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Manufacturing the Albanian Threat

Crime, Consent, and the Politics of Border Control in Post-Brexit Britain

By Ama Lotlana

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July 2026

AUTHORED BY

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the political mobilisation of anti-Albanian sentiment in the United Kingdom since 2020 and its role in legitimising restrictive asylum and border governance in post-Brexit Britain. It argues that anti-Albanian sentiment should not be understood as a spontaneous expression of public prejudice, nor as a direct response to criminality or migration pressure alone. Rather, it functions as a form of political discourse through which Albanians are racialised as criminal, fraudulent, culturally suspect and undeserving of protection. Drawing on securitisation theory, moral panic, crimmigration and Gramscian hegemony, the paper analyses how Albanian migrants have been constructed as a distinct category of illegitimacy within government rhetoric, parliamentary debate and media amplification.

Through qualitative discourse analysis, it demonstrates how tropes of criminality, economic migration, modern slavery "*abuse*" and safe-country logic produce a simplified narrative of threat. The paper then shows how this construction legitimises accelerated removals, safe-country presumptions, detention, restrictions on modern slavery protections and wider exceptional border policies. Finally, it argues that the political payoff of anti-Albanian discourse lies in the displacement of responsibility: structural failures of asylum administration, accommodation, public spending and post-Brexit sovereignty are reframed as failures of control caused by external abuse. Anti-Albanian sentiment therefore operates as a social-hegemonic mechanism through which coercive border governance is made to appear necessary, defensive and commonsensical.

Keywords: **Albania, United Kingdom, UK-Albania Relations, Border Policy, Immigration, Anti-Albanian Sentiment, Asylum System**

Section 1

Introduction

Migration and asylum have long occupied a central position within British political life, yet in post-Brexit Britain these questions have acquired a qualitatively different function. Border governance has increasingly been framed not as an administrative nor a humanitarian concern but as a decisive test of the state's authority, sovereignty and political credibility. Within this conjuncture, the emergence of Albanian migrants as a primary object of political hostility marks a notable shift in the UK's migration discourse. Recently, Albanians have been recurrently represented by political elites and their respective media interlocutors as criminals, fraudsters, and abusers of the asylum system, despite their recent arrival at the centre of political debate. This paper will examine how anti-Albanian sentiment has been politically mobilised in the UK since 2020 and assesses its role in legitimising restrictive and exceptional forms of asylum and border governance in Britain.

The primary claim advanced is that anti-Albanian sentiment does not arise organically from public concern, criminality or migratory pressure. Rather, it constitutes a strategically constructed political discourse that racialises Albanians as *uniquely* illegitimate, criminal, and deceitful with the purpose of manufacturing consent for coercive border policies, displacing responsibility for failures in structural governance, and reasserting state authority during a period of acute political and economic instability. Resultantly, anti-Albanian discourse attempts to manufacture consent around the expansion of the state's coercive capabilities while presenting such measures as defensive necessities. In this instance, "*manufacturing consent*" is used not to imply a centrally coordinated conspiracy, but to describe the production of a political common sense in which coercive border measures become publicly intelligible and morally defensible.

The paper is guided by the following question: "*How has the construction of Albanian migrants as a criminal threat functioned to manufacture consent for exceptional asylum and border policies in post-Brexit Britain?*"

The concern is not explicitly about whether claims about Albanian migrants are empirically accurate, but how they are mobilised, repeated and embedded within

broader strategies of governance. The following analysis therefore foregrounds the relationship between discourse, state power, and consent rather than public attitudes in isolation.

Firstly, why Albanians? Why now? The prominence of Albanians within British migration is neither historically continuous nor demographically self-evident. Unlike earlier racialised targets of British border politics, Albanians did not previously occupy a central symbolic position within public anxieties around migration[1]. Their sudden elevation from relative invisibility to a primary object of hostility from Brexit onwards (intensifying during the 'small boats' panic of the early 2020s) requires explanation.

Albanians occupy a politically useful position within Britain's *racial and migratory* hierarchy. As a predominantly white, Muslim-majority, European yet non-EU population associated in British memory with the conflicts of the late 1990s, Albanians can be positioned simultaneously as familiar yet alien; European yet morally suspect. This enables a form of racialisation that avoids overt biological racism while reproducing a hierarchy of legitimacy through associations with criminality, deception, and economic parasitism. What this means is that Albanians can function as a flexible '*other*' that is sufficiently proximate to be legible, yet sufficiently distant to be stigmatised without destabilising liberal self-representations of tolerance.

The timing of this construction is inseparable from the crisis of post-Brexit Britain. Brexit elevated border control into a test of state competence, while stagnant wages, housing shortages, deteriorating public services and asylum-system dysfunction generated broader social frustration[2][3][4]. Consequently, the Albanian migrant becomes a convenient condensation of multiple anxieties: border failure, criminality, welfare pressure and sovereign decline.

Therefore, the paper's argument will proceed in three stages.

(1) Demonstrating how Albanians are discursively constructed as categorically distinct from other asylum seekers and migrants. Through executive rhetoric, parliamentary debate, and media amplification, Albanian asylum seekers are represented as overwhelmingly economic, criminal, and fraudulent. This

[1] Migration Observatory (2025) Albanian asylum seekers in the UK and EU. University of Oxford.
[2] Brewer, M., Fry, E. and Try, L. (2023) The Living Standards Outlook 2023. London: Resolution Foundation.
[3] National Audit Office (2024) Investigation into asylum accommodation. London: National Audit Office.
[4] Barton, C., Wilson, W., Rankl, F. and Panjwani, A. (2023) Tackling the under-supply of housing in England. House of Commons Library.

construction relies on selective statistics, repetition, and moralised language, producing a simplified and durable narrative of illegitimacy.

(2) Arguing that this construction performs a legitimising function. By portraying Albanians as uniquely undeserving, the state develops conditions necessary to justify policy measures that would otherwise encounter significant legal and moral resistance. These include fast-track detention, collective inadmissibility, offshore processing schemes, and the erosion of procedural safeguards within asylum law.

(3) Contending that the political payoff of this process lies in the displacement of responsibility: structural failures of governance are reframed as failures of control caused by external abuse. This contributes to the British hegemonic order by redirecting popular discontent away from political-economic structures and towards an out-group, thereby preserving the legitimacy of the state under crisis.

Several concepts require clarification before proceeding. First, anti-Albanian sentiment refers not simply to individual prejudice against Albanians, but to a politically organised discourse through which Albanians are represented as criminals, fraudulent, culturally suspect, and undeserving of protection. Second, racialisation refers to the process through which a group is assigned fixed collective characteristics and positioned within a hierarchy of legitimacy. In this case, racialisation does not operate primarily through biological racism, but through moral and cultural coding that renders Albanians as a suspect European "other." Third, hegemony is used in a Gramscian sense to describe the organisation of consent and coercion through which state power appears natural, necessary and commonsensical[5]. Anti-Albanian discourse is therefore analysed as part of a wider hegemonic process that produces consent for coercive border policy. Finally, exceptional border governance refers to policies that depart from ordinary procedural protections in the name of emergency, deterrence, or system integrity, including accelerated removals, safe-country presumptions, offshoring, detention, inadmissibility and restrictions on modern slavery protections.

[5] Gramsci, A. (1971) Selections from the Prison Notebooks. Lawrence & Wishart. p.12-13.

Section 2

Literature Review

The political mobilisation of anti-Albanian sentiment sits at the intersection of several bodies of literature: securitisation theory, moral panic, crimmigration, and Gramscian accounts of hegemony and consent. This paper does not treat these frameworks as competing explanations, but as interconnected tools for analysing how Albanians have been constructed as a distinct threat, how this construction has circulated through political-media discourse, and how it has legitimised coercive border governance.

The first relevant framework is securitisation theory, particularly the Copenhagen School associated with Buzan, Waever and de Wilde. Securitisation theory argues that an issue becomes a security threat not only because of its objective properties, but because political actors successfully frame it as an existential danger requiring exceptional measures[6]. For this reason, securitisation is useful because it provides the direct framework explaining how Albanian migration is transferred from the field of ordinary administration into the field of emergency. This is directly relevant because political language around "invasion," "abuse," "*criminal gangs*" and "*illegal migration*" constructs Albanian migration as a security problem requiring exceptional measures.

The securitisation of migration has also been developed by scholars like Huysmans and Bigo, who show how migration can be governed through a security continuum linking borders, policing, crime, and national identity[7][8]. This is directly relevant to the Albanian case because anti-Albanian discourse repeatedly blurs distinctions between asylum seeking, irregular entry, organised crime, trafficking and fraud and the Albanian migrant is constructed as an individual who threatens the state, asylum system and public order.

[6] Buzan, B., Wæver, O. and de Wilde, J. (1998) Security: A New Framework for Analysis. Lynne Rienner Publishers. p.23-24.
[7] Huysmans, J. (2000) The European Union and the securitization of migration, Journal of Common Market Studies 38(5) p.751-777.
[8] Bigo, D. (2002) Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease. Alternatives 27 p.63-92.

The second body of literature concerns moral panic. Cohen's concept of the "*folk devil*" explains how particular groups are amplified as threats to social order through the interaction of the media, political authority and public anxiety[9]. Hall et al.'s work on policing and crisis further develops this by showing how moral panics can function politically by displacing social contradictions onto racialised or criminalised groups[10]. This framework is useful because the Albanian case is not simply a legal or administrative issue; it involves the symbolic production of a dangerous out-group. Press stories about so-called Albanian gangs, prison numbers, modern slavery "*abuse*" and economic migrants intensify the impression that Albanians are a uniquely deviant population. Moral panic literature therefore helps explain how repetition, exaggeration and selective statistics transform a complex migration pattern into a simplified public threat.

The third body is crimmigration, a concept associated with Juliet Stumpf, which describes the growing fusion of criminal and immigration law[11]. Crimmigration is relevant because Albanian asylum seekers are repeatedly discussed through the language of criminality, even where the legal issue is migration status or asylum eligibility. This fusion allows coercive measures to appear as law enforcement rather than as restrictions on asylum rights. In the Albanian case, the association with organised crime, trafficking networks and prison statistics enables the state to present its own coercive measures as protective. Crimmigration therefore helps explain how the Albanian migrant is moved from the category of claimant to suspect.

The final and most important framework is Gramscian hegemony. Gramsci understands hegemony as the organisation of consent and coercion; whereby ruling power is maintained not only through force but through the production of common sense[5]. This paper uses this logic to explain why anti-Albanian sentiment manufactures consent for coercive border governance. This approach also connects anti-Albanian sentiment to the wider crisis conditions of post-Brexit Britain. Brexit elevated border control into a central test of sovereignty, while the asylum backlog, hotel accommodation costs, stagnant wages, housing shortages and deteriorating public services created wider conditions of frustration. Given this context, the

[9] Cohen, S. (2011) Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers. 3rd edition. Routledge. p.xxi p.56.
[10] Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J. and Roberts, B. (1978) Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order. Macmillan Press Ltd. p.221-224.
[11] Stumpf, J.P. (2006) The crimmigration crisis: Immigrants, crime, and sovereign power. American University Law Review. 56(2) p.368-418.

Albanian migrant becomes a politically useful figure through which structural failures can be re-narrated as failures of control caused by external interference. This is where the paper departs from analyses that treat migration rhetoric as merely populist or episodic. Anti-Albanian sentiment is analysed instead as a hegemonic strategy and a way of redirecting discontent away from political-economic structures and towards a racialised out-group.

Together, these literatures provide the analytical base for the paper. Securitisation explains how Albanians are framed as a threat; moral panic explains how the threat is amplified and made culturally intelligible; crimmigration explains how asylum becomes fused with criminality; and Gramscian hegemony explains how these processes manufacture consent for coercive border policy. The contribution of this paper is to apply these frameworks to a recent and under-theorised case: the political weaponisation of anti-Albanian sentiment in post-Brexit Britain. More specifically, the paper contributes by showing how a relatively recent and demographically specific migrant group can be rapidly transformed into a symbolic threat through the interaction of executive classification, parliamentary repetition and media amplification.

Methodologically, this paper employs qualitative discourse analysis. Primary sources include government speeches, Home Office communications, parliamentary debates, and ministerial statements. These are supplemented by media coverage, treated not as an autonomous driver of sentiment but as an amplifying and normalising apparatus embedded within elite political projects. The objective is to identify recurring discursive patterns, justificatory logics, and narrative structures through which anti-Albanian sentiment is produced and operationalised. This approach enables an examination of how meaning is politically mobilised rather than merely expressed. The analysis does not claim to measure public opinion or establish the causal effect of discourse on individual attitudes; rather, it examines how authoritative political and media texts make particular policy responses appear reasonable, necessary and legitimate.

The evidence was selected purposively and focuses on texts in which Albanian migration was explicitly named or implicitly positioned as a problem of criminality, fraud or abuse. For the sake of comprehension, the timeframe runs from 2020 onwards, giving particular attention to the intensification of debate during 2022–23 when Albanian small boat arrivals became politically central and were linked to major

asylum reforms. Consequently, Government and Home Office sources are prioritised as they represent official state classification and policy justifications; parliamentary debates are also examined as they present how such classifications are repeated, contested and legitimised within British political institutions. Press coverage is also included where it repeats and sharpens anti-Albanian sentiment. This selection of materials allows the paper to trace a coherent narrative of the construction of Albanian illegitimacy across institutional sites rather than treating isolated statements as representative in themselves.

Section 3

Stage One: Discursive Construction of the Albanian "*Threat*" as a Distinct Category of Illegitimacy

The contemporary border discourse does not begin at the level of policy intervention, but at the level of classification. Before coercive measures are rendered legitimate, the state must first stabilise a category of particular migratory subjects to be categorically illegitimate, producing an object of enforcement that can be acted upon without substantial moral or legal contestation. Since 2020, this classificatory work has been conducted with Albanian migrants repeatedly positioned as the subject. Rather than being situated within the broader and heterogenous field of asylum, Albanians have been constructed as a distinct and morally suspect category: not simply irregular migrants, but inherently illegitimate claimants. This distinction enables a shift from adjudication to presumption and therefore from administrative management to moralised enforcement. This section will deconstruct the Albanian "*threat*" as a political construction produced through three interrelated mechanisms: executive framing, parliamentary consolidation and media amplification.

Within British political discourse, "*illegal migration*" is a great example of category conflation. It functions as a master category that collapses asylum seeking, trafficking, smuggling, visa overstays and irregular entry into a single field of suspicion. Legal and experiential distinctions are therefore blurred: the asylum seeker, the trafficking victim, the smuggled migrant and the criminal facilitator can be made to appear as parts of one undifferentiated problem[12]. Within this already condensed field, Albanians are elevated as a paradigmatic case.

This elevation was most visible in Home Office communications during the 2022 increase in Channel crossings. A Home Office factsheet stated that between May-September 2022, Albanian nationals accounted for 42% of small boat arrivals, equating to more than 11,000 people, and contrasted this with 815 Albanian arrivals

[12]Bigo, D. (2002) Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease. Alternatives 27 p.69-72

across the whole of 2021[13]. The comparison isolates a short temporal window and presents it as evidence of a broader structural crisis and indicative of a broader phenomenon of systemic loss of control, despite it being a five-month spike[1]. In this discursive function, Albanians appear not simply as one nationality within irregular migration, but as the visible embodiment of the "small boats" crisis.

This framing constructs Albanians as numerically dominant within irregular migration, irrespective of longer-term trends[141]. The problem is not that the increase was invented, but that the framing converted volatility into apparent permanence. Independent analysis complicates this narrative: the Migration Observatory notes that Albanian small boat arrivals rose sharply in 2022 but declined substantially afterwards, indicating the risks of drawing structural conclusions from a short-term spike[1]. Similarly, Full Fact found that claims that Albanians constituted around 60% of small boat arrivals were not supported by published Home Office data[15]. The executive discourse therefore did not merely describe Albanians as one group among many; it installed them as a shorthand for the very border crisis itself.

From Nationality to Risk Category: Executive and Parliamentary Framing

If executive rhetoric introduces the category, then parliamentary discourse normalises it. In British Parliament, as a legislative and legitimising institution, has transformed Albanians into a *"risk"* category. In late 2022, parliamentary discussion repeatedly linked Albanians to Channel crossings, criminal gangs and abuse of the asylum system[1617]. Suella Braverman's claim that Labour would allow "*all the Albanian criminals*" to enter the UK is particularly revealing[17]. It fuses nationality, irregular migration and criminality into a single formulation. The phrase does not merely refer to criminal individuals who happen to be Albanian; it encourages "*Albanian*" to function as a distinct marker of criminal suspicion.

[13] Home Office (2022) Factsheet: Small boat crossings since July 2022. Home Office.
[14] Home Office (2024) How many people come to the UK irregularly? Home Office.
[15] Full Fact (2022) Evidence for claim that 60% of small boat arrivals are Albanian not yet published. Full Fact.
[16] UK Parliament (2022) Albanian Migrants Volume 719: debated on Monday 5 September 2022. Hansard.
[17] UK Parliament (2022) Western Jet Foil and Manston Asylum Processing Centres Volume 721: debated on Monday 31 October 2022. Hansard.

The analytical significance of this lies in its capacity to convert contingent associations into essentialised characteristics. The Home Affairs Committee (HAC) provides the clearest example of how this slippage operates. It recorded evidence from Dan O'Mahoney, the UK's Channel Threat Commander, that the rise in Albanian crossings was linked "in the main" to Albanian criminal gangs gaining a foothold in northern France[18]. Yet a claim about facilitation networks is not the same as a claim about Albanian migrants as a group. The discursive movement is from the existence of some Albanian criminal networks to a broader suspicion attached to Albanian arrivals themselves – a movement that is central to the construction of Albanians as a quasi-criminal population. This assessment was further encouraged by the Nationality and Border Act 2022, of which Lord Murray of Blidworth commented: "*on the term 'illegal immigrant', that nomenclature derives from the provisions in Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which make it an offence to enter illegally*" when referring to Albanian asylum seekers[19].

Parliamentary debate also reveals the instability of this construction. Some peers cautioned against conflating asylum seekers, trafficking victims and criminal facilitators. Lord Murray of Blidworth, for instance, acknowledged that "*merely seeking asylum cannot in itself be an act of illegality*" and located illegality instead with traffickers and smugglers[19]. Such interventions expose the simplification required by the dominant narrative: where legal and humanitarian distinctions exist, political discourse often compresses them into a single image of Albanian criminality. Nevertheless, the dominant emphasis remained on repetition, moral clarity and enforcement, allowing later policy debates to proceed as though the problem had already been defined. For example, in 2025, Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood discussed new enforcement plans in Parliament while citing Albanian families and "*criminal gangs*" as emblematic of systemic abuse[20].

[18] Home Affairs Committee (2023) Asylum and migration: Albania. Second Report of Session 2022-23 House of Commons.
[19] UK Parliament (2022) Albanian Asylum Seekers Volume 826: debated on Tuesday 13 December 2022. Hansard.
[20] Lotlana, A. (2025) The British Home Secretary's Reforms to Match Reform UK and Anti-Albanian Sentiment. The Atlas Institute for International Affairs.

The Tropes of Illegitimacy: Criminality, Fraud, Abuse and the Safe Country

The threat construction operates through a limited but highly repetitive repertoire of tropes. These tropes do not simply describe Albanians; they design the organising principles that structure anti-Albanian sentiment and attach the national identity to danger and deception.

The most prominent trope is criminality. Official concern about Albanian criminal networks is not analytically problematic. The HAC recorded evidence from Swiss Contact about the role of Albanian gangs in facilitating Channel crossings and recruiting through social media[18]. The problem instead lies in the generalisation of this concern. A claim about some criminal facilitators becomes a suspicion attached to Albanians as such. This is normalised by media coverage who amplified this association, like the Telegraph who have foregrounded Albanian criminality in headline form, including articles such as "*How Albanian gangs came to dominate organised crime in Britain*" and "*One Albanian migrant jailed every two days.*"[21][22] Accordingly, the wider social group is converted into the criminal threat as headlines circulate more widely than detailed evidence, producing immediate association before qualification is a possibility.

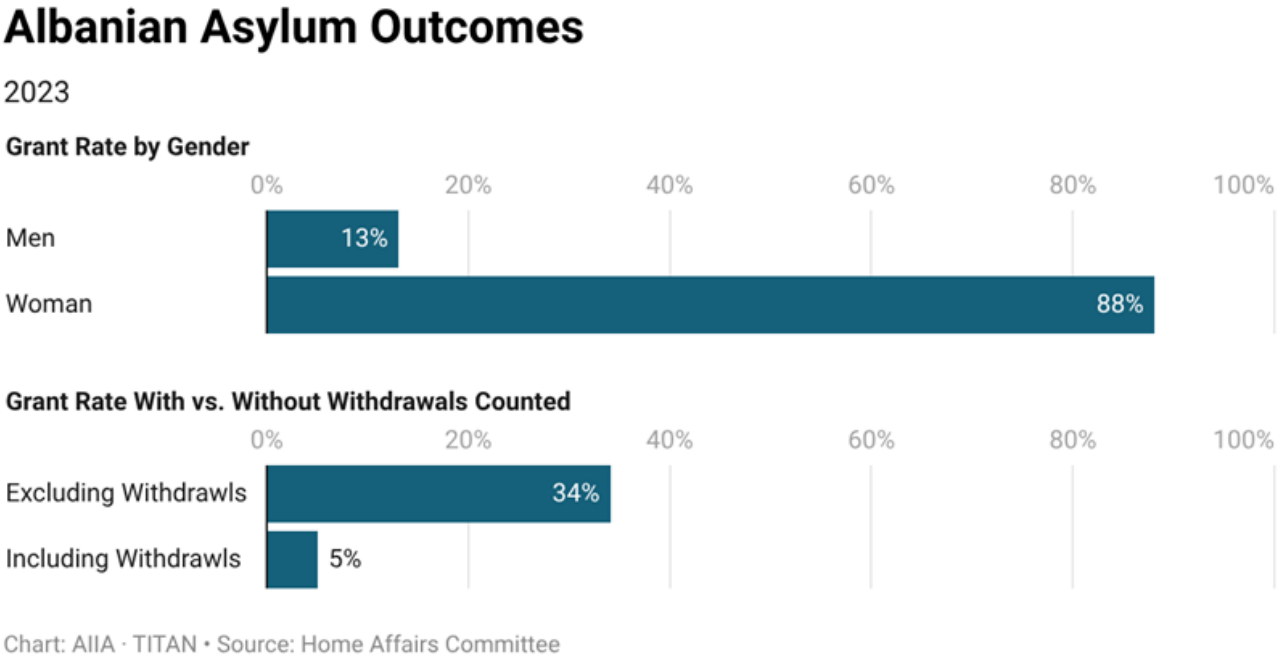
This does not mean that media discourse creates state discourse from the outside. Rather, state and media discourse operate within a feedback loop. Official references to Albanian gangs provide authoritative categories; press coverage popularises and intensifies them; and the resulting *common sense* allows ministers to present enforcement as rational necessity. The result is that criminalisation becomes politically effective, not because it is consistently proven in each case, but because it is repeated across authoritative institutional and media sites.

The second trope is the framing of Albanians as economic migrants fraudulently posing as asylum seekers. In November 2022, Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick contrasted "*genuine refugees and genuine asylum seekers fleeing persecution and human rights abuses*" with "*Albanian economic migrants coming to this country for all the wrong reasons.*"[23] This formulation places Albanians outside the category of

[21] Silverman, R. and Dearden, L. (2024) How Albanian gangs came to dominate organised crime in Britain. The Telegraph
[22] Hymas, C. (2026) One Albanian migrant jailed every two days. The Telegraph
[23] UK Parliament (2022) Migration Volume 722: debated on Wednesday 16 November 2022. Hansard.

the genuine refugee before individual adjudication has occurred and the phrase "economic migrant" therefore carries ideological weight: it does not simply describe motivations but implies the claimant is someone fraudulent and abusive of humanitarian systems.

However, this presumption is complicated by the asylum outcome data. The HAC noted that, up to June 2022, 51% of Albanian asylum claims were initially accepted, a rate the committee itself described as far higher than many comparable European countries. It also carried a sharp gender disparity: 88% for women compared with 13% for men[18]. Though this does not prove that all Albanian claims are valid, nor does it remove the need for scrutiny, but it does undermine the political certainty with which Albanian claims were treated as self-evidently fraudulent. A grant rate of this kind indicates that a significant proportion of Albanian applicants were found by the state's own asylum system to have protection needs. The government later argued that, if withdrawn cases were included, the Albanian grant rate for the year ending March 2023 fell from 34% to 5%, because 84% of outcomes were withdrawals[24]. Yet withdrawal is an administrative outcome and not proof of fabrication. It may reflect return, non-compliance, fear, poor legal advice, dispersal instability, or other pressures. To treat withdrawal, then, as evidence of bad faith is itself a discursive move which converts bureaucratic attrition to moral failure.



[24] Home Office (2023) How many people do we grant protection to? Home Office.

The fraud trope is deepened when concerning modern slavery *"abuse."* Here, the Albanian figure is not only represented as criminal or fraudulent, but as capable of manipulating vulnerability itself. This is a more sophisticated form of delegitimization because it targets one of the strongest humanitarian protections available within the legal system and reinterprets it as a loophole. Ministers criticised late referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) after asylum refusal as an *"abuse"* of the system, but former Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner Dame Sara Thornton rejected the assumption that late disclosure is inherently unreliable, and delayed disclosure does not prove fabrication. The HAC noted that NRM referrals are made where there is evidence that someone could have been trafficked or subjected to slavery-related practices[18]. The press intensified this presumption of abuse. Sky News reported official claims that some arrivals were "*deliberately gaming the system*" and would disappear after arrival[25]. Similarly, the Telegraph coverage foregrounded Jenrick's claim that Albanians were "*abusing*" the Modern Slavery Act[26]. The Telegraph and Times also covered headlines including: Albanian migrant criminals "*coached to claim they are modern slavery victims if caught*" and "*Albanian gangsters exploit slavery laws to pose as victims*."[27][28] This formulation performs one of the larger ideological inversions by re-coding the victim as performative, and the claim to exploitation itself is perceived as evidence of manipulation.

However, this trope is unstable because the existence of criminal facilitation does not prove migrant criminality. The same routes used to reach the UK may involve coercion, debt, dependency, deception or trafficking. The HAC's evidence therefore points to overlap rather than simple opposition: criminal networks may structure the route while migrants themselves remain vulnerable to both sexual and labour exploitation[18]. Anti-Albanian discourse collapses this distinction by treating proximity to criminal networks as evidence of moral guilt, which then justifies exploitation as a reason for suspicion rather than protection. Thus, allowing protective law to be delegitimised without openly rejecting humanitarianism: the state need not deny protection to

[25] Brown, F. (2022) 'Exponential rise' in Albanian migrants crossing the Channel this year, MPs told. Sky News.
[26] Hymas, C., Turner, C., Butcher, B. and Mendick, R. (2022) Modern Slavery Act set for reform to tackle migrant crisis. The Telegraph.
[27] Hymas, C. and Evans. M. (2022) Albanian migrant criminals 'coached to claim they are modern slavery victims if caught'. The Telegraph.
[28] Hamilton, F. (2022) Albanian gangsters exploit slavery laws to pose as victims. The Times.

victims in principle; it can instead suggest that the category of victim has been corrupted by strategic claimants.

The third trope is safe-country logic. Albania is repeatedly claimed as a safe country, and Albanian asylum claims are therefore presented as presumptively invalid. The problem is that this reasoning collapses general country assessment into individual moral judgement, although asylum law is premised upon individualised risk, not aggregate national conditions[29]. A state may be broadly stable while particular groups remain exposed to trafficking, domestic abuse, blood feuds, political intimidation or other forms of persecution. The HAC itself reproduced this tension, concluding that Albania is generally safe and its citizens should not "ordinarily" require asylum, while also acknowledging that some Albanians, particularly trafficking victims and vulnerable women may require protection[18]. As stated, 88% of women's claims were accepted.

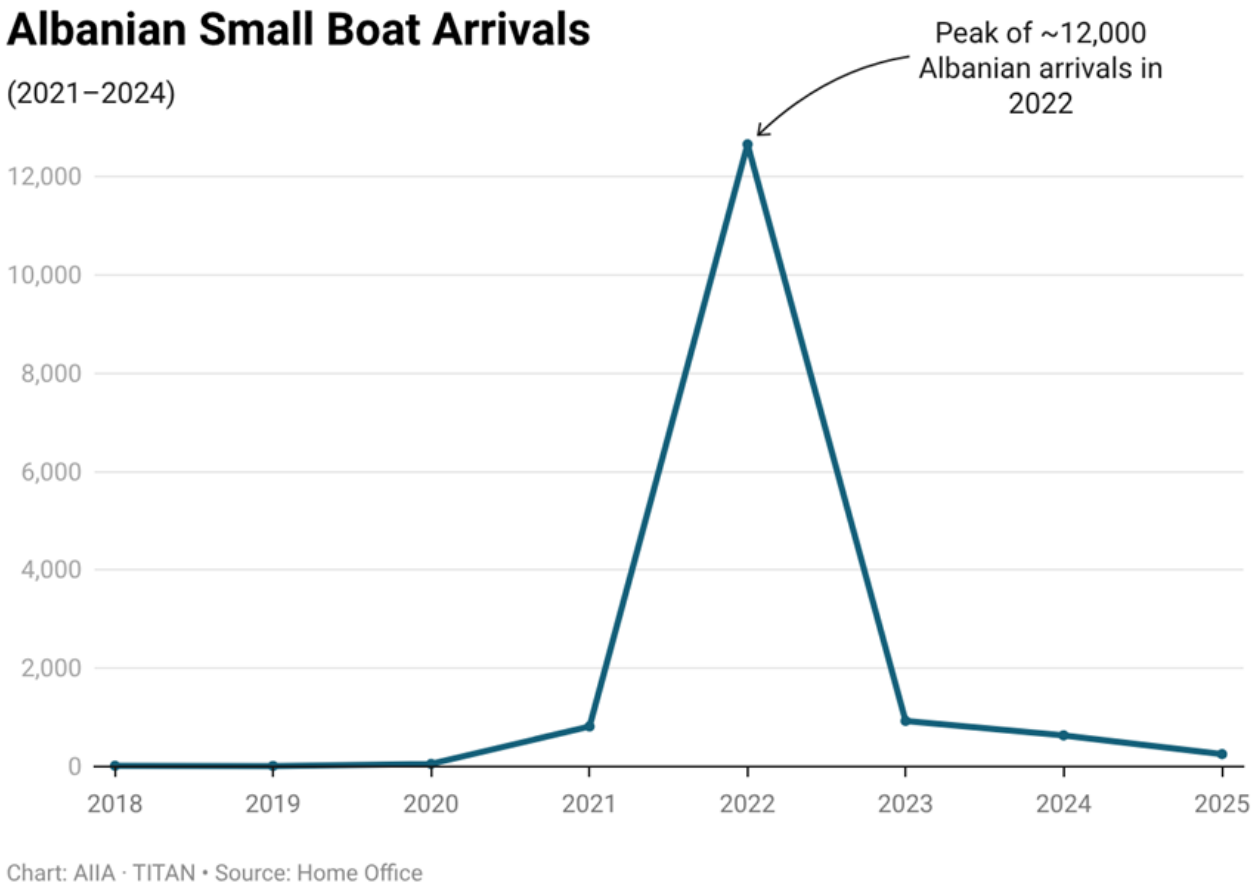
Safe country logic completes the wider architecture of illegitimacy. Criminalisation constructs Albanians as dangerous; the fraud trope constructs them as dishonest; modern slavery "*abuse*" reframes vulnerability as strategy; and safe-country reasoning supplies the final premise that protection is unnecessary in the first place. Together, these tropes reverse the burden of legitimacy. The Albanian claimant is required to overcome a prior suspicion generated by nationality. This does not formally abolish asylum procedure, but it transforms the moral atmosphere in which that procedure operates, allowing collective judgement to precede individual assessment. This is why the Albanian case is analytically significant, as racialisation does not depend on visible phenotypical difference alone. Instead, Albanians are racialised through moral and cultural coding, where nationality becomes attached to perceptions of criminality, deception, disorder and undeservingness.

Statistical Construction: Producing Scale, Urgency and Common Sense

This threat narrative is reinforced through the selective presentation of statistics. Quantitative claims appear neutral because the numbers carry a perception of

[29] UNHCR (2019) Handbook on procedures and criteria for determining refugee status and guidelines on international protection. UNHCR. p.20.

objectivity and authority, but their political meaning depends on the framing: the choice of timeframe, denominator, comparison and category all function to simplify the facts. In the Albanian case, statistics have repeatedly been used not simply to describe migration patterns, but to produce scale and urgency.



The first mechanism is temporal selection, a strategy that the UK Home Office is notably complicit in. The Home Office's focus on May-September 2022, when Albanians represented 42% of small boat crossings, dramatised rupture and made a temporary spike appear as a national emergency[13]. However, the Migration Observatory later recorded around 12,700 Albanian small boat arrivals in 2022, while only 616 Albanian small boat arrivals were recorded in 2024[1]. This does not make the 2022 increase significant; rather, it shows that the political narrative of permanent Albanian crisis depended on a specific temporal frame.

The second mechanism is the circulation of opaque figures as settled evidence. Full Fact examined claims that around 60% of small boat arrivals were Albanian and found that the relevant Home Office data had not been published[30]. The issue is clear: numbers acquired political authority before they could be independently verified. Once repeated by ministers or major media outlets, provisional figures can function as common sense, making Albanian arrivals appear dominant and self-evidently abusive even where the evidentiary basis remains incomplete.

There is also direct misinformation: Rupert Lowe claimed Restore Britain conducted an "*investigation [that] has uncovered the Albanian crimewave sweeping Britain*" which provided misleading raw arrest numbers, without the arrest type, nor confirmation of convictions, without accounting for changes in the Albanian population, nor any attention raised to changing policing priorities – and ultimately no sources to support his findings[31].

The third mechanism is category conflation. A useful example is the claim, popularised through Telegraph analysis, that "*one in 50 Albanians in the UK is in prison,*" – a searing and rhetorically powerful claim which Jenrick commented on: *"This analysis confirms what the public will have sensed for a long time: some nationalities are more likely to go on to commit serious crimes than others. It once again points to the need for a far more tightly controlled immigration system, including more rigorous security checks for nationalities linked to criminality in the UK."*[32] Yet this claim depends heavily on the denominator used, reportedly excluding Albanians with British passports and therefore not representing all people of Albanian origin or the wider British-Albanian community. It is also easily misread since prison population data includes people on remand and non-criminal prisoners and cannot be equated directly with convicted criminality. Ministry of Justice data for December 2024 recorded 10,355 foreign nationals in custody, including 3,589 on remand, 6,423 sentenced prisoners and 343 non-criminal prisoners; Albanians comprised 11% of the foreign national prison population, while foreign nationals overall represented 12% of the total prison population[33].

[30] Office for Statistics Regulation (2023) Will Moy to Ed Humpherson: Home Office Transparency. Office for Statistics Regulation.
[31] Lowe, R. (2025) A Restore Britain investigation has uncovered the Albanian crimewave sweeping Britain. X.
[32] Hymas, C. and Butcher, B. (2024) Revealed: First migrant crime table. The Telegraph.
[33] Ministry of Justice (2025) Offender Management Statistics Bulletin, England and Wales. Ministry of Justice.

Category conflation is therefore ideologically significant as it performs the central ideological work. A nationality-specific prison statistic is made to stand in for criminal character; prison population is made to stand in for convicted criminality; and criminality is then allowed to bleed back into asylum discourse. The result is a chain of equivalences where Albanian nationality becomes associated with imprisonment; imprisonment with criminal threat; criminal threat attached to Albanian migrants, regardless of whether they have any criminal history. These selective statistics therefore give moral claims a technical surface.

Moral Language: Invasion, Abuse and Deception

Statistics alone cannot produce a durable threat narrative – they require a moral vocabulary that instructs the public how the figures should be interpreted. In the Albanian case, this vocabulary is organised around three overlapping terms of invasion, abuse and deception. These terms move migration from the field of legal administration into the field of criminal and moral emergency.

The language of invasion is the most explicit example. In October 2022, Braverman told Parliament that "*the British people deserve to know which party is serious about stopping the invasion on our southern coast.*"[17] This discursive function does not simply intensify rhetoric; it changes the state's position as no longer the adjudicator of legal claims but as a body under attack against territorial incursion. Detention, removal and exclusion can therefore appear less as political choices than as defensive necessities.

The language of abuse performs a related function. As invasion externalises the threat, abuse internalises it since migrants are represented as manipulating the system after arrival. References to "*gaming the system,*" modern slavery "*abuse,*" and fraudulent asylum claims suggest that humanitarian protections had been turned against the state, allowing restrictions on rights to be presented as the restoration of integrity rather than the erosion of protection. The externalising and internalising functions are completed by framing the character and not their actions. Framing the character refers to language that the Albanian claimant is dishonest. This is visible in the repeated opposition between "*genuine*" refugees and Albanian "*economic migrants.*"[23] This allows policymakers to reframe the ethical meaning of asylum refusal, whereby

removal can no longer be interpreted as coercion against a potentially vulnerable person but as correction against manipulation.

Moral language therefore organises the meaning of statistics. A high number of arrivals could be interpreted as evidence of route displacement, smuggling market adaptation, labour demand, humanitarian need or administrative failure. It could also be more mundane than that, according to the Albanian Ambassador in London, Uran Ferizi, who wrote "*post-Covid economic hardship hit southern Europe harder than most. Combined with a UK visa system towards Albanians that is badly in need of reform, it produced a wave of young people chasing a promise that social media had made to look more attainable than it was.*"[34] Regardless, the language of invasion, abuse and deception narrows those possibilities. It instructs the public to interpret scale as threat, legal claim-making as manipulation, and vulnerability as performance. Moral language does not supplement the evidence but organises it into a politically usable narrative and therefore completes the movement from migrant to threat.

From Migrant to Illegitimate Subject: Synthesis

Taken together, these discursive practices produce a coherent and self-reinforcing narrative where Albanians are not represented as one group within a diverse migratory flow but rather, they are constructed as a distinct category of illegitimate migrants. Criminalisation positions Albanians as dangerous; the fraud trope positions them as dishonest; modern slavery "*abuse*" retranslates vulnerability as manipulation; safe-country reasoning implies protection is unnecessary; statistical framing produces urgency; and moral language gives the urgency the character of emergency.

The result is a shift from individual assessment to collective suspicion. Formally, Albanian asylum claims remain subject to legal procedure. Politically, however, the claimant enters the procedure already coded through a prior narrative of criminality and deception. This is the core achievement of the discourse: it places the Albanian asylum seeker outside the ordinary moral framework of asylum while leaving the formal language of legality intact.

The media's role in this process is neither autonomous nor incidental. Press coverage translates official categories into popular common sense, while official rhetoric draws

[34] Ferizi, U. (2026) Albanians are being unfairly demonised in illegal immigration debate. The Guardian.

upon that common sense to justify its enforcement. Parliamentary repetition then gives the same categories institutional legitimacy. The result is a mutually reinforcing feedback loop where Anti-Albanian sentiment becomes politically effective not because each claim is consistently proven, but because the same associations circulate across multiple authoritative sites until they appear self-evident.

Once Albanians have been constructed as illegitimate by default, then the political question is no longer whether coercive policy is justified, but how far it can be extended. The following section therefore examines how this discursive construction performs a legitimising function, enabling exceptional forms of border governance that would otherwise encounter significant legal and moral resistance.

Section 4

Stage Two: Policy Legitimisation

In December 2022, the UK and Albanian governments signed a Joint Communique designed to enhance cooperation on migration, including returns and trafficking. The British government explicitly framed this agreement as a mechanism to speed up the removal of Albanians they deemed should not be in the UK[35][36]. It then published return numbers as evidence of success: in April 2023, the Home Office announced a "*milestone*" in the agreement, stating that 1,888 Albanian nationals had been returned in 2022, including 954 enforced and 934 voluntary returns, with a further 795 returned between January and March 2023[36]. The language of "*speed*" here is most significant, it implies that the central problem is not whether claims have been adequately assessed, but why removal has not occurred more quickly. This assumption is therefore made possible by the prior construction of Albanians as presumptively illegitimate and anti-Albanian discourse provides a legitimising vocabulary through which already-contested coercive measures could be presented as necessary responses to abuse.

The same logic operates through safe-country designation – the UK-Albania communique on trafficking stated that Albania is designated as a safe country because, "in general," there is no serious risk of persecution for those entitled to reside there. It also explained that where a country is listed as generally safe, claims may be certified as unfounded unless shown otherwise[37]. This mechanism does not formally abolish individual assessment, but it alters its starting point since the claimant enters the process from a position of suspicion and must prove exceptionality against the background of presumption that their claim should not exist. This is how collective judgement enters a formally individualised system.

Another revealing policy effect concerns modern slavery protections. The construction of Albanians as people "*gaming*" the system enabled a broader attack on procedural safeguards that might delay removal. The Illegal Migration Act 2023's explanatory

[35] Prime Minister's Office (2022) PM statement on illegal migration: 13 December 2022. Prime Minister's Office.
[36] Home Office (2023) Milestone reached in UK-Albania agreement on illegal migration. Home Office.
[37] Home Office (2022) Joint UK-Albania communique in relation to trafficking. Home Office.

notes state that the Act creates a system in which people arriving illegally will not have their asylum, human rights, or modern slavery claims considered while they are in the UK but will instead be removed either to their home country or to a safe third country[38]. The government's modern slavery factsheet for the Illegal Migration Bill similarly stated that where someone has entered the UK illegally and is identified as a potential victim of slavery, the government will ensure they are returned home or to another safe country "away from those who have trafficked them."[39] This formulation presents removal not as the denial of protection, but as a form of it, and coercive removal is plainly translated into safeguarding.

The Albanian case provided an especially useful example through which this shift could be justified because it provided an apparently concrete example of modern slavery "*abuse*." Once Albanian referrals to the NRM were framed as suspicious, the target became not only the individual claimant but the procedural framework that allowed removal to be delayed. Restrictions on modern slavery protections were not presented as a weakening of rights but as a necessary defence against manipulation – where the Albanian figure mediates this transformation because they have already been constructed as fraudulent and legally manipulative. Reducing access to protective procedure can be narrated as anti-abuse rather than anti-victim. Without the prior production of suspicion, removing or limiting the modern slavery safeguards would encounter greater resistance – with this suspicion in place, the safeguard appears as a loophole and the loophole as the real injustice.

Another legitimising effect is the normalisation of detention and removal as routine administration. Once Albanian claimants were constructed as straightforwardly removable, detention appears less as a deprivation of liberty and more as a practical step in the enforcement chain. A 2023 inspection of a removal flight to Tirana found that some Albanians who were willing to return voluntarily had nevertheless been detained for weeks, alongside concerns about vulnerability recording and treatment in detention[40]. This exposes the gap between the rhetoric of efficient return and the reality of coercive administration. The same logic also supports the wider safe-third-country and offshoring policies: although the Rwanda scheme was not Albanian-specific, it relied on the same legitimising functions the Albanian case provided the

[38] Illegal Migration Act 2023, Explanatory Notes.
[39] Home Office (2023) Illegal Migration Bill: modern slavery factsheet. Home Office.
[40] HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2023) Detainees under escort: Inspection of escort and removals to Albania. HM Inspectorate of Prisons.

groundwork for: that Rwanda is a safe country and removal to Rwanda can be framed as restoring order.

The central point is that anti-Albanian discourse does not merely accompany restrictive policy; it makes it politically intelligible. By constructing Albanians as undeserving, the state creates a population against whom coercion appears reasonable. This is the legitimising function of the discourse – as contested coercive policies are transformed into practical responses to a manufactured problem. The Albanian migrant becomes the exemplary figure through which the state can argue that the asylum system has been overwhelmed not by policy failure, undercapacity or international inequality but by manipulation. The solution, therefore, is not investment, legal access or humanitarian protection, but removal, restriction and deterrence.

Section 5

Stage Three: Displacing Responsibility - the Political Payoff

As the first stage demonstrated how Albanians are constructed as illegitimate, and the second displayed how that construction legitimises coercive policy, the third stage concerns the wider political payoff of this process. Anti-Albanian sentiment does not only justify specific border measures; it performs a broader ideological function by reorganising responsibility for crisis. Structural failures of governance are reframed as failures of control caused by external actors. In this movement, the state's own administrative, economic and political contradictions are displaced onto an out-group. Albanians become useful not only as an object of enforcement, but as figures through which state failure can be narrated as migrant misconduct.

This displacement is most visible in relation to the asylum backlog and accommodation crisis. The UK asylum system, while pressured by arrivals, has also been shaped by administrative delay, under-capacity, legislative instability and poor procurement. The backlog peaked at approximately 132,000 cases awaiting an initial decision in June 2023, far above levels seen during the 2010s, before falling from that peak. The National Audit Office reported that in 2024, the Home Office expected to spend £4.7 billion on asylum support, including £3.1 billion on hotels. These figures point towards a crisis of state administration: delayed decision-making generates prolonged accommodation need; reliance on hotels increases cost; rising cost can then be narrated as evidence that asylum seekers themselves are imposing an intolerable burden. Therefore, the ideological move is one of displacement. Visible symptoms of governance failures are detached from their administrative causes and reattached to the figure of the abusive migrant. The Albanian figure encapsulates this perfectly because it has already been constructed as economic, criminal and fraudulent. Once this image is stabilised, the cost of housing or processing claimants appears not as the product of outsourcing failures, legal bottlenecks, under-resourced decision-making, or a lack of burden-sharing legislation, but as the consequence of fraudulent pressure on the state. The object of resentment consequently shifts away from state capacity towards migrant abuse.

The accommodation crisis demonstrates this mechanism clearly. Hotel use became one of the most visible symbols of the failures of the asylum system, yet its cost was not produced by arrivals alone. It reflected backlog growth, shortage of dispersal accommodation, contracting failures and the need to house people whom the state had not yet processed. However, political discourse reverses this causality, and the hotels became evidence of migrant excess.

This displacement also works by placing migrants in symbolic competition with citizens. Under conditions of stagnant wages, housing shortages and deteriorating public services, anti-migrant discourse invites the public to interpret scarcity as the result of external pressure rather than political-economic organisation. The Albanian asylum seeker is positioned as a competitor for hotel rooms, welfare support, policing, court time and administrative capacity. This narrative does not need to claim directly that Albanians caused austerity, the housing shortage or the NHS crisis. Its function can be subtler by attaching existing frustration to the visible out-groups and redirecting anger away from questions of underinvestment, privatisation, labour precarity and state capacity.

In Gramscian terms, this is a struggle over common sense. The state preserves legitimacy not only through coercion but by producing explanations of crisis that appear plausible and morally intuitive. Anti-Albanian discourse offers such an explanation by condensing multiple frustrations such as small boats, hotel use, public spending, crime anxieties and post-Brexit sovereignty failure into a single legible figure. The primary political question therefore shifts from “why is the state unable to process claims efficiently and humanely?” to “why are Albanians exploiting Britain?” This shift protects state authority by relocating causality outside the state itself.

Post-Brexit Britain has been marked by a persistent contradiction between the promise of sovereign control and the state’s limited capacity to deliver it. Brexit elevated border control into a central measure of political competence and subsequently the state’s inability to stop Channel crossings was perceived as more than an administrative problem but as a symbolic failure of the post-Brexit state. Within this context, the Albanian figure provided an explanation that preserved the sovereignty narrative. The problem was not that “taking back control” had collided with legal obligations, global inequality, labour-market dependencies and administrative incapacity but that smugglers, legal loopholes, foreign courts and fraudulent migrants were frustrating the will of the state.

This explains why the discourse repeatedly returns to the language of control, as claiming the system is being abused implies the state could be effective if only legal obstacles, activist lawyers, modern slavery claims, foreign courts or bad-faith migrants were removed which frames failure as an obstruction. This converts government weakness into a demand for stronger state power, and the solution becomes more enforcement, more removal, more restriction and greater executive discretion. Having understood this crisis does not weaken the logic of coercion but becomes the very basis for expanding coercive capacity.

The political payoff is that the state can reassert authority through enforcement even where it has failed to resolve the underlying crisis. Returns, detention and restrictive legislation become performances of control, and they display the state acting decisively against a constructed source of disorder. This matters because hegemonic authority is not preserved only by solving material problems; it can also be preserved by defining those problems in ways that make coercive action appear responsive. The removal flight, the returns agreement, the safe-country designation and the hotel closure target all become symbolic acts through which the state stages its competence.

However, this hegemonic strategy is unstable. Because the underlying causes of crisis are not resolved, displacement must be repeated. If backlogs fall, appeals may rise; if hotels close, other accommodation pressures emerge; if one nationality is targeted, another may become the next emblem of abuse. Recent data illustrates this instability: while the initial-decision backlog has fallen substantially from its 2023 peak, it remained high throughout March 2025, and asylum accommodation costs continued to generate political pressure. This suggests that anti-Albanian sentiment may stabilise consent temporarily, but it cannot overcome the contradictions that produced the crisis.

The Albanian case therefore reveals a broader feature of post-Brexit border politics. Anti-migrant discourse does not merely express racism or xenophobia, although it may rely upon both. Instead, it functions as a mechanism of crisis management. By constructing Albanians as abusive outsiders, the state displaces responsibility for administrative breakdown, public expenditure and failed sovereignty promises onto a racialised migrant group which allows coercive border governance to appear not as a response to state failure, but as a defence of the public against external exploitation.

In Gramscian terms, the payoff is the preservation of consent under conditions of crisis. Popular discontent is not eliminated but it rather is redirected. The state's legitimacy is not restored through effective resolution, but through the production of a credible enemy. Anti-Albanian sentiment thus performs a stabilising function by converting structural contradictions into questions of border control, it translates administrative failure into migrant abuse and allows the expansion of coercive state power to appear as common sense. This is the political work that the Albanian "threat" ultimately performs.

Conclusion

The paper has demonstrated that the political mobilisation of anti-Albanian sentiment in post-Brexit Britain is not a result of spontaneous public hostility, isolated media sensationalism or neutral concern about irregular migration. Instead, anti-Albanian discourse has operated as a strategically useful political formation through which Albanian migrants are constructed as criminal, fraudulent and undeserving, thereby rendering coercive border governance more publicly intelligible and morally defensible. The central claim advanced throughout has been that the Albanian "*threat*" is not simply discovered by the state but produced through repetitive acts of classification, amplification and institutionalisation.

The first stage demonstrated how Albanians have been discursively constructed as a distinct category of illegitimacy. Through executive rhetoric, parliamentary debate and media coverage, Albanian migrants are repeatedly separated from the broader field of asylum and positioned as paradigmatic examples of abuse. This construction relies on a limited but powerful repertoire of tropes: criminality, fraudulent economic migration, modern slavery "*abuse*" and safe-country logic. Each trope performs a specific ideological function: (1) criminalisation associates Albanian nationality with organised crime; (2) the fraud trope places Albanians outside the category of the "*genuine*" asylum seeker; (3) modern slavery discourse recodes vulnerability as manipulation; and (4) safe-country reasoning implies that protection is unnecessary before individual claims have been assessed. Selective statistics and moralised language then give these tropes the appearance of empirical urgency and ethical clarity. The result is a shift from individual assessment to collective suspicion.

The second stage showed that this construction performs a legitimising function. Once Albanians have been positioned as presumptively undeserving, restrictive policies can be presented not as exceptional coercion, but as practical responses to system abuse. The UK-Albania returns agreement, safe-country certification, accelerated removal, detention, restrictions on modern slavery protection and wider safe-third-country logic all become easier to justify within a discursive environment that has been already organised around suspicion. The Albanian case specifically illustrates how coercive border policies require ideological preparation to enact them, and while policy does not follow discourse mechanically, discourse creates the necessary conditions in which

policy becomes acceptable. Having understood this, anti-Albanian sentiment accompanies restrictive asylum governance and makes it politically intelligible to policymakers and citizens alike.

The third stage located the wider political payoff of this process in the displacement of responsibility. Anti-Albanian discourse allows structural failures of state governance to be reframed as failures of control caused by external abuse. The asylum backlog, hotel accommodation costs, administrative delays, procurement failures and the symbolic crises of post-Brexit sovereignty are detached from their institutional causes and reattached to the figure of the abusive migrant. This is why the Albanian figure becomes so strategically useful – it condenses multiple varying anxieties into a single visible out-group. Questions about state capacity, austerity, outsourcing, legal obligations and administrative dysfunctions are displaced by questions about criminal gangs, fraudulent claims, legal loopholes and border control.

The theoretical significance of this argument lies in the Gramscian reading of border politics. While securitisation explains how migration is framed as an emergency, moral panic explains how deviant out-groups are amplified, and crimmigration explains how asylum and criminality become fused, the concept of social hegemony explains why these processes matter politically. Anti-Albanian sentiment manufactures consent by making a coercive state apparatus appear necessary, proportionate and protective. The state thus does not merely impose border control from above; it helps to produce a common sense where coercive measures are perceived as defending the public. This is the hegemonic function of the Albanian "*threat*."

However, this strategy is unstable since the underlying causes of crisis are not resolved, so therefore displacement must be continually reproduced. If Albanian arrivals fall, other nationalities or categories of migrant can be made to occupy the same symbolic position. This reveals both the specificity and the broader significance of the Albanian case as it is not simply another example of anti-migrant hostility; it displays how racialised governance can be recalibrated in response to shifting political conditions. As a predominantly white, European, non-EU and Muslim-majority population, Albanians occupy an ambiguous position within Britain, enabling a form of racialisation that operates through perceptions of criminality and deception.

Ultimately, the political weaponisation of anti-Albanian sentiment reveals how British politics manages crisis through the production of illegitimacy. The Albanian migrant

is made to stand in for border failure, welfare pressure, criminal disorder and sovereign decline. Through this construction, the state can redirect public frustration away from structural contradictions and towards a racialised out-group, while presenting expanded coercive power as common sense. Anti-Albanian sentiment therefore functions not only as prejudice, but as a political technology of consent, crisis displacement and state legitimisation.

Abbreviations, Acronyms and Initialisms

EU	European Union
HAC	Home Affairs Committee
HM	His Majesty's (e.g. HM Government, HM Treasury; in this paper, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons)
MPs	Members of Parliament
NHS	National Health Service
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
PM	Prime Minister
UK	United Kingdom
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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