living under clandestine status involves much more than working informally: irregular migrants are trapped in a social space limited to the narrow trajectory 'from home to work', as the interview analysis reveals. They live in fear, above all of being arrested by the police, which has become for many a synonym of trouble, as these two brief interview extracts reveal:

From 1992 to 1998 we were hiding ... maybe I was lucky ... I was never stopped by the police.

Without papers you are afraid ... even in the street, we couldn't walk, we were hiding in order not to be caught by the police.

Deportations have been, and still are, frequent, and the so-called '*skoopas*' or 'broom' operations (during which illegal immigrants are 'swept up' by the police, imprisoned for a period and then deported) form part of the police logic that characterises the legal framework. Ten of the interviewees, all men except one, had been arrested or stopped at least once by the police; some had also been deported to Albania and had returned back to Greece. It seems that women were not in such a vulnerable condition in respect to an illegal status. In the words of Dalina, 'For us women I don't think it was that hard, but for men, in general, it was difficult'. But there are exceptions, like the case of Maria. She has been arrested and deported three times, each time returning clandestinely to Greece. On the last occasion she travelled alone to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and crossed the border from there.

Repressive police behaviour has targeted regular migrants too. Their treatment depended largely on the personal attitude of individual policemen. Gjion told me that his wife had been stopped once on her way home: after checking her stay permit, the policeman threatened to tear it up. Cases of police brutality are not uncommon; reports of such events appear quite often in the daily press. There are cases of people arrested even when they had their documents with them, something that would cost them at least a day's work. According to Dimitri's experience,

They arrested me once, I had a copy of my [Green] Card, stamped by the police, and they didn't believe that it was legal, they arrested me ... they kept me ... until the afternoon and then they let me go.

In short, Greek immigration policy over the past decade has been radically exclusionary. To an extent, the police-logic of governmental policy has contributed to the stigmatisation of Albanians by the criminalisation of their illegal status; instead of giving them an opportunity to apply for regularisation, the stereotype of the 'Albanian criminal' has been built up (Karydis 1996). However, the negative effects of this stance are beginning to diminish as, after two regularisation programmes and a forthcoming third one, more and more immigrants are managing to get a permit to stay.

'I am not afraid of hard work ...' Albanian trajectories in the labour market

Regarding the socio-economic context within which the processes of incorporation and exclusion of immigrants take place, a key role is played by the extent and the form of their labour market integration. Other indicators of the immigrants' socio-economic situation in the host country, such as their living conditions and consumption capacities, are clearly functions of their position in the labour market and, consequently, of their income as waged employees or entrepreneurs. In addition, their social identity reflects to an extent their labour market experiences. Exclusion from the labour market and lack of access to formal registered employment constitute serious obstacles to immigrants' incorporation and are connected to a tendency towards their marginalisation. In that sense, the employment of immigrants depends on the characteristics of the labour market and on the productive structure of the specific localities in which they live and work. Therefore, the discussion in this section follows Albanian migrants' experiences in the labour market of the city of Thessaloniki as an example of a specific local labour market, based on the definition of this concept by Sassen (1995) and Vaiou and Hadjimichalis (1997). According to them, local labour markets are historically and geographically shaped, but they operate within national patterns of regulation of economic activity and nowadays are increasingly subject to global forces of economic restructuring.

There is a considerable amount of literature which theorises and summarises the vulnerable and precarious character of the employment of the majority of immigrants in Southern Europe (Anthias and Lazaridis 1999; King 2000; King and Rybaczuk 1993). In the case of Greece, there are empirical studies which confirm the above rule and outline the particular characteristics that immigrant employment takes in this south-eastern corner of the EU (Droukas 1998; Fakiolas 2000; Iosifides and King 1998; Lazaridis 1999; Psimmenos 1998). The aim of this

section is not to repeat what is already known, but to present and analyse the particular forms that the integration of Albanian immigrants takes in the labour market of Thessaloniki, also bearing in mind the rapidly-evolving nature of Albanian migration to Greece and the fact that my own fieldwork is more recent than that of the authors cited above.

Let me start with the sectors of employment of Albanian immigrants and the types of task they perform in Thessaloniki. Among the 30 interviewees, plus another ten members of their households from whom I also collected information, six men were employed in the construction sector, while six women were cleaners, most of them as domestic servants. Six persons were working in manufacture, among whom were two women employed in clothing factories and two men in metal-processing factories. Three women were looking after children and old people. Four men were self-employed, either on a part-time (together with their regular job) or full-time basis. Among those, three were undertaking small contracts at construction sites, on a freelance basis and together with relatives (repair works, tiling, painting, roofing, etc.). Two men, both of ethnic-Greek origin, were highly educated businessmen, one of whom runs a consultancy and trade company in both Albania and Greece. One woman of ethnic-Greek origin (graduate of a Greek University) held a highly paid position as an economist in a financial company. Finally ten persons had unstable/occasional employment, either because of the high seasonality of their work or due to their inability to find regular employment.

The employment characteristics of the interview sample can be considered broadly representative of the general picture of Albanians' employment in Thessaloniki. According to survey data from Labrianidis *et al.* (2001), the principal occupations of men are as follows: builders and painters in construction (30.3 per cent of the men), workers in manufactures (24.2 per cent), assistant technicians (9 per cent) and workers in transport companies (6.5 per cent), while 18.9 per cent had unstable employment. Regarding women, 27.1 per cent were employed as domestic servants, 16.5 per cent as workers in small manufactures (mainly in the garments sector), 9.7 per cent as cleaners for specialised companies, while 5.1 per cent were unemployed and a significant percentage (28 per cent) were housewives. The same survey presents evidence on the employment of the overwhelming majority of Albanian migrants in small and medium-scale enterprises (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001: 234–5, 245). This is also confirmed by my interview data. Twelve persons were employed in small enterprises: two workshops, a kiosk, a small retail shop, a bakery, a confectioner's, a small supermarket, restaurants and take-aways, while four of them were involved in small translation businesses.

Regarding remuneration, the sample shows a high degree of heterogeneity, depending on the type of occupation and the position held, but also on the period a person was working for the same employer, the hours of work and, as many interviewees stated, their personal relationship with their boss and the latter's goodwill. The daily wage for a manual worker in (metal or wood processing) workshops and on construction sites (general manual tasks, building, cement-mixing, painting) varies from 23 to 32 Euros, while for a domestic servant/cleaner it lies between 10–30 Euros per day, depending on the hours of work and again the 'goodwill' of the employer. Care work (looking after children and old people) can start from 90 Euros per month for a part-time position and rise up to 380 Euros per month for a full-time one. Women in small

clothing firms get paid around 20 Euros for eight hours of work, while the monthly wage of a male worker in a medium-scale manufacturing concern varies from 645 to 705 Euros, depending on the employee's skills and the period of working for the same employer. In general, low payment was one of the problems commented on by the majority of the interviewees. A comparison with Greeks' wages is unavoidable; as Nadi said: 'There is a slight difference, there always is one, but it's not as big as it was in the beginning'. Working days for most of the interviewees are according to the usual Greek standards (five or six days per week), depending on the nature and the needs of each job, while the majority works eight hours per day and gets extra money for working overtime. The findings of Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 231–3) concur with the above: in general Albanians in Thessaloniki do not work more hours than the Greeks, and while they do get paid less, the rates are not very much below locals' wages.

Employment and income mobility is highly characteristic of Albanian immigrants' experience of the labour market of Thessaloniki. There are significant changes in the types of jobs and the remuneration of Albanians in the city over time. Obviously, regularisation may lead to better wages and social security. Most of the interviewees have experienced a gradual improvement of their position in the labour market and their wages have risen since their arrival. This does not mean that they overcome the obstacles posed by the legal framework and the labour market. Neither does it imply any idealising stereotype of 'the successful immigrant'. It rather reflects the fact that immigrants form a dynamic section of the labour force and also reflects the temporal nature of their labour market integration. Below I give two examples of the employment trajectories of Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki.

Ferin, aged 22 and single, came from Gramsh in 1993:

When I came, I couldn't communicate with people here ... I used to work in the fields, in gardens and such things. After that I worked with a foreman at construction sites. Then I left; for two and a half years now I work in a metal workshop. I've learned many jobs here ... in the beginning my wage was 3,500dr. [per day]. ... There was not 'eight hours', just the whole day. Now it's fine, I work eight hours, I'm getting paid 10,000dr. [about 30 Euros], plus the social security stamps.

Dalina, 32, married with one child, came from Tirana in 1990:

In the beginning I worked in a small firm producing plastic flowers ... during my first years here. Then we managed [with her husband] to get a licence for being street-vendors, they were issuing this kind of licence at the time, and we have worked, together with my husband, as street-vendors at open markets, feasts, such things.

Now she works as a secretary in a translation business.

In general, acts of discrimination against Albanian immigrants in the labour market seem to concern mostly the questions of payment and hours of work. Employers seem to profit from the migrants' cheap labour and their need to work for many hours to make ends meet, although most individual's work experiences improve with time. There are many examples, however, of unpaid work, like the case of Mimoza's husband, who was not getting paid for his work because he had developed 'a personal relationship' with his boss, who had 'financial problems'. There are also cases of 'semi-slavery' conditions when, for instance, the employer does not pay the employee, whilst threatening to inform the police about his or her clandestine status. As Emil told me, 'There are people who work on construction sites or in the fields and they don't get paid'. On the

other hand, there are few reported cases of rejection of Albanian immigrants from jobs, especially for unskilled or low-skilled job-seekers where competition from local Greeks is weak. The situation changes for immigrants who look for skilled jobs in sectors of strong competition among Greeks. Edri, a medical school graduate in Albania, abandoned her job as a nurse in Greece and became a hairdresser following a spell of training in a private professional school in Thessaloniki. She told me: 'There is too much supply [of nurses] and I know that I am the last one to be taken on because I am a foreigner'.

Generally speaking, the picture in Thessaloniki is fairly typical of the situation regarding Albanians' employment in urban labour markets in Greece. In cities, apart from construction and domestic services, immigrants are also employed in small enterprises in the tertiary sector (commerce, transportation, hotels and restaurants) and in small- and medium-scale manufacturing. Iosifides and King (1998) found that most Albanians in Athens usually worked in the informal sector, as cleaners/decorators (in houses, buildings or offices), as painters and builders on construction sites (private house-building, repair works, large public engineering projects) and as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in various types of small firms (manufactures, removal firms, hotels, restaurants and take-aways). Most of these jobs are certainly low-status ones, they require few or no qualifications, and they are 'dirty', difficult and heavy manual occupations which the local population rejects. Some of these jobs embody an evident 'servile' character, especially those performed by women (see also Psimmenos 1998). All the above characteristics are reflected in my interviewees' experiences. What is rather exceptional in the case of my survey is that a high percentage – around two-thirds – of the interviewees actually had social security at the time of the interview. However, this had happened only recently and was closely connected to their legal status, as we saw in the previous section.

But why do locals reject positions requiring minimum skills at a time of a serious growth of unemployment? A large percentage of unemployment in Greece concerns young and qualified people. Low fertility rates and population ageing are responsible for significant decreases in the growth rate of the total labour force. Increased living standards and widespread participation in academic/professional education have created high employment aspirations, leading many young people to late entrance in the labour market. Strong family ties support them until the time they find a job according to their skills. It is true that many Greek young people would perform low-status informal jobs, but on a part-time basis or only for a temporary period; therefore a greater part of such jobs remains open for immigrant labour. At the same time, Albanians in Thessaloniki are themselves relatively well educated and have more work skills than the local Greek population generally believe. The majority of the interviewees (18), apart from those who came to Greece immediately after finishing secondary school (or who abandoned it), used to work in white-collar jobs in cities, and some were students or had advanced professional or university training.³ Below there are typical examples of this 'shift' of some of the interviewees from white-collar employment in Albania to low-status jobs in Thessaloniki:

- Spyros, 36, married, one child: primary school teacher and part-time journalist for newspapers and radio-stations in Sarandë; assistant in a bakery in Thessaloniki.

- Mimoza, 39, married, two children: office secretary in Tirana; occasionally casual worker cleaning houses and shops in Thessaloniki.
- Gijon, 35, married, two children: policeman in Mirditë; construction worker in Thessaloniki.
- Valbona, 30, married, one child: secondary school teacher in Burrel; worker in a clothing factory in Thessaloniki.

How can a skilled worker or a qualified person accept such low-status, unskilled and unattractive manual jobs? The answer is simple: the economic conditions in Albania and the personal and family needs generated by the transition to a market economy, push people to throw away – at least for a certain period – what can be characterised as acceptable standards of dignified employment. Hence, as emigrants they accept any job in order to survive or to support their family back in Albania; they sacrifice their present in the hope of gaining a future life in dignity. Work seems to have become an important value for Albanian immigrants, an indicator of virtue and dignity and a path to well-being. Especially for migrants who have Albanian university education, it is difficult to obtain official recognition of their degrees in Greece; hence they cannot use them in order to seek employment relevant to their qualifications. Therefore Albanian migration to Greece brings widespread de-skilling. As Dimitris told me:

I work as a construction worker since the beginning. It's a heavy job, as you know. It was difficult for me, because I had never performed any job of this kind, but I needed to work and I want to live in Greece ... that's why I don't mind working in any job.

The tendency of immigrants in Greece to be employed in jobs requiring minimum skills is the result of an increased demand for cheap and flexible unskilled and low-skilled labour. Fakiolas (2000: 60) explains this demand on the basis of two factors: on the one hand, the Greek productive structure relies mainly on 'small family firms and households which apply labour-intensive production methods, use low- and middle-level technology and utilise mostly indigenous resources'; on the other hand, the high incomes earned by the business community and highly skilled personnel 'generate a demand for hotel, catering, entertainment, domestic and other services'. Let me examine each of the above factors in the context of Thessaloniki.

Small- and medium-scale enterprises are of great importance for Thessaloniki's economy. The city is the second largest urban concentration in Greece and the most important productive centre in the North, accounting for 12.6 per cent of the total number of industries in Greece and 15.1 per cent of industrial employment (Vaiou and Hadjimichalis 1997: 85–6). A significant part of industrial activity in Thessaloniki remains unrecorded and is based on small enterprises, often family-owned, using labour-intensive practices (Cronaki *et al.* 1993). The rise in labour costs, increasing international competition and the inability of small enterprises to modernise interrupted the fragile dynamism of the 1980s and led to crisis (Chronaki *et al.* 1993; Vaiou and Hadjimichalis 1997). The early 1990s witnessed many enterprises shutting down and a rapid growth in unemployment rates, attaining 10 per cent in 1992 and 11.7 per cent in 1995 (of whom 47 per cent were young people between 20 and 29 years of age), according to the National Statistical Service of Greece.⁴ However, restructuring processes combined with the overall 'good' performance of the Greek economy during the second half of the 1990s (reaching EU threshold standards and entering the

monetary union) generated a new dynamism manifested in the local economy. As Giannakou and Kafkalas (1999) note, large companies using capital-intensive methods are being developed and the urban economy is characterised by further tertiarisation and informationalisation. In addition, the post-1989 events in Eastern Europe and the Balkans offered a great opportunity for small and medium firms to find their way out of the crisis. Reduction of labour costs is now possible through the employment of cheap labour, found either within the country, mostly among the large supply of newcomer immigrants, or outside, in the neighbouring Balkan countries, which currently attract significant proportions of direct investment from Greece (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001).

The increasing employment of immigrants in personal services in cities is indicative of segmented labour markets and of sharpening socio-economic polarisation (Sassen 1996). Psimmenos (1998) underlines the increasing importance of private/personal services regarding the employment of Albanians in Athens: on the one hand, many women work in personal 'pleasure' services (sex workers, entertainers, etc.); on the other, growing personal consumption creates a demand for immigrant labour (domestic cleaners/servants, manual workers performing house repairing tasks, shop assistants, etc.). In Thessaloniki, the basic changes in consumption attitudes are characterised by two major trends: the persistence of mass demand for 'fordist-type' products and services, and the shift towards more individualised forms of demand (Giannakou and Kafkalas 1999). This second trend is partly the result of the increased incomes of the middle and upper classes, and to a large extent it is covered by immigrant labour offering personal services to individuals and households.

It is important to stress the significant differentiation of immigrant female labour connected to the above conditions. On the one hand, small manufacturing firms are of particular importance for the economy of Thessaloniki, operating within a dense network of subcontracting arrangements (Chronaki *et al.* 1993). They are a typical sector of female employment and they are characterised by low technology and labour-intensive practices, favouring the employment of Albanian women. On the other hand, factors such as increased income levels, continuous enlargement of the private housing space, ongoing ageing of the population, rising participation of Greek women in the labour market and in tertiary education, plus the inadequate number of state nurseries and of care for the elderly, have contributed to a rapid rise in demand for domestic services and nursing (Fakiolas and Maratou-Alipranti 2000). Together with the above there are also socio-cultural factors, such as the still low participation of men in housework and the perception of the local middle classes that employing a foreign maid is some kind of prestige symbol. Finally, little is known about immigrant women working in the sex industry of Thessaloniki; what is sure is that many women have been victims of involuntary trafficking and work under highly exploitative conditions (see Emke-Poulopoulos 2001). Although this sector is not that significant in terms of numbers and size, it remains important, however, regarding moral and political considerations.

In general, Albanians in Greece are believed to be a migrant group facing conditions of poverty and social exclusion (Lazaridis 1999; Lazaridis and Psimmenos 2000). In Athens, the two studies of Iosifides and King (1998) and of Psimmenos (1998) analyse the particular expressions of labour market exclusion of Albanian immigrants who appear to be 'trapped' within the informal labour market, destined to perform badly paid, low-prestige, unstable jobs and to have

no social security. Both studies were based on empirical research conducted in Athens in a quite early stage of Albanian migration to Greece (mid-1990s). My empirical findings from Thessaloniki question and refine this dominant perception about Albanians' integration in the labour market. I find no evidence of absolute exclusion from the labour market in general (that is, unemployment). Exclusion from the formal labour market is more common, along with limited access to 'dignified' jobs and considerable exploitation in terms of wage, working hours and social security. However, there is a tendency towards accessing better jobs, more stable employment, higher wages and social security. This has obviously to do with the ability of many to become regularised, but it is also a function of time and place. As years pass and the migrants settle in a specific locality within the host country, Thessaloniki in this case, they gradually gain access to more stable and better-paid employment. This hypothesis does not imply of course that immigrants enjoy increased living standards or that they are not threatened by exclusion: social exclusion is a process, not a stable situation, and it has many more faces than the socio-economic/labour market one. One of these is housing.

'When we say we're Albanians they shut the door ...' Immigrants' residential trajectories and socio-spatial incorporation

Although, at a statistical level, migration is reduced to placeless flows of people, at a micro-level and in respect to each individual migrant's personal experiences, the migration phenomenon takes place-specific characteristics (King 1995: 27). The place of residence affects living and working experiences of immigrants in the host country and plays a crucial role in the process of their social incorporation, for two basic reasons. On the one hand, it reflects broad socio-spatial mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination, as well as changes in the use and the public image of urban social space. On the other, it takes a particular meaning in the context of each individual's own experiences, as migrants live, work and socialise within a specific local environment, where they 'build' a new home. In this section, I examine the socio-spatial aspect of Albanian immigrants' incorporation in Thessaloniki. More precisely, I focus on their spatial distribution throughout the city, the types of their accommodation and their experiences of discrimination in the housing market.

Regarding the spatial distribution of the interviewees within Greater Thessaloniki, 13 were living in the western part of the city, another 13 in central Thessaloniki and four in the eastern part. Similar are the survey findings of Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 206–7): 47 per cent of the Albanian households surveyed lived in the central part of the city, 39 per cent in western Thessaloniki and 14 per cent in eastern Thessaloniki. The social map of the city is generally considered to be divided between the prosperous, more expensive and better-conserved areas of the eastern side and the downgraded, poorer and cheaper areas of the western part, with a socially mixed centre in between. However, social divisions in Thessaloniki are not as sharp as in other urban concentrations, due to the existence of a wide middle class which is geographically dispersed all over the city. There exist downgraded neighbourhoods within the centre (e.g. Kassandrou Street) and eastern Thessaloniki (Foinikas and the neighbourhoods above the seafront); while there are also upgraded areas in the west (parts of Stavroupoli and Oraiokastro). Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 208) describe this as a 'new social

geography of the city', where Albanian immigrants settle and get mixed, in terms of residence, with the local population. The fact that in many cases the workplace is the place of residence (as for many domestic servants who live in the homes of their bosses) offers an additional explanation of the phenomenon. No ghetto-like situations, that is, concentrations of large numbers of Albanians in specific downgraded neighbourhoods and gradual displacement of locals, have been observed so far. Very similar are the findings of Iosifides and King (1998) in Athens, where again immigrants are generally dispersed all over the city, obviously with a higher concentration in poorer areas but without being excluded from the richer ones.

Going back to the interview sample, among the basic reasons for choosing a particular accommodation, the majority mentioned rent and size of the property. On the other hand, the more frequent problems are related to bad quality of the apartments. The price for paying a rent as low as 120 Euros per month is to live in a small, old, damp apartment in the basement or on the ground floor and without central heating. Melina moved from Albania to Thessaloniki in 1999. She lives in a basement in the northern part of the town centre together with her husband and their three children. Apart from bathroom and kitchen, there are only a living room and a bedroom. In our discussion about her current accommodation, she told me: 'I am not satisfied, the apartment is very small, but moving somewhere else would cost too much money'. Even bad-quality housing can be expensive. As Kaiti said: 'They ask extraordinary prices. I called up for an apartment and the rent mentioned was 100,000 drachmas. No furniture, no telephone, no central heating'. This is a distinctive feature of the housing market of Thessaloniki, where the majority of buildings in the central part of the city were built before 1970 (see Velentzas *et al.* 1996: 121, Table 6.1). Taking into account that Thessaloniki also houses a large number of students who, like many immigrants, seek temporary accommodation, it seems that many landlords increase the rents without repairing their properties until a temporary tenant (a student or an immigrant) will do so. The experience of Maria reflects this practice:

I have many complaints about that. ... All the landlords I've met owned 'rotten' places. I had to paint them myself... the kitchens and everything. ... I repaired all those places ... but the landlords, after I had repaired the properties, they were telling me to leave.

Most of the interviewees live with their families (usually in households of 3–5 people), while six of them are sharing an apartment with friends and relatives and only one lives on his own. Survey data from Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 199) confirm more or less my findings: 82 per cent of the respondents lived with their family, 11 per cent with friends and relatives and only 7 per cent lived alone. According to the same source, Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki live in groups of three (32 per cent) or four (29 per cent) persons per property, while almost half (49 per cent) live in properties with only two rooms (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001: 201). The above figures show that housing conditions of immigrants in Thessaloniki, although not too unsatisfactory, are certainly inferior to those of the indigenous population. What was observed in Athens in research of the mid-1990s (Psimmenos 1998), that is, concentrations of large numbers of Albanian immigrants in old hotels and apartments in downgraded parts of the centre, where they were sharing accommodation together with many others,

does not seem to be the case for Thessaloniki. The time factor mentioned earlier applies also to the case of immigrants' accommodation. As the length of stay in the city is extended, the quality of housing improves. The number of persons living in the same apartment decreases, while immigrant households seem to follow a vertically upward residential route, as they move from basements to the upper floors (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001: 202–3). Residential trajectories depend also on family unification (when the rest of the family comes from Albania), on the birth of children, and on increases in the household income. Here are three examples:

- Nadi, 37, came from Tirana in 1992. Initially he stayed at the apartment of a friend as a guest. Then, for three years, accommodation was provided by his employer in the factory he used to work in (located in the industrial complex of Thessaloniki). After that, he rented a flat and lived alone until he got married. Now he lives in a rented apartment in Neapoli (western Thessaloniki) together with his wife, son and sister.
- Andreas, 49, arrived from Korçë in 1991. Initially he lived in the countryside, in a house in the fields that his employer lent to him. He shared this cottage with his own family and the families of his brother and sister. Then he moved to Thessaloniki, where he lived in five different flats in the central and western districts of town. Now he rents a flat in Stavroupoli (western Thessaloniki) where he lives with his wife and daughter.
- Konstantina, 30, came from Sarandë in 1992. As a student, initially, she spent some time in university accommodation. She changed accommodation four times before moving to the place she lives in now, which is bought by her husband's family, together with her husband, her daughter and her mother-in-law.

One of the most important features of Albanians' housing experiences in Greece is the discrimination they face in accessing the housing market. Some landlords refuse to rent their property to a foreigner, especially to Albanians. Almost all the interviewees agreed on this point. Two characteristic examples of this practice are the following:

They do not want to rent the apartment to you. When they hear that your Greek is not good they tell you to go away. If you tell them that you are an Albanian, they won't rent the house to you.

After my first few words, the question was 'Where are you from?' And then I had a negative answer.

The phenomenon of exclusion from fair chances of finding accommodation is connected to the widespread 'Albanophobia' in Greek society and to the 'bad name' Albanians have. It is a particular expression of racism, one of its many faces, which denies some social groups the right to participate because they are stigmatised. In this case, some landlords deny Albanians their right to rent an apartment. However, it is not a totally exclusionary phenomenon: the housing market, as any other market, operates in terms of exchange, of supply and demand. If a landlord refuses to rent a property to an Albanian family, someone else will accept. And in most cases, any initial hesitation will disappear over

time, when the relationships between migrants and landlords or neighbours reach a more personal level, as the experience of Dimitri shows:

In the beginning, the landlady told me 'There are only Greeks living here ... the rest of the residents don't want Albanians. ... Now, two years later, the landlady and the neighbours are happy with us, they love our kids, they help us.

A more pernicious face of racism and exclusion relates to the social use of urban space and the public image of the city (Pavlou 2001). Certain areas of Thessaloniki, especially parks and squares, have become places where immigrants gather in order to meet each other or to look for work. Examples are the Aristotle University campus, Aristotelous Square, and the railway station. All these places are located downtown. This development has changed the face of the city, and this is evident even at a neighbourhood level, in areas with high concentrations of immigrants, where, for instance, the surrounding kiosks sell Albanian newspapers. Immigrants develop new social uses of urban space, which acquires a particular meaning for them and becomes their 'place'. Meeting points like the ones described above have a social significance for immigrants, as Iosifides and King (1998) write in their study of Albanian, Egyptian and Philippine migrants in Athens: they become both places of recreation, socialising or rest and 'piazzas' of job-seekers. Psimmenos (1998) develops a similar argument: 'in socially "dead" places, immigrants organise space' in a completely different way to the indigenous population.

In his study of the local media discourse, Pavlou (2001: 140–5) analyses local public perceptions of the 'proper' use of urban space, which has to be regenerated and therefore 'cleansed' of immigrants, whose presence is 'annoying' and who 'destroy' the public image of specific areas. This kind of discourse is based on existing practical problems of degradation, but it connects them to the presence of distinct social groups such as immigrants, gypsies, beggars and drug-addicts. According to Pavlou, the discourse became more hostile in 1997, when Thessaloniki was Cultural Capital of Europe and many urban districts had undergone processes of regeneration and reconstruction of their social use. Regeneration and the increasing use of certain parts of the urban social space for consumption and entertainment exclude immigrants and other vulnerable groups from using these particular spaces. What is actually 'annoying' is the visible face of poverty or, more generally, the view of the 'other', who uses space in a different way from 'us'.

However, the presence of immigrants in most areas of the city does not seem to be threatened by the practical applications of such racist discourses. The concentration of people in specific places and the use of space according to people's needs remains free as long as space remains public. In a way, the settlement of immigrants in Thessaloniki and the specific social uses of urban space they develop have contributed to the 'return' of public space to the people, at a time of otherwise increasing privatisation. Albanian immigrants' distribution in the city is quite diffuse, although there are higher concentrations in the western and central parts, where rents are cheaper. Their housing conditions have significantly improved, although still inferior to those of Greek citizens. In that sense, Albanians cover similar trajectories regarding their residence as they do in the labour market. There is a certain degree of exploitation, a tendency towards inadequate housing and some instances of openly discriminatory attitudes by some landlords, but things do improve with time. The presence of immigrants shapes the face of the city, which has now become their home.

'A friend ... may help ...' Remarks on social networks and the formation of an ethnic community

Immigrants naturally develop a set of informal interpersonal ties, namely ties of kinship, friendship and common origin: these are the social networks linking them to their home countries and helping them to overcome initial difficulties and further integration problems in the host countries. Such social networks function as 'sources for the acquisition of scarce means, such as capital and information' (Portes 1995: 8). As immigrants extend their stay in the host country, networks of a more formal and institutionalised character are developed, such as various types of immigrant associations, often in interaction with the citizens and institutions of the host society. In fact, migrant networks constitute a 'social bridge' (Portes 1995: 22): between those who migrated and those who are left behind, between different members of an immigrant community in the host society, and between immigrants and locals. Hence my aim in this section is to outline some basic features of the operation of migrant networks in Thessaloniki, based on the analysis of the interview sample and other material collected during my fieldwork.

On the basis of the interviewees' experiences, various kinds of informal social networks operate at the following levels: (a) information about the host society in the pre-migration context; (b) assistance for crossing borders; (c) solidarity and support amongst the immigrant population; (d) reciprocity between immigrants and locals. The first issue reveals an important additional factor that contributed to the initial migration decision for many. Apart from the first wave of Albanian citizens who immigrated to Greece in 1990 and 1991, all the rest seem to have followed paths already opened by some pioneers. Friends, relatives or compatriots from the same town or village arrived first and then either directly invited others, or influenced the others' decision by providing information about jobs or other matters, or by just narrating some of their experiences. In the words of Maria:

The basic reason is that, before I came to Greece, some other guys had come. They said that Greece is fantastic. ... Relatives, people from my village, friends. ... And I said to myself 'Why don't I go to try my luck there?'

The overwhelming majority of the interviewees already had some contacts in Greece, which made their decision easier. Especially for Albanians from Korçë, Thessaloniki was their final destination because of the historical ties linking the two cities (commercial and cultural relations before the Second World War). Usually, a relative was already employed and had accommodation. Most of the women interviewed (ten out of 15), in particular, followed their husbands, parents or brothers, reflecting not only 'chain' factors in the migration system between Albania and Greece, but also the relatively dependent nature of Albanian female migration.

In addition, certain kinds of networks have played an important role in the migratory passage of crossing of the border. The development of illegal trafficking networks in the Balkan area in the post-1989 period, which are often connected with international organised crime and in many cases have contacts with corrupted state and police officials, 'sell' their services to those immigrants who choose an irregular path in order to overcome immigration controls. My interview data suggest prices of around 200–300 Euros for transfers during 1996–97. However, the guides who help small groups of people to cross the

mountainous border on foot should not always be regarded as traffickers; sometimes, especially in the beginning, they were persons who just 'knew the way through the mountains', as several interviewees observed.

Solidarity between Albanians in Thessaloniki is a rather controversial issue. While most interviewees agree that there is a certain degree of support, others believe that reciprocity is not that strong. As Katerina told me 'I would like it if there was more support between each other here, there is not enough'. The existence of such contradictory perceptions can be explained in relation to the nature of social relationships which Albanians develop. It seems that interpersonal relationships among Albanians have changed either because of migration, or because of the general process of transition to the market economy. As Emil said, 'Relationships there used to be friendlier, truer ... but since money came, relationships have changed'. He also added that 'usually distance makes relationships tighter', although sometimes it can bring together people of different backgrounds, a point elaborated on by Konstantina:

There are relationships developed here, which can even be friendly, between groups of people that wouldn't have come into contact there. Just because you are in a foreign country ...

Furthermore, the living conditions of many Albanians in Thessaloniki – working hard and for long hours – and their dispersion throughout the city, do not enable them to meet each other that often. Operating within the above context of interpersonal relationships, informal social networks are built on the basis of kinship, friendship and common origin and are of particular importance regarding their role in facilitating Albanian migrants' incorporation. Such networks help migrants to find employment and accommodation and develop mechanisms of support and mutual help. All the interviewees agreed that the main source of information and help in order to find a job was the existence of informal relationships and solidarity. About 55 per cent of the Albanians who participated in the survey analysed by Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 247) declared that the main way of finding a job is through the help of friends and relatives. This particular function of networks confirms the 'place-based knowledge about jobs that immigrants are most likely to do', which Sassen (1995: 106–7) relates to the operation of local labour markets. In general, 'immigrants have a different sensitivity to job location' than locals (Sassen 1995: 113), since their decision about moving to a particular place for taking a job is not so much a factor of wage levels, but rather more a factor of where their contacts are located. Migration networks in that sense function not simply as a source of information related to jobs, but also as a source of social capital for individuals and households in order to overcome barriers imposed by the market (see also Portes 1995).

Finally, Albanians in Greece, like immigrants anywhere, unavoidably interact with the local population, which may result in the eventual breakdown of cultural barriers and prejudices. All of the interviewees socialise with locals in the workplace or the neighbourhood, and some have close Greek friends. The previous migration experience of many Greeks seems to make them more sensitive to the problems of Albanians and thus more open to personal relationships with them. For example, Adriana explained why she had such a nice relationship with her boss, 'My boss had been in Germany for 23 years, so he knew what is to be an immigrant'. Sometimes, such ties surpass the level of a

simple interpersonal relationship and become 'mixed' or interactive networks of assistance in job-finding, teaching of the Greek language, and material help. In addition, there seem to exist some uniquely 'Greek' expressions of intercultural relationships between immigrants and locals. One of them is certainly baptism, a strategy developed by some Albanians (mainly those of Muslim religious origin) aimed at facilitating their own and their children's acculturation in the host society. As Edri explained:

We wanted our children to be baptised, not because we are very religious, but simply because you feel racism in this field too ... so if they are baptised they'll have fewer problems. So, when we went there [to the church], they told us that at least the mother has to be baptised, so it was necessary for me to get baptised ... and I did it, not because I was feeling it.

The godfathers are Greeks, friends, neighbours, bosses or colleagues, who usually volunteer to baptise the children. From the immigrants' point of view, this practice is certainly a strategy of adjustment to the host country's culture, in order to 'make things easier' for them or their children. Regarding the locals, it is rooted in the great importance of Orthodox religion as a 'marker' of Greek national identity (Triandafyllidou 2000), and reflects a willingness on their part to offer Albanians the opportunity to acculturate by adopting the dominant religious dogma.

This strategy of tactical baptism is closely connected to another widespread adaptive strategy of Albanian immigrants in Greece, especially, again, those of Muslim origin, which is to change their names to Greek ones. Some of my interviewees introduced themselves to me using adopted Greek names (hence Ferin presented himself as 'Nikos'). In the Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 174) quantitative survey, one-third of the respondents were using Greek names. Whilst from the Albanian side Orthodox baptism and Greek name adoption might appear to be rational adaptive tactics to living in Greece, this should not obscure the repressive and hegemonic nature of Greek society's apparent willingness to partially incorporate (but then to deny) certain aspects of Albanian immigrants' identity.

Turning now to examples of solidarity within and towards the Albanian community in Thessaloniki, institutionalised networks of support and information emerged since the very beginning of the migratory wave from Albania. Initially, they took the form of solidarity from various institutions in the host society. NGOs, trade unions, left-wing parties, anti-racist organisations, the Church and Community Associations took active initiatives in order to help and advise the newcomers, while immigrant associations gradually emerged. There are several organisations of this kind currently active in Thessaloniki.⁵ Albanian immigrants have also managed to establish various associations, among which are the 'Albanians' Association of Thessaloniki Prefecture' and the 'Greco-Albanian Association of Workers and Friends of Thessaloniki: Progress'. There are also two Northern Epeirote (i.e. ethnic-Greek) cultural associations and an association of Vlach Albanians. Focusing on local host-society initiatives and organisations would stimulate a discussion about the civil society's stance towards immigration, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. What is of interest here is to give an account of those associations which have contributed to, and/or are indicative of, the formation of an Albanian community in the city. Two examples are briefly presented: the Albanians' Association and Epeirote

House.⁶ The reason for choosing these in particular is not only because they are the largest and most active ones, but also because the interviewees had contacts mostly with these two organisations. Six of them had contacted 'Epeirote House' in order to get advice or find employment; another six are in contact or are members of the Albanians' Association of Thessaloniki. However, regular participation in any of the above associations remains extremely low.

- *Epeirote House* was founded in 1940. It is not a migrant organisation, but rather a federation of several associations, including community associations of people originating from the ethnic-Greek region of Epeiros and three Northern Epeirote unions: Vlach-speaking, Christians from Vlorë and Himare's Dhelmi Union. In the beginning, before the government managed to develop any policy for immigrants from Albania, this association issued a 'registration document', initially to ethnic Greeks but later to Albanians too. The association's main initiatives include advice on legal issues, assistance in health, education and welfare matters, job-finding, support of the ethnic-Greek minority in Albania and establishment of cultural relationships between the two countries.
- *The Albanians' Association* was founded by regular Albanian immigrants in 1998 with the support of the Anti-racist Initiative of Thessaloniki. It collaborates with many local social organisations, anti-racist groups, political parties, NGOs and trade unions as well as other immigrant associations. It functions as an officially recognised institution which represents Albanians living in the city in negotiations with the local authorities and the government. It also has ties with Albanians in the rest of Greece, mainly the Forum of Albanian Immigrants in Athens. Its main initiatives include legal advice and social support of Albanian immigrants, organisation of cultural events, celebration of national festivals and participation in anti-racist demonstrations. Since March 2001, it runs free courses in the Albanian language for immigrants' children (the teachers are Albanian volunteers).

To summarise, Albanian immigrants in Thessaloniki appear to rely largely on informal networks of support and information regarding their labour market integration, their accommodation, but also their ways of socialising. The overall contribution of such networks to migrants' incorporation has been of considerable importance. There is no evidence of mass participation in collective institutions. In general, all evidence shows that a new immigrant community is being formed which, although heterogeneous, is in dynamic interaction with the local society and creates bridges with particular places in the country of origin.

Conclusion

The relevant literature suggests that immigrants in Southern Europe are a particularly vulnerable social group, with precarious and badly-paid employment, living in conditions of poverty and social marginalisation. Albanians in Greece have been characterised as 'helots' (Lazaridis 1999) and it is believed that they face exclusion at several levels (Iosifides and King 1998; Lazaridis and Psimmenos 2000; Psimmenos 1998). In contrast to this widespread picture, this paper has shown that this is no longer the case for the Albanians in Thessaloniki, at least not as a general rule. After having examined different levels of incorporation, namely the policy context, the structure of the local labour market, the

residential and spatial aspects of incorporation and the role of social networks, I come to the conclusion that there are temporal and place-specific factors influencing immigrants' incorporation within the host society. Through comparisons between the individual experiences of my interviewees and the empirical findings or theoretical insights of other studies, I argue that, over time, Albanian immigrants who live and work in Thessaloniki manage to organise their lives increasingly successfully in terms of work, residence and interpersonal relationships. I do acknowledge that several important aspects influencing immigrants' incorporation, such as civil society's response to immigration, the media discourse, racism and xenophobia, the cultural adjustment of immigrants themselves or their perceptions of identity, could not be included in this analysis, largely for reasons of space. This is not to underestimate their crucial role. Indeed, the media construction of 'Albanophobia' frames all other factors of social exclusion in Greece. I also acknowledge, as I did at the beginning of the paper, the possibility that interviewees might not have felt comfortable in expressing their true feelings to a member of the host society in an interview taking place in the host country.⁷

Integration and exclusion were not seen as stable situations or given facts, but as parallel, although opposing, social processes, which operate through contradictory mechanisms that influence migrants' incorporation by dialectically interacting with each other at all the above four levels. On the one hand, there are forces, reactions and mechanisms pushing immigrants towards exclusion, while on the other, there are personal or household strategies and non-market social structures like social networks, which facilitate integration. Contradictory patterns such as legal and illegal status, formal and informal employment, entry and discrimination in the housing market are reflected in the experiences of the individual migrants. Life in fear during illegality gives way to new hopes after regularisation; work, despite the low status of the jobs usually held by Albanians, acquires a social value; space gets re-configured for new social uses as immigrants organise their lives around places of work, residence and leisure.

Without implying that there are not Albanian immigrants living in poverty, or that immigrants as a social group are not threatened by social exclusion, the findings support the fact that the majority of Albanian immigrants seem able to gradually build a life in the city, despite the political and structural obstacles they face. In the beginning, the migrant knew little about the host society, did not speak the language, had no contacts with locals and was forced to perform jobs he/she never did before. In most cases, the migrant had illegal status. Gradually the immigrant became aware of the employment conditions in the host country, obtained skills, a self-respect and the power to negotiate with employers, or at least to leave a job when not satisfied. The immigrant managed to obtain legal status, establish contacts with locals and build personal relationships with some of them, to learn the language and get used to the culture and way of life of the host society, while the children went to Greek schools.

Such a perspective should not lead us towards the idealisation of the migrants' condition in the host country. We should be wary of neoclassical approaches which see the economic success of immigrants as dependant on their education, work experience, language fluency and the human capital they possess, which is enriched as the length of stay increases (see Chiswick 1978). Immigrants' incorporation is indeed subject to both deep social structures and wider social processes that are very much beyond the control of individual

rational actors and that supersede the local society where they settle. Immigrants' legal status depends not only on whether the host polity is willing to accept them or not, but also, for instance, on the obligations arising from Greece's membership of the European Union. Immigrants' participation in the world of work is not simply a question of how segmented the labour market is, but also reflects the structural relation of exploitation of labour by capital. Their overall integration within the host country is not just a matter of individual and household strategies, or of pro-migrant policy, but is influenced by the wider reaction of the civil society and the extent to which current anti-immigrant feelings might find a political expression. After all, the unpredictable nature of the life-course itself challenges the neoclassical conception of 'rationally acting individuals', as the experiences of individual migrants suggest. In the words of Nadi, one of the interviewees:

When you see that you can't have what you need there, then you look for something else. If you can't find this at the place where you live, you look for it somewhere else. Since I could come to Greece I came here, but I didn't really know what I really wanted, what exactly I was looking for. ... My only thought was to come and work. ... Then, as the time was passing, I was thinking to work, have some savings and start my own business in Albania. But then the time passes and you go on thinking, and then you are suddenly married and have a baby. ... You can't reach everything in life; nobody can.

It is important to highlight the limited time-scope of the analysis presented here: while at the current stage the majority of Albanian immigrants who have settled in Thessaloniki seem to follow upward employment and residential trajectories, the issue of the so-called 'second generation' still remains open. It is uncertain what will happen in the future – when immigrants' children, for instance, come into direct competition in the labour market with Greeks of the same age, and both possess equal qualifications such as higher education degrees. Or, the other way round; it is unclear at the moment if a deepening of the economic crisis will lead many Greek workers to seek the same positions in the informal labour market that are currently occupied mostly by immigrants. Such possibilities imply a rethinking of dominant perceptions of 'us' and the 'others', of immigrants and locals.

I would like to conclude by referring to Ribas-Mateos' (2001: 36) evocative description of the 'Mediterranean migratory space' as the 'new caravanserai'. Thessaloniki is a city with a long multicultural history, hosting populations from all over the Balkans and the Mediterranean. In Greek popular culture of previous decades, Thessaloniki is known as 'the mother of refugees', a title that the city acquired due to its reception of ethnic-Greek refugee populations from Asia Minor after the Greco-Turkish war of 1922. Now it is being transformed into a new 'caravanserai', which is the name of the building currently accommodating the city's Town Hall. Albanian immigrants gradually become part of the local society, not in the sense that they break their links with their country or that they are fully acculturated or assimilated, but as a *de facto* situation, since they are 'here' and here they build their lives.

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Notes

- 1 The total number of Albanian immigrants in the city remains unknown. In the whole Prefecture of Thessaloniki, the 2000 Census recorded a total of 68,871 immigrants (excluding Pontian Greeks from the former USSR and possibly ethnic Greek Albanians). In the whole Prefecture, 19,807 Albanian immigrants applied for legalisation (three-quarters of the total number of applicants) during the 1998 regularisation programme (Kavounidi and Hatzaki 1999).
- 2 For reasons mostly connected to limitations of space, but also related to my initial intention to focus basically on the material aspects of incorporation and exclusion, I decided not to investigate in detail the issues of civil society and public opinion, nor migrants' cultural 'adjustment'. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that these issues are of great importance in shaping immigrants' lives. Much has already been written and much still needs to be said about the role of the media, or about racist hostility and xenophobia in Greece. Cultural and identity aspects, which also appear in the interview material, are not analysed here, because this would have taken the discussion beyond my initial aims.
- 3 According to the survey of Labrianidis *et al.* (2001: 174), 61 per cent of the sample (excluding children) had finished high school, while about 23 per cent had technical, professional or academic education. Regarding employment in Albania, among 838 Albanian immigrants (excluding children and elderly people), 22 per cent were employed in industry (64 per cent of whom are men), 20 per cent were white-collar workers (59 per cent women), 9 per cent were employed in agriculture and 9 per cent were male technicians (Labrianidis *et al.* 2001: 229).
- 4 See *Labour Force Survey*, Athens: National Statistical Service of Greece, various issues.
- 5 To give some examples, there is the left-wing Anti-racist Initiative', the INTEGRA project for the 'Reception and Support of Immigrants and Refugees' run by the Macedonian Institute of Employment (a research and vocational training institution of the Labour Centre of Thessaloniki), the NGO 'Odysseas', offering free Greek-language courses to immigrants, and others.
- 6 Information about Epeirote House is drawn from an interview with representatives of the organisation, which took place in their offices on 15 July 2002. Material concerning the Albanians' Association has been drawn from an information leaflet published by the association. See also Glarnetatzis (2001) on the assistance of, and collaboration with, the Anti-racist Initiative of Thessaloniki.
- 7 Interviews carried out by Russell King, Nicola Mai and Mirela Dalipaj with Albanian immigrants in Italy and the United Kingdom (virtually all of whom had previously migrated to Greece) reveal a much harsher critique of migrant conditions in Greece, especially as regards their experience of state violence at the hands of the army and police. Such experiences are often contrasted with the more lenient treatment Albanians generally receive in Italy and the UK. See King *et al.* (2003).

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