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— SPECIAL SECTION —

Editorial Introduction: New Trends in Migration in the Western Balkans

Russell King*, Ilir Gëdeshi**

This editorial introduction sets the scene for the special section of 6 papers on new migration trends in the Western Balkans. The paper is in 2 parts. The first reviews the history and geography of migration from the 6 countries of the region (WB6). The 5 successor states of the former Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) have a similar migration profile, shaped by postwar labour migration to Germany, Austria and Switzerland, whilst Albania's mass migration is more recent – since 1990 – and directed mainly to Italy and Greece. Whilst labour migrations dominated the 1960s and 1970s (the 1990s in Albania) and refugee movements accompanied the break-up of Yugoslavia, recent migration trends are more diverse, including especially highly educated young people and students, as well as transit migrants from the Middle East and other source countries. Most WB6 countries have policies to manage their migrations and mobilise return and the diasporas for development but, in practice, these measures are not effective. The second part of this introductory paper provides an integrated overview of the 6 papers, sequenced in a way that moves from the general (covering the region as a whole) to the particular situations of individual countries regarding such topics as the changing profile of migration, student migration, return migration and gender perspectives.

Keywords: Western Balkans, migration, labour market, drivers of migration, migration policy

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Introduction

This special section focuses attention on a part of the Central and Eastern European region (defined in its widest sense as those European countries lying to the east of the former Iron Curtain) which has received scant attention in the pages of this journal thus far.¹ The Western Balkans are conventionally listed as the following 6 countries (denoted WB6): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia.² The last 5 of this list are now-independent entities of the former Yugoslavia, whereas Albania has been independent since 1912.

The 6 papers which follow were first presented at an international conference on ‘Migration, Development and Diaspora in the Western Balkans’, held in Tirana, Albania, on 27–28 October 2021. They represent a selection from the more than 30 presentations made at the conference. The conference was financially supported by the Western Balkans Fund and the EU’s Central European Initiative and was organised as part of an ongoing research collaboration between the Center for Economic and Social Studies (CESS) in Tirana and the Sussex Centre for Migration Research (SCMR), University of Sussex, UK.

The Western Balkan countries have a long history of emigration, resulting in substantial diasporas. The migration takes many forms: labour migration, high-skilled and student migration, forced migration and displacement, transit migration and return migration (King and Oruč 2019: 1). According to Oruč (2022), the first major outflows occurred between 1880 and 1921, directed especially to the United States. Around the same time, the fall of the Ottoman Empire led to a significant migration of Muslims from the WB region to Turkey. Emigration continued more sporadically during the interwar period. After World War II, Yugoslavia signed bilateral labour recruitment agreements with several Western European countries in need of foreign workers for factory and construction jobs. Yugoslavia was unique as the only state-socialist regime in Europe to sponsor labour migration at this time. Hence, large-scale migration flows took place in the 1960s and 1970s, especially to Germany, Switzerland and Austria, countries where there were labour shortages and which were also geographically close to Yugoslavia. Albania, meanwhile, was locked in isolation under the communist leadership of Enver Hoxha; here, emigration was banned until the early 1990s, when Albanians burst out of their hitherto closed borders (King 2003). Also in the 1990s, the break-up of Yugoslavia resulted in mass migration, displacement and refugee flows; for instance, around 25 per cent of Bosnia’s population sought refuge abroad during 1992–1995 (Oruč 2022).

In contrast to the earlier, male-dominated labour migrations, emigration from the 1990s onwards took on a more family-oriented character, helped by provisions in some host countries for family reunification. Nowadays, youth migration, student migration and brain drain constitute the characteristic and sensitive issues confronting national and regional policy-makers. According to a large-N survey conducted in 2018 with WB youth aged 14–29, one third of the respondents had strong aspirations to migrate. In response to the question ‘How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than 6 months?’, the percentages who checked either ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ were 43 for Albania, 35 for North Macedonia, 34 for Kosovo, 30 for Serbia, 27 for Bosnia and Herzegovina and 26 for Montenegro. The figures for Croatia and Slovenia, also covered by the survey, were 18 and 11 respectively (Lavrič 2020: 20).

Following the displacements and refugee flows of the 1990s, the WB region has more recently become a major transit zone for refugees coming from the Middle East, South Asia and parts of Africa. In 2015–2016, during the refugee crisis triggered by the conflict in Syria, almost 1 million people routed through the Western Balkans in their attempt to find sanctuary in the EU. Some of the routes followed through the region have perpetuated or become modified in the years since then. After a lull in the late 2010s, numbers have escalated in very recent years and increasing numbers of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants have become ‘stranded’ in the WB countries, unable to progress further north and unwilling or unable to turn back (Oruč 2022).³

As a result of the historically layered phases of migration referred to above, the WB countries have generated large emigrant and diaspora populations. Table 1 gives one set of relevant figures sourced from the World Bank's *Migration and Remittances Factbook* (World Bank 2016). The table shows the 'stock' of emigrants for each WB6 country expressed as a percentage of the resident population for the source country. Data for Croatia and Slovenia are included in the table since these countries are the remaining successor states to the former Yugoslavia and are now EU members, Slovenia since 2004, Croatia since 2013. Taking the WB6 countries, the combined stock of emigrants stands at 5.7 million or 31 per cent of the aggregated WB6 population of 18.3 million.⁴

Table 1. Population and emigration stock figures: WB6 plus Croatia and Slovenia

Country	Population in millions	Stock of emigrants	
		'000	%
Albania	2.9	1,264	43.6
Bosnia-Herzegovina	3.8	1,700	44.5
Kosovo	1.8	550	30.3
Montenegro	0.6	282	45.4
North Macedonia	2.1	626	30.2
Serbia	7.1	1,293	18.0
Croatia	4.2	888	20.9
Slovenia	2.1	171	8.3

Source: World Bank (2016).

Note: % figures are the stocks expressed as a ratio to total population.

OECD (2022) data document in more detail the geography of emigration from the WB6 countries. Table 2 sets out, for each WB country, the five main destination countries based on migrant stock figures for 2015/16. For Albania, Italy and Greece are the 2 main destinations, as they always have been since the early 1990s and the onset of Albanian mass emigration in the post-communist era. Albania thus exhibits a very different emigration geography compared to the other WB countries. For the latter, all part of the former Yugoslavia and therefore part of the labour migration agreements of the 1960s and 1970s, Germany heads the list in every case, followed by a variety of other country combinations, often including Austria and Switzerland.

Thus, after 3 decades since the start of the post-socialism period and the fragmentation of Yugoslavia, international migration remains one of the 'hot' issues in the region due to its size, intensity, diversity and socio-economic consequences. Reflecting their structurally weak position on the economic and geographic periphery of Europe, the WB countries are amongst the very few in Europe which have consistently registered net emigration and continue to do so. In summing up the key diagnostic features of the WB6 and their problematic relationship with migration, we can do no better than to draw on insights from the OECD's (2022) study on *Labour Migration in the Western Balkans*, which provides arguably the best, most thorough and up-to-date analysis of the migratory phenomenon in this region.

Table 2. Main destination countries for WB6 migrants, 2015/16

Country of origin	Country of destination	Number of emigrants	% of stock of emigrants
Albania	Italy	481,106	43
	Greece	394,986	35
	USA	95,725	8
	Germany	63,981	6
	UK	28,747	3
Bosnia-Herzegovina	Germany	171,729	20
	Austria	162,019	19
	USA	111,922	13
	Slovenia	102,846	12
	Sweden	58,110	7
Kosovo	Germany	219,763	62
	Austria	31,215	9
	Italy	29,704	8
	UK	22,093	6
	Slovenia	16,164	5
Montenegro	Germany	18,725	33
	USA	16,612	29
	Italy	2,946	5
	Slovenia	2,848	5
	Switzerland	2,475	4
North Macedonia	Germany	92,427	22
	Italy	75,914	18
	Switzerland	59,927	14
	Turkey	43,402	10
	Austria	38,961	9
Serbia	Germany	188,977	27
	Austria	137,057	19
	France	81,307	11
	Switzerland	61,047	9
	Hungary	44,625	6

Source: OECD (2022: 27–28), drawing on OECD database on immigrants in OECD and non-OECD countries.

- The waves of labour migration in past decades have created a *distinctive geography of the WB diaspora*, mainly in close-by EU and OECD countries (Germany, Italy, Greece, Austria, Switzerland) but also further afield (especially the USA). Emigration to neighbouring EU countries Croatia and Slovenia has been increasing in recent years, reprising earlier patterns of internal migration within Yugoslavia.
- Migration from the WB6 countries is shaped by a *mix of push and pull factors* operating at different scales, from a personal motivation to macro-structural economic, social and political forces. Amongst the key drivers are high unemployment, low wages, weak educational/training systems and outcomes, poor social-security measures, an ineffective health service, a weak climate for business development and endemic corruption. Table 3 sets out some of these indicators.

Table 3. Key socio-economic indicators, WB6 and comparators, 2019–20

	AL	BiH	KS	NMK	MNE	SRB	WB6	CEE	EU	OECD
Unemployment %	12	17	26	18	16	9	16	6	7	7
Youth unemployment %	27	34	50	36	25	27	33	12	17	13
Labour productivity '000 USD <i>per capita</i>	30	44	nd	45	50	44	43	69	94	94
94% Tertiary educated	18	11	12	18	22	22	17	27	28	
Women empowerment index score	75	46	25	53	71	62	52		80	

Notes: CEE = Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia. Youth unemployment: ages 15–24. Labour productivity is measured in USD at PPP. Tertiary educated = % working-age population with completed tertiary education. Women empowerment index score is a composite index measuring the gender employment gap, share of women in middle and senior management, the female labour-force participation rate, the share of women in full-time employment and the female unemployment rate.

Source: OECD (2022: 63, 68, 79).

- On average, more than half of WB6 migrants abroad are employed in *mid-level jobs*; for men, mainly in construction and related trades and blue-collar manufacturing jobs; for women, domestic cleaning, care work, sales assistants and associate health professionals. The labour-market outcomes have improved slightly over time but WB6 migrant workers remain more vulnerable to insecure situations and unemployment during recessions and the Covid-19 pandemic. WB6 migrant women are more disadvantaged than men. Across the board, WB6 migrants are often over-qualified for the jobs they can access. Around half of those with a tertiary-level qualification work in low- and medium-skilled jobs and hence experience de-skilling.
- *Remittances* correspond to approximately 10 per cent of GDP across the WB6 in 2019, the highest being Kosovo, 16 per cent. However, remittances' contribution to national GDP has been higher in the past – up to 22 per cent in Albania in the early–mid 1990s. Most WB migrants use informal channels to transfer remittances. Whilst remittances have been effective in lifting many households out of poverty, they have mainly been used for consumption purposes and not invested in economic activities that could drive self-sustaining development.
- *Students* from the WB6 countries have shown a sharply increasing desire to pursue their studies abroad, the upward trend in mobility being interrupted temporarily by the Covid-19 pandemic. Germany and Italy are the most popular destination countries for study abroad.
- Knowledge about *return migration* is generally lacking and policy on return is limited to receiving returnees from EU countries under readmission agreements. Concrete measures on the economic and social reintegration of voluntary and 'assisted' (often non-voluntary) returning migrants are in place or planned in most WB countries but are weak in their implementation.
- All WB6 governments have drafted and developed multi-annual *migration strategies*, with varying objectives and funding levels and with generally low degrees of effectiveness. Unstable governments and the difficulties of inter-departmental and cross-ministry coordination have been key obstacles to implementation. Monitoring and evaluating policies are rare.
- Likewise, *diaspora investment and knowledge transfer policies* have been developed in most WB countries but, often, there is a lack of effective frameworks and mechanisms to fully exploit this potential. Lack of trust in the government and public institutions (such as the police and legal and justice systems) is a major obstacle to diaspora involvement in homeland co-development initiatives. Return and circular migration can result in knowledge transfer but a lack of strong policies and of survey data make it difficult, once again, to evaluate the extent to which this actually takes place.

Having set out this general thematic background to migration processes in the WB region, we now turn to a summary of the papers.

Overview of the papers

Exemplifying a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the papers are presented in a sequence that moves from the general to the specific.

The first paper, by *Sanja Cukut Krilić and Simona Zavratnik*, is wide-ranging geographically, linking the WB region to Slovenia and to Europe via the so-called ‘Balkan route’ taken by migrants and refugees.⁵ The paper has two interlinked themes: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the already vulnerable situation of people on the move; and the specific cases of agricultural and posted workers, subject to border control and management within and beyond the EU at a time of health crisis. Posted workers are defined as workers sent by their employers to work in another EU member state. Covid controls exacerbated the already difficult situation of asylum-seekers and irregular migrants, whose mobility was halted by being trapped in poor conditions in reception centres in countries like Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia or subject to ‘pushback’ by the frontier controls enacted at the multiple borders within and beyond the Balkans. For migrant workers, the situation was more contradictory: they, too, were subject to the blockages to movement necessarily imposed by countries as part of their pandemic control policies, suffering both pushback and ‘pullback’ (prevented from returning to their home countries). On the other hand, many were ‘needed’ as essential workers for agriculture (harvesting, packing, processing and transporting food products) and to work in labour-shortage sectors such as construction and maintenance (including many posted workers). As an example, the authors reveal how many of the posted workers sent by Slovenia to work elsewhere were third-country nationals from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Given the timing of the research for this paper, the methods for data-gathering were transposed to the virtual social worlds inhabited by migrants and professionals working in the field. Key sources were blog posts, social-media discussion groups and online expert interviews.

Very different is the methodological approach of the second paper: a gravity-model analysis of the pattern of migration of health professionals from the WB countries to Europe, by *Isilda Mara*. The study covers the period 2000–2019 and shows, unsurprisingly, that earnings differentials are strong drivers of the high net outmigration of doctors from the WB5 countries (Kosovo is excluded because of lacking data).⁶ Also important are policy changes in destination countries, especially Germany, which is the major recruiting country for WB doctors. Hence the mobility of medical professionals is both supply- and demand-driven but based on inequality, which can become cumulative. There is a global excess demand for doctors which is set to double between 2020 and 2030 due to a combination of population growth and population ageing (including the ageing of the population of doctors). Through global competition for highly qualified labour, the wealthier countries seek to plug their own shortages of medical expertise by bringing in foreign-trained doctors and nurses. In this scenario of inequality, Mara describes a kind of cascading effect. Health professionals from the EU15 (now EU14 following Brexit) move to Switzerland, Norway, the USA and Canada, to be replaced by doctors from the CEE and WB countries. Whilst, at an individual level, doctors from the WB countries benefit from higher salaries, better career prospects and improved working conditions by moving abroad, at a macro level the WB countries lose out on 2 fronts. First, they are subsidising the supply of doctors for the richer destination countries by paying for their upbringing and training. Second, the health sectors of the WB countries are denuded of the professionals they need. Mara’s model suggests that reducing the income gap for medical doctors between sending and receiving countries by 10 per cent would reduce the emigration by 6.5 per cent.

For the third article, by *Adnan Efendić, Melika Husić-Mehmedović and Lejla Turulja*, we move to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and a mixed-methodology paper which combines non-linear econometric modelling

of emigration intentions with qualitative interviews to a variety of respondents (residents of BiH, emigrants and returnees of various ages and skill levels). The quantitative data input into the modelling consist of nationally representative survey data collected during the period 2006–2010 plus the latest survey round for 2019, the idea being to empirically analyse intentions to emigrate from BiH focusing on a range of determinants – individual, household, regional and socio-economic and political – over a decade-long time-span. Taking the most recent survey data (2019), 34 per cent of respondents say that they want to emigrate permanently and 24 per cent for a temporary stay abroad, while 22 per cent have no plans to emigrate and the remainder are undecided. Intentions to migrate are highest amongst young adults and those who are highly educated.⁷ Whilst these figures are broadly constant across the two survey periods, what changes is the reasoning behind these intentions. In 2019 the socio-economic and political environment of BiH acts as the most powerful influence over the intention to migrate; in the earlier surveys, individual-scale factors were determinant. The qualitative interviews confirm the increased importance of this structural push factor. The policy implications are clear: efforts should be made to improve the economy, the labour market and, above all, the political culture in order to damp down emigration intentions, especially among the young and more-educated segments of the population who are vital for the country's future prosperity and stability. These recommendations are all the more salient given BiH's current demographic scenario of a declining and ageing population.

Whilst the previous paper dealt with intended or potential migration, the next one, by *Russell King and Ilir Gëdeshi*, deals with *actual* migration – that of Albanian students studying abroad. The combination of an online survey (651 respondents) and follow-up interviews (21) reveals the broad characteristics of the phenomenon of Albanian student emigration – why they have left and where they have gone – and the prospects for their return to Albania. Survey results show that there are 3 main reasons for studying abroad: as a step towards an international career; to study at a better-standard university than those in Albania; and family encouragement. The study-abroad students are mainly drawn from professional and business families. Whilst studying abroad they are supported by a mixture of financial means – their families, grants and bursaries as well as part-time work. Germany is the most favoured destination, accounting for more than one quarter of survey respondents, followed by Italy and Turkey. The last of these is seen as a 'cheaper' option (in terms of tuition fees and living costs); it is often selected for undergraduate studies as a prelude to getting a postgraduate scholarship to do further study in Europe or North America. The degree courses chosen reflect a strategy of maximising employment and career chances – hence Business Studies, Economics, Natural Sciences, Maths, Engineering and ICT are favoured over degrees in Humanities or Social Sciences. For the future of the Albanian qualified labour market, the most worrying findings relate to forward plans: more than half of the survey respondents 'do not intend to return to Albania for the foreseeable future'; another 30 per cent will 'only return after spending some time working abroad' (during which, of course, they may change their mind) and only 5 per cent say that they intend to 'return to Albania immediately after graduating'. Reluctance to go back to Albania is explained in terms of low incomes, poor career prospects, low quality of life, nepotism and corruption at all levels of society and the general feeling that 'there is no future for me in Albania'.

The next paper, by *Ruth Vollmer*, stays with Albania but focuses on migrants who *did* return – and specifically on the role of networks in shaping social (im)mobility throughout the migration cycle. Based on 100 qualitative interviews with returned migrants in various locations in Albania, 3 clusters of participants are distilled according to the role that economic motives and social networks played in their migration profiles. The author's focus on networks is inspired by the fact that Albania ranks second-bottom in Europe regarding opportunities for upward social mobility. Hence Vollmer poses the question: to what extent can migration and return unlock the barriers to social-status improvement? Or, on the other hand, are social inequalities reinforced through the cycle of migration and return? The three clusters are initially formulated by reference to literature on the role of economic factors in the original decision to migrate. For the *intrinsically* motivated cluster,

economic factors play a minimal role: the migration is not undertaken specifically for economic reasons, e.g. to support the family with remittances. Albanian students who move abroad to study are the best example of this cluster – a link back to the previous paper. Successful economic integration upon return depends on using the foreign-acquired qualifications – and here family and network effects may be important at this stage of the migration cycle. For the *instrumentally* motivated cluster, migration is undertaken precisely to solve economic problems and achieve economic objectives. Network effects – finding employment and accessing other livelihood resources abroad – are often important. However, the lack of participation in networks can result in irregular migration and informal-sector jobs. Either way, migration can be instrumental in supporting family members back home through remittances and savings. Finally, for the third cluster – *survival*-motivated – the reason to migrate is to escape from severe economic problems. Here, networks can play a key role but in different ways, leading to different social-mobility outcomes.

The final paper in the set, by *Janine Pinkow-Läpple*, stays with the theme of return migration but introduces a gender perspective, examining the experience of highly skilled female returnees to Kosovo. Based on detailed narrative interviews with 19 Kosovan women who had returned from their sojourns (usually to study abroad) in Western Europe or North America, the author finds that all the women experienced their stays abroad as liberating and empowering. They used words or phrases like ‘transformational’, ‘insanely different’ and ‘like comparing salt to sugar’; one expressed surprise at seeing women driving buses. Their experiences of freedom and self-reliance, as well as exposure to different gender norms and behaviours, constitute what Pinkow-Läpple calls ‘intangible remittances’ – a cognitive resource which is brought back with them when they return to Kosovo. The challenge arises when they try to transfer these intangible remittances, especially their views and plans regarding gender equality. Their attempts are generally fiercely resisted in the various domains of Kosovan society – family, friends, work etc. As a result, around half of the interviewees were contemplating re-emigrating – and some had already done so. Kosovan society remains highly patriarchal and women continue to be subject to imposed stereotypes regarding their roles in family life and society. The context and findings of this paper are highly relevant to other WB countries and, in fact, to many other return migration settings elsewhere in the world (King and Lulle 2020).

Summing up, the 6 papers to follow offer crucial insights into the ongoing dynamics of migration in a cluster of small countries which are strategically positioned culturally, spatially and geopolitically on the doorstep of the EU and which will surely continue to play a key role in the future.

Notes


1. Over the 12 years since the CEEMR was launched, only 3 papers on the Western Balkan countries have been published – and only 1 of them on migration (Parker, Hester, Geegan, Ciunova-Shulenska, Palamidovska-Sterjadovska and Ivanov 2022); the other 2 were on citizenship (Džankić 2017, Krasniqi 2017).
2. The ‘Western Balkans’ is regarded as a geopolitical neologism created in the early 1990s to refer to those Balkan countries which are not members of the European Union (Oruč 2022: footnote 1).
3. For detailed maps of the different Balkan routes, including links back to source and transit countries, see IOM (2023: 3–4, 9–10). The same source gives the following figures for migrants arriving in the Western Balkans in recent years: 42,892 in 2018, 80,323 in 2019, 103,371 in 2020, 120,513 in 2021 and 192,266 in 2022. Hence, a 60 per cent increase 2021–2022 and a 4.5-times increase 2018–2022. A similar temporal profile but with different statistics (from Frontex on ‘detection of irregular arrivals in the Western Balkans’) shows an exponential growth, rising from 5,805 in 2018 to 144,148 in 2022 (see Mixed Migration Centre 2023: 16). According to these and other sources, the main sending

- countries include Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and Morocco – but the importance of each of these countries can vary year by year.
4. The figures discussed here and in Table 1 are not uncontested. For instance, the European Training Foundation (2022) which uses UN DESA data, estimates the WB total emigrant stock at 4.7 million, equivalent to 25 per cent of the total resident population of the WB6, yet a re-working of the ETF figures suggests an emigrant stock of 5.3 million (see European Training Foundation 2022: 25, 115). Meanwhile, the OECD report on labour migration from the Western Balkans states that ‘the more than one in five of the population born in the WB6 live abroad’ (OECD 2022: 20) and aggregates the WB6 emigrant stock at 4.8 million (2022: 25). This report also sets out the various data sources for estimating WB emigration stocks – the OECD International Migration Database, the Eurostat Migration and Migrant Population Database and the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) migration statistics – and points out a problem with the Kosovo data: missing in some cases and double-counted under Serbia in others (OECD 2022: 22).
 5. Cukut Krilić and Zavrtnik trace the Balkan route from Greece to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and, finally, to Italy or further into Europe. There is not 1 single route but many variants which shift over time in response to the perceived permeability of borders: see Pastore (2019).
 6. Survey and interview research on the emigration of Albanian doctors by Gëdeshi, King and Ceka (2023) suggests that the motivations to emigrate to Italy, Germany and other richer countries are less about salary *per se* and more to do with working conditions and long-term career prospects.
 7. The findings for BiH are consonant with those on the emigration intentions of the populations of Albania (King and Gëdeshi 2020) and North Macedonia (Zulfiu Alili, King and Gëdeshi 2022).

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Structural Vulnerabilities and (Im)Mobilities Amidst the Covid-19 Pandemic: People on the Move along the Balkan Route, Posted and Agricultural Workers

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The global Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerable situation of people on the move and other migrant groups at a time when the usual spatial routes were disrupted and mobility was restricted for much of the world's population. However, while mobility was halted for some groups of migrants (e.g., in reception centres), migrant workers faced somewhat contradictory treatment by different governments, reflecting the 'need' for migrant workers in certain sectors of the economy. The article provides an analysis of such paradoxes in European migration and mobility policies. It focuses on the situation of people on the move on the so-called 'Balkan route' and two categories of temporary workers in the European Union: posted workers and agricultural workers. Its main argument is that, despite hierarchies of different mobility practices, both groups remained largely marginalised and such inequalities made some populations structurally vulnerable in different ways.

Keywords: migration, people on the move, posted work, agriculture, Balkan route, Covid-19, refugees

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Introduction: the changed contours of migration and mobility in the European Union

In recent decades, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, we have witnessed major, even paradigmatic, changes. These have been most evident in the dissolution of former socialist regimes and nation states, the transition to new economic forms and the accession of several nation states to the European Union. Although it appears that the European Union has opened up by implementing the principle of the free movement of people, capital, goods and services – the pillars of the European single market – it has also selectively closed itself to those perceived by governments and the public to be ‘undesirable’ migrants (Zavrtnik and Cukut Krilić 2020). Increased control over the movements of different populations is also possible due to the development of information and communication technologies, which increasingly turn the Schengen border into a technological border that distinguishes ‘legitimate’ from ‘illegitimate’ migrants. Moreover, the use of technological tools reinforces physical borders, embodying the paradigm of ‘violent borders’ (Jones 2016) symbolised by the use of physical barriers such as barbed wire. In this regard, it is not an exaggeration to point to restrictive and securitised migration regimes as one of the culprits for the increasing insecurity and vulnerability of people on the move. We are aware of the arbitrariness of the various categorisations of migrants, which are based on perceptions of the legitimacy of migration rather than the reality of individuals’ lives. In this respect, taking into account also the issue of ‘categorical fetishism’ (Crowley and Skleparis 2018) that has been used to justify policies of migrant exclusion and containment based on the problematic distinctions between a ‘real refugee’ and a ‘migrant’ and/or between ‘voluntary’ and ‘forced’ migration, we use the established term ‘people on the move’ to describe the various movements of people along the Balkan route. These people are generally granted neither the status of asylum-seeker nor that of refugee and this is reflected in our choice of terminology.

On the other hand, labour migration and mobility policies target specific groups of migrants and mobile individuals who are supposedly ‘needed’ for labour markets in European Union countries. For example, companies in the European Union send ‘posted’ workers to provide a service in another member state on a temporary basis. As defined by the European Commission (n.d.), a posted worker is ‘an employee who is sent by his employer to carry out a service in another EU Member State on a temporary basis, in the context of a contract of services, an intra-group posting or a hiring out through a temporary agency’. As such, posted workers are among the groups that remain in the member state where they work only for the duration of the provision of their service and do not integrate in the labour market of the state where they work. Their situation represents a certain contradiction between the principle of free movement of services, goods, capital and labour on the one hand and the European social model and established models of labour relations on the other (Vah Jevšnik and Rogelja 2018). Among temporary migrant workers in the European Union – for example in agriculture – underpayment, long working hours, inhumane working and living conditions and various forms of rights violation are also widespread (European Parliament 2021). We note that these policies, particularly with their emphasis on the temporary nature of various forms of labour migration and mobility, have contributed to the generally insecure and precarious status of migrant and mobile workers in the countries of the European Union, not unlike policies aimed at people on the move. In this sense, our main point is that Covid-19 has exacerbated structurally produced inequalities and vulnerabilities for both people on the move and migrant workers, although nation states adopted quite differential treatments of workers on the one hand, and people on the move on the other.

The Covid-19 pandemic further demonstrated that emerging diseases are always, in the words of Dingwall, Hofmann and Staniland (2013), sources of instability, uncertainty and even social crisis. As noted early in the pandemic, it became clear how the interlocking aspects of the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, with one of the groups particularly affected being people on the move, migrants and refugees

(Casaglia 2021; Fassani and Mazza 2020; United Nations 2020). The various aspects of the crisis related not only to their health aspects – namely the limited ability of these groups to protect themselves and maintain physical distance – but also to the socioeconomic aspects of their increasingly precarious living conditions and the restrictions on their movement and border closures (United Nations 2020). According to Casaglia (2021), borders and boundary lines have played an important role in shaping such asymmetries.

The theoretical part of the article deals first with the question of how borders are controlled and managed on the European territory, so that it is more or less desirable/legitimate for certain population groups to cross the borders of a particular nation state. Taking into account the socio-political realities in different nation states, we examine the changes in European border regimes that have led to the increasing securitisation of the European Union's borders, particularly using various digital technologies. We discuss the role that migration and mobility from the territories of Central and Eastern Europe have played in 'filling' gaps in certain economic sectors in the European Union. Despite this utilitarian stance toward migration and mobility, we point to concepts such as (il)legitimate mobilities and their embeddedness in broader debates about the proper composition of national populations that reflect the ongoing hierarchisation of certain patterns of migration and mobility. While the proponents of the new mobilities paradigm see the issue of movement as central to many lives and many organisations, they also expose questions around the intensity and the eligibility of different groups to move and also see the regulation of mobility as of central importance (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2007; Urry 2000).

This article situates these changes in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the limits of the pandemic also became the limits of mobility. According to Düvell (2020), restrictions and even the suspension of mobility were the predominant responses to the pandemic in most European nation states. Nevertheless, we argue that measures to contain the spread of the virus consisted not only of immobility policies but also of mobility, in order to strike a balance between the preservation of public health on the one hand and the needs of the economy in certain sectors that the states considered 'essential' on the other. This sharpened the distinction between the legitimate and the illegitimate movements of the population.

The empirical part of the article draws on the data and semi-structured interviews with different professionals in the field of migration collected through the blog entitled *The Virus Knows No Borders* (Virus Nima Meja, www.virusnimameja.com). The blog was created by the authors of this article and four students at the University of Ljubljana at the beginning of the pandemic.¹ The texts on the blog focused primarily on the changing notions of im/mobility and the hierarchies of different types of migration in the Western Balkan and Mediterranean countries in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. We also use secondary data from researchers and various stakeholders and organisations. In order to highlight pandemic-related changes in the mobility patterns of posted workers, one of the most 'mobile' groups of people moving for work, we examined selected data on the posting of workers during the pandemic, collected as part of the international project *POSTING.STAT - Enhancing the Collection and Analysis of National Data on Intra-EU Posting*. We focus on data for Slovenia, which is, relatively, one of the most important posting countries and significantly involved in the posting of third-country nationals, especially from the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

Based on the points of reference presented, we examine three examples that indicate the different treatment of certain groups of mobile people during the pandemic and that frame our main research questions. First, we present the situation of people who travelled on migrant/refugee paths along the Balkan route. The aim is to examine both the significant limitation of their mobility in refugee camps and detention centres and the structural vulnerabilities which they experienced in the midst of the pandemic due to the inadequate living conditions they faced. In the next part, the paper focuses on two groups of workers: agricultural workers and posted workers. While their freedom of movement was initially suspended, nation states soon resorted to various measures to maintain the 'flow' of workers in sectors that were considered either 'essential'

(agriculture and related activities such as harvesting and packing) and/or ‘deficient’ in terms of domestic labour (e.g., construction, which is one of the most common sectors in which posted workers are employed). We argue that the insistence on the temporary nature of their status has contributed to their structural vulnerability in certain nation states. Examining these changes in the context of Covid-19 leads us to some preliminary implications for future migration and mobility research.

Theoretical background: (im)mobility and hierarchies during the pandemic

Even before the pandemic, control over the movement of certain populations was one of the most important features of the migration policies of most nation states. These relied on sophisticated information databases that allowed sorting between ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ migrants (Scott, Odukoya and von Unger 2014). In this regard, mechanisms for classifying migration took effect at the borders of nation states, which had the power to construct hierarchies of particular groups of migrants. The European Union has fenced itself with such ‘e-borders’ since its inception (Allan and Vollmer 2018; Zavratnik Zimic 2003), albeit most intensively after its largest territorial expansion towards the former ‘socialist East’. In this respect, the barbed wire on the border between Slovenia and Croatia and in Hungary is the most obvious example of such a paradigm of the securitised border. In such a perception, mobility – paradoxically one of the most characteristic features of the so-called global subject – is a luxury that the ‘other’ does not deserve (Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2016). As McDonnell (2020) argues, forced immobility and family separation are nothing new for millions of people. Many individuals and groups are routinely excluded and discriminated against under the global mobility regime; they are targeted by destination states’ externalisation strategies aimed at keeping certain (would-be) migrants in check and denying them freedom of movement. From this perspective, we should name restrictive and securitised migration regimes as one of the culprits in the increasing insecurity and vulnerability of people on the move.

Moreover, temporary labour-migration schemes increasingly feature forced transience as one of their main characteristics (Horvath 2014; Yeoh 2020). Horvath (2014) understands temporary labour-migration programmes as linked to power constellations and social inequalities, as they depend largely on the ‘global division of labour and the unequal distribution of resources and life chances between regions and countries’ (Horvath 2014: 156). One of the most prominent examples of such programmes are seasonal-worker programmes for labourers in agriculture. Given the increasingly restrictive migration policies, it is no coincidence that nation states base recruitment programmes for this group of workers on the temporary nature of their stay, resulting in a lower level of granted social and economic rights. Structural determinants of their vulnerability are also evident in the working and living conditions of this group: labour hierarchies are formed according to the type of work and ethnic or racial affiliation, as well as the legal status of certain groups – citizens are at the top of such hierarchies, while undocumented migrants are generally at the bottom (Cohen 2017; Corrado 2011; Holmes 2013). Moreover, agriculture is a sector that is strongly linked to the characteristics of physical space, quality of land, season and climate. The seasonal nature of work in agriculture is one of the additional reasons for the short-term and precarious employment of workers in agriculture (King, Lulle and Melossi 2021).

Furthermore, many policies and practices of nation states that receive migrants are still based on the notion of the national population as a closed system with shared linguistic, cultural and historical experiences and associated material conditions such as residence in a common territory and common ancestry (Kreager 2015). Such a notion seems difficult to reconcile with the idea of the free movement of people, capital, goods and services, which is considered necessary for the creation of a common European labour market to strengthen European integration (Kmak 2015; Knežević Hočevar and Cukut Krilić 2019; van Ostaijen 2016). However,

in the face of increasing austerity policies and the neoliberal dismantling of welfare systems, media reports and political statements project concerns about job loss and abuse of welfare systems onto migrants to create a moral distinction between the ‘deserving refugee’ and the ‘undeserving migrant’. Yet the media and political actors often perceive both groups as outsiders who threaten the well-being of a supposedly homogeneous Europe (Holmes and Castañeda 2016).

Shamir (2005: 208) defines globalisation as ‘a process constitutive of a global mobility regime that seeks to separate those substances (viruses, people and hazardous materials) that can cross the boundaries of particular social containers (e.g., national borders and gated communities) from those that cannot’. As discussed above, selective migration policies were already firmly entrenched in European migration policy before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, with the pandemic, the immobility of a large part of the population became a commanded and desired way of life. The limits of the principle of free movement now became apparent to a larger share of the world’s population, not only across the borders of nation states but also at their micro-administrative level. In this process, borders not only played a symbolic function but can also be seen as actual technologies and bureaucracies for containing human activity and managing social order (Düvell 2020). Nation states have reintroduced and expanded border-management practices in areas where they had previously been largely abolished (Radil, Castan Pinos and Ptak 2021; Ramji-Nogales and Goldner Lang 2020), such as in the Schengen area. However, these practices were not a complete departure from previous ones as, for example, nation states already used various practices during the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ to suspend the movement of people along various migration routes (such as the Balkan route) or to introduce registration practices even at the internal borders of the Schengen area (Kogovšek Šalamon 2016). Especially for third-country nationals who are not residents of the European Union, border closures have a significant impact on their living conditions – several states have also adopted national measures restricting access to asylum and the right to enter and leave reception centres and imposed a temporary registration freeze (Ramji-Nogales and Goldner Lang 2020). Such measures leave in limbo those who are the most vulnerable: asylum-seekers and irregular migrants (Triandafyllidou 2020), who now are seen to pose both a security and a health threat. Recognising the historical continuities and trends underlying such developments, Tazzioli and Stierl (2021) argue that the pandemic has only accelerated already existing tendencies to contain and detain migrants. It is true that restricting access to asylum, portraying asylum-seekers as a security threat and a threat to local and national economies, and constructing ‘economic migrants’ to pose as ‘political migrants’ were common practices in migration policy even before the pandemic (Kisiara 2015). Various actors therefore justified them by protecting the security of migrants and citizens. According to Tazzioli and Stierl (2021), the pandemic also reinforced existing deterrence measures and access to asylum as part of sanitary biopolitical and spatial tactics. In this context, Radil, Castan Pinos and Ptak (2021) contend that, in the context where the focus was on controlling the movement of people to stop the spread of the virus, border management was among the most important policy tools to ostensibly contain public health risks and ensure national security. As Casaglia (2021) notes, the tension between inclusion and exclusion in relation to the movement of people and goods is increasingly taking shape, leading to global inequalities in mobility and demonstrating the impact of border closures and differential inclusion on particularly vulnerable populations. Mobility as such has been subject to profound asymmetries and exclusions in terms not only of who could travel but also of who could afford to do so in the face of quarantine measures, testing costs and disrupted travel routes (Aradau and Tazzioli 2021).

Nonetheless, nation states have adopted different practices and measures to allow the entry of those groups of workers who were considered indispensable (Neef 2020). While, according to Shamir (2005), the differential ability to move through space and mere access to opportunities for such movement is an important stratifying force in the global social hierarchy, the differential treatment of certain groups of mobile populations during the pandemic was evident. The privileges, power, boundaries and hierarchies of

im/mobility were reshuffled (Ben Lazreg and Garnaoui 2020) but inequalities also crystallised during the pandemic through the enforced forms of (im)mobility and through the debates over who could work, who could not or who was pressured to work (Dobusch and Kreissl 2020; Schling, Espinoza and Datta 2020). Thus, while social positioning as mobile and immobile was redrawn to some degree, relational dependence on the socially reproductive labour of others remained central. In this process, the distinction between those who needed to be protected from health hazards (in this case, the native population) and migrant workers, whose labour contribution was more important than their health, created a differentiation and hierarchisation between bodies that were considered valuable and worthy of protection and those that were less valuable and potentially expendable (Bejan 2020; Dobusch and Kreissl 2020). The latter should remain on the territory of the host state only if their presence is necessary (Pécoud 2013). As Paul (2020) has analysed, at the structural level, intergovernmental agreements facilitated opportunities for people to travel as essential workers, even in the early days of the pandemic. At the agency level, migrants also struggled to keep borders porous to some degree by first campaigning for repatriation and then for return to sectors that could not function without their labour.

Creţan and Light (2020) also emphasise that, during the pandemic, it became even clearer how much the economies of Western European countries depended on flexible and mobile migrant workers. As we point out in the next section, using the example of posted and agricultural work, Western European governments soon realised that the exodus of labour from Eastern Europe had left enormous deficits in certain sectors of the economy, such as construction, agriculture, services and care. In this regard, at least to some degree, economic priorities and concerns about the food crisis took precedence over epidemiological concerns. Aware of the contested nature of such patterns of mobility and migration, we next examine some of the changes in the structures of mobilities and their hierarchisation – in terms of, for example, citizenship, occupation, etc. – that became more evident during the pandemic.

Methods and data collection: virtual methodologies

Considering the multiple aspects of pandemics, a group of two migration researchers and four sociology students at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, created a blog titled *#Stay Home. Migration, Refugees and COVID-19* at www.virusnimameja.com (translated as ‘*The Virus Knows No Borders*’) at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. Its aim was to address the complexity of new migration and refugee routes at the time when borders became impassable for almost everyone.

Against the backdrop of closed national and, in some cases, even municipal, borders or neighbourhoods, we transposed our research to the virtual social world where contemporary digital communities of refugees, migrants, activists, researchers, locals and other actors created support networks for people on the move as well as professionals and experts working in the field of migration. Moreover, digital technologies, essential for the mobility of ‘digital refugees’ (Zavrtnik and Cukut Krilić 2020), became a truly crucial factor in the migration reality for isolated people in refugee centres along interrupted refugee pathways, such as the Balkan route, during the pandemic. Apps and various online communication tools thus became also our core methodological tools for conducting interviews and observing changes in physical space.

All original data were obtained via the internet, which allowed us not only to collect secondary data but also, most importantly, to talk to experts and activists working on the ground along the Balkan migration route, from Greece to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia and the final destination in Italy or further west. Digital research methods based on the web connectivity of different actors in a given research area therefore allowed us to gain deeper insights into social processes in territorial units that were closed, inaccessible or restricted during the pandemic. Virtual research methods are already well-placed in social science research (see Hine 2005, 2012; Phillips and Plesner 2018) but their use understandably expanded

during the pandemic and offered insights beyond closed territories and closed borders in our research area – migration and refugee research.

Our data were assembled through semi-structured online interviews with experts, active debates on webinars, analysis of existing secondary data sources and statistical data collected as part of the POSTING-STAT project, focusing on data on posting during the pandemic period. We conducted six online interviews with experts in the field of migration and asylum policy working in different locations along the Balkan route.² We conducted one interview with a medical worker from the US working in a refugee centre in Greece, one with a journalist from Slovenia working in Greece and four with activists or professionals in close contact with refugees on the ground and/or involved in direct aid delivery in Italy, Slovenia and Croatia at the time of or before the Covid-19 pandemic. We conducted the interviews via Zoom, Viber, Messenger or phone apps or phone calls. The authors of the blog participated in four specialised online workshops/webinars that focused on the situation of migrants and refugees in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in different areas – on the Balkan route, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia; in the European Union and globally. The blog's short texts, reports and expert opinions present our key findings on the impact of the pandemic on refugees at global, regional and local levels. Secondary-data analysis includes academic literature on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration, reports and expertise from global actors in the field of migration and mobility regimes and their critical reviews and the broader academic literature in the field of mobility and public health.

The data collection using virtual methods took place primarily over a 2.5-month period, from mid-March to the end of May 2020 and was published from 7 April 2020 to 6 June 2020, inclusive. During this period, we published 23 different texts, either in their full original versions or abridged as reports, expert opinions and comments on the blog *#Stayhome: Migration, Refugees, and COVID-19*. Nevertheless, we continued to follow the discussions on this topic throughout 2020 and 2021. In 2021, data was collected from the POSTING-STAT project and the first author was among the project researchers.

Results: the ambivalence of (im)mobility regimes and new structural vulnerabilities amidst the Covid-19 pandemic

To illustrate the paradoxes of (im)mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic, we present the results of our analysis in two sections, although the topics of people on the move and migrant workers in the pandemic era are in many ways strongly interrelated and overlapping. The first sub-section focuses mainly on the policy and institutional responses to refugee flows along the Balkan route in the context of the notion of the contagious 'other', while the second sub-section addresses the issue of mobile workers (agricultural workers and posted workers), focusing on the policies and public perceptions of (un)wanted migrant workers in the era of mobility restrictions.

People on the move along the Balkan route

The first social relation concerns the new realities of mobility regimes, demonstrating in practise how migration and asylum public policies and institutions respond to the new global reality of disrupted mobility and changing asylum procedures. Our empirical research uncovered two fundamental problems: first, global (im)mobility and the associated increased vulnerability of refugees and migrants as they travel; and, second, the extremely limited access to asylum in most countries in the region. According to our interlocutors, the imperative of global non-mobility meant that people remained trapped in various unpredictable situations as they travelled, often without any, let alone appropriate, information. Globally, refugee centres were still

struggling with the problems that preceded the virus and that were now exacerbated. The overpopulation of refugee centres, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece and Serbia, undoubtedly had a negative impact on the mental and physical health of their residents. Moreover, at the onset of the pandemic, three-quarters of refugees and migrants worldwide were stranded in areas where health systems were already overburdened and consequently unable to successfully manage the health crisis. According to our analysis, these were particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (Vovk and Andlovic 2020). Numerous reports from the UN, the IOM and NGOs shed light on the fundamental difficulties in maintaining hygiene standards in overcrowded refugee centres; the latter was already a problem before the pandemic and inadequate sanitary conditions worsened with its onset. One possible strategy to address the overcrowding problem beyond the pandemic is to relocate refugees to other centres with more vacancies in Europe that would ensure better sanitary conditions. Another, more permanent strategy is to settle their legal status (Perner and Zafošnik 2020) and thus provide access to health services. Both strategies address the broader issue of solidarity and social cohesion among European Union member states and their perception of democracy.

Another issue that emerges from our data is violence in refugee centres. We found the latter, for example, in the centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bihać) and Serbia (Krnjača). Refugees are dehumanised and subjected to violent practices, while the organisations responsible for the centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IOM, UNHCR) did not actually provide clear answers to questions about human-rights violations. According to NGO sources, the perpetrators of this violence are often members of public institutions, private security guards in the camps and police guards at the borders and on the streets of the municipalities. Moreover, the practice of illegally returning refugees at the borders, known as pushbacks, along the Balkan route, including Italy, remains highly problematic. Hungary even went so far as to legalise these pushbacks (Cukut Krilić and Zafošnik 2020). On the other hand, NGO activities on the ground were severely limited, if not crippled, due to mobility restrictions caused by the pandemic and limited access to refugee facilities (Cukut Krilić and Zafošnik 2020; Perner 2020). Independent observation was difficult because journalists and activists did not have access to the centres or were accompanied by security forces and IOM representatives (Cukut Krilić 2020a). As a volunteer from the NGO *No Name Kitchen*, an organisation that supports refugees in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, pointed out in an interview, the Covid-19 pandemic left these people even more isolated, less visible and as a result, completely forgotten by both politicians and the media (Zafošnik 2020). According to a medical worker from the NGO *In-Sight* (Perner 2020), who works in a refugee centre on the island of Chios, a major problem faced by the Greek islands is the lack of staff. Due to the isolated location of the islands, volunteers are also unable to get to the urgent sites.

Another issue concerns access to asylum, a basic human right that must be granted to all without access restrictions. However, anti-immigrant discourse was prevalent in the public and government policies of most countries on the Balkan route even before the outbreak of Covid-19. With the proclamation of the health crisis, these practices have intensified considerably. To illustrate, with the proclamation of the state of emergency, it was no longer possible to initiate the asylum process or regularise residency in Serbia, while the army patrolled the streets, borders and areas surrounding refugee camps (Cukut Krilić 2020a). Another theme reflects the role of key global actors in managing migration. Here, the UNHCR, IOM and WHO play a particularly important role in responding to the health crisis (Vovk and Andlovic 2020). Global policy has focused on universal access to health services that include the prevention, testing and treatment of refugees. However, further analysis of the limited mobility of most inhabitants around the world shows that the activities of global migration actors during the pandemic had a restricted reach, as their mandate was territorially limited, which was clearly reflected in their presence or absence (Vovk and Andlovic 2020).

One of the main issues in the data collection phase concerns the position of the refugee as a potential disease carrier and the complex relationships on the public health–pandemic–refugee nexus. The question here is how

the existing coverage of migration relates to the coverage of health carried out by nation states. In this health policy, the firmly established demarcation of the foreigner as a potential disease carrier plays an important role. To illustrate the thesis that the public largely perceives refugees as a threat to the public health of the local community, we use the example from our study of a small tourist town in Greece. After the public learned of an increasing number of infections with Covid-19, the authorities imposed a quarantine for the entire region and sent several health workers to the local refugee camp. The public linked the panic surrounding the rising infections to prostitution, more specifically to local men who visited the camp to seek sexual services from refugee women (Lihtenvalner 2020b). We might view the general reaction that followed as a local epidemic of xenophobia and racism which, coupled with sexism, blamed the female residents of the migrant camp for the situation, thus labelling them as the contagious ‘other’ and attributing general responsibility for the Covid-19 infections to migrant women. The only expressions of solidarity towards the young refugee women and the only criticism of the local men came from feminist groups and some leftist politicians (Lihtenvalner 2020b).

This homogenisation of the local community towards the young refugee women clearly highlighted the limits of our imagined community as well as the intersections of gender, class and race, indicators that are important markers of social relations. Another important theme is the apparent discrepancy in public health concerns for refugees. In this particular case, involving the possible infection of local men, the authorities instituted mass testing and a high presence of health workers, in contrast to cases involving several hundred thousand refugees stranded on the Greek islands, particularly Lesbos, Chios and Samos. For these refugees, concern for their health during the pandemic remained a largely secondary issue.

As our interviewees told us, the situation is similar in Italy, especially along the northern border with Slovenia, where the authorities primarily ‘cultivate’ the rhetoric of border protection against refugees (Lešnik 2020). During our data collection, what was going on in the large closed refugee centres in Italy and along the entire Balkan migration route was quite vague. Indeed, Italy was one of the largest hotspots of the new coronavirus disease. However, this did not correspond to strong public policies that also adequately addressed the health of refugees and migrant workers (*ibidem*).

Slovenia was no exception in this regard, with its rhetoric of the constant rejection of refugees as part of government policy, which overlapped with public health issues and created the new social paranoia. As Vezjak (2020) shows, this is a psychopolitical process of refugee intimidation that has been ongoing since the refugee crisis in 2015, with the refugee portrayed as contagious in this propaganda. If someone is contagious, they must indeed be a refugee and, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the political connotation has been associated with ‘tangible’ biological and health contagion (Vezjak 2020). This further legitimises the myth of refugees as disease vectors who have typhoid and scabies and are now spreading Covid-19 (*ibidem*).

The wide range of public policy and institutional responses along the Balkan migration route provides insights into the practice of providing safe places and ways to integrate vulnerable people on the move into a shared safe zone. The theme relates to the broader problem of deepening social inequalities during the time of the pandemic, while making new distinctions based on implicitly racist and nationalist assumptions about the ‘carriers of the virus’. Populist mobilisation around the refugee issue has been prevalent along the Balkan route during the pandemic. While migrants bear the brunt of the harassment by the authorities, those who try to help, advocate for or report on the abuse of refugees become secondary targets. ‘Both international and local journalists reporting have been threatened or fined by police while documenting the situation along the Balkan route’, reports Lihtenvalner (2020a). However, while propaganda and misinformation also help to fuel resentment and mobilise action, civic engagement – both vigilante action and acts of solidarity and altruism – is usually motivated by what the public perceives as a lack.

In summary, political propaganda and simplistic reasoning regarding the role of people on the move during the health crisis are not only a tradition of populist political parties in Central and Eastern European countries

and the Balkans but are also deeply rooted throughout Europe and widely manifested in Western countries as well. This particular social problem reflects a long history and legacy of a ‘fear of refugees’ by the European Union and Europeans in general. The European public perceives people on the move as an ambivalent social reality (Zavrtnik, Falle-Zorman and Broder 2017). On the one hand, they are associated with fears of a threat to cultural identity and the traditional European way of life and, on the other, with the reality of shortages in labour markets in Western European countries – a topic which we explore in the next part of the article.

(Im)mobility and Covid-19: workers in agriculture and posted workers

Across the world, in various geographic contexts, agricultural employers are increasingly relying on migrant workers to perform arduous and demanding tasks in the sector (King *et al.* 2021). In European countries, this trend is related to the intensification of agriculture in some areas of Southern Europe (e.g. Spain and Italy) but the phenomenon is also observed in European countries where it is not as widespread. In Slovenia, stakeholders only sporadically mention the importance of migrant labour in agriculture (Kmetijsko Gozdarska Zbornica 2018) and there is clearly no research in this area. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food published information as early as March 2020 showing that agricultural labour, especially harvesting (particularly of hops, berries and vegetables), was under threat. Due to the measure to protect public health from the spread of coronavirus disease, the authorities cancelled all procedures for the arrival of seasonal workers in agriculture, especially those from Romania. They also called on students, the unemployed, younger pensioners and all healthy people who could work to answer their call and do seasonal work in agriculture. As the ministry stated, the response was satisfactory, as some people were even willing to work for free, so there was no need for foreign labour (Cukut Krilić 2020b; Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food 2020).

However, the ministry also emphasised that it would not interfere in the business relationship between the employer and the job-seeker, which also refers to the amount of the wages, as the Law on Agriculture establishes a minimum payment for seasonal work in agriculture. Labour law does not apply to ‘temporary and occasional work in agriculture’ and workers do not have the protection afforded to people in an employment relationship (Breznik 2020). The situation in Slovenian agriculture is symptomatic of the generally low level of rights that governments and employers grant to seasonal workers. Moreover, the discourse that ‘native labour’ should help national agriculture is not exceptional as, for example, the British government also called on locals to perform work in agriculture, especially harvesting (Beard 2020). Despite such calls, they organised flights of fruit pickers from Romania to the UK soon after the initial restrictive stance (O’Carroll 2020). Germany also allowed seasonal workers from Romania to enter the country in early April 2020 and organised charter flights to fly them there (Deutsche Welle 2020). However, host countries were not the only ones that made efforts to facilitate the entry of seasonal agricultural workers. The Romanian government also took a measure to exempt flights of seasonal workers from the ban on commercial flights to areas which it considered as ‘crisis areas’ in terms of the spread of the virus (Gascón Barberá 2020).

In a situation where borders were virtually closed to all and air travel was largely at a standstill, some EU countries, such as Germany and the UK, continued to ‘import’ large groups of seasonal workers from Eastern Europe, especially in agriculture. The authorities and employers largely carried out this process in disregard of basic physical distancing rules, both during the journey (especially when leaving Germany) and during the stay. In this respect, although they were mostly citizens of European Union countries, they were in a similar position to people on the move who are forced to live in inadequate and cramped accommodation. Moreover, they were often unable to comply with the rules of physical distancing when working in the fields (Cukut Krilić 2020b; Lagana 2020; Zavrtnik and Perner 2020). In this context, NGOs in particular have called for the legalising of the stay and work of undocumented migrants in agriculture in order to reduce the shadow

economy and exploitative practices in the sector (Cukut Krilić 2020b). However, it is still unclear whether or not the crisis Covid-19 has led to better working conditions and more solidarity with the group of workers on which our food system so crucially depends.

Another example of those working temporarily in another country is posted workers, who are sent by a company in the European Union to another European Union country to provide services. This type of work is especially common in the construction industry, where it has become one of the main forms of recruiting short-term temporary workers with lower wages and other economic rights. Researchers have identified numerous vulnerabilities of posted workers such as their temporary status in host countries, cultural and language barriers, insufficient union representation, inadequate living conditions, disadvantages in social and economic security and the overlap of migration and posting status, as many workers posted to another member state are third-country nationals (Danaj 2018; Dodi and Melenciuc 2019; Vah Jevšnik and Rogelja 2018). The issue of posting has attracted considerable political and media attention in Slovenia as one of the most important sending countries of posted workers. The posting of third-country nationals occurs mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina but also from Serbia, Kosovo and other former Yugoslav republics. In this respect, the posting of workers to Slovenia is part of the already well-established historical, cultural, geographical and economic relations between these countries. Furthermore, bilateral agreements with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia on the employment of workers make it easier for workers from these countries to obtain legal residence and a work status in Slovenia and facilitate the inflow of workers across nation state borders. To examine changes in the mobility patterns of posted workers during the pandemic, we hereby rely on data from the project POSTING-STAT, under which we collected data from various statistical sources summarised in the national report for Slovenia (Vah Jevšnik, Cukut Krilić and Toplak 2022). Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, we observed an upward trend in the posting of workers from Slovenia to other member states in 2020. Compared to 2019, the number of Portable Documents A1 increased by 7 per cent and the number of people posted abroad increased by 6 per cent.³ To illustrate, the total number of workers posted abroad in 2020 amounted to 60,503 persons, an increase of 6 per cent compared to 2019 and almost 15 per cent compared to 2017. Workers posted abroad accounted for 7 per cent of total national employment in Slovenia and even around 30 per cent of national employment in the Slovenian construction sector. In terms of the total number of PD A1s issued and people posted in 2020, the project findings demonstrate that the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact on postings from Slovenia. The quarterly statistics do demonstrate a decrease in the number of issued PD A1s in the second quarter (April–June) and in the fourth quarter (October–December), reflecting the peaks of the epidemic, but the total number of issued PD A1s continued to increase compared to previous years. The report also identified posting of third-country nationals from Slovenia as a persistent trend. In 2020, almost 60 per cent of posted workers from Slovenia were third-country nationals and the highest number and the largest share of third-country nationals posted from Slovenia were nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina (23,051; 38 per cent), followed by nationals of Serbia (7,706; 12.7 per cent) and Kosovo (3,368; 5.6 per cent). Compared to 2019, the number of posted workers who are nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased by 21.8 per cent, from 18,925 in 2019 to 23,051 in 2020.

The analysis shows that the mobility and border crossing of temporary agricultural workers and posted workers were interrupted only briefly and that the border crossing of workers deemed necessary and/or ‘needed’ was soon possible again, which is evident both at the level of selected statistics and with examples from agriculture. Nevertheless, the vulnerabilities of this group of workers should not be overlooked.

Conclusions: ambivalences about mobility and new inequalities

The article has addressed the changes in mobility and migration patterns during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first topic related to the situation of people on the move, especially along the Balkan route. The Covid-19 pandemic put people on the move in an additional vulnerable position because the usual spatial routes were disrupted and the restricted mobility – i.e., the lockdowns of societies – further increased the insecurity of continuing the route – although, of course, mobility could not be stopped completely. We observed the structural vulnerability of this group at many levels. For example, they often live in cramped housing conditions and spaces without adequate and sufficient access to water. Hygiene items are in a constant state of volatility and insecurity due to the uncertain course of the pandemic. Moreover, they have limited access to asylum procedures and experience various forms of violence during their stay in the reception centres. In addition to the securitisation of their migration, they also experience a securitisation of their health, as various actors hold them responsible for the spread of the virus, which supposedly legitimises restrictive measures.

Second, we found an interesting – and indeed long-standing – ambivalence about mobility: some people were forced to stay (e.g., people fleeing or trapped in reception centres), while others – for example, coveted seasonal workers from Eastern Europe – were initially unable to reach Western European countries to perform their usual seasonal work. Nonetheless, governments in Western countries soon facilitated their arrival, so that the economies and sectors that rely on migrant labour could continue to function. Such a development points to the importance of the link between agriculture and migration, as the pandemic brought the issues of migration and agriculture to the fore (King *et al.* 2021). Moreover, our presentation of statistics on workers posted from Slovenia to other European Union countries confirms the fact that the halt in their mobility was short-lived and that economic activity in posting seems to have continued at a high rate despite the stringent measures in some other sectors.

Nevertheless, our examples have shown that the working and living conditions of workers in agriculture, as well as of people on the move, remain inadequate, as they are often forced to live in cramped and inadequate accommodation, without proper respect for the rules of physical distancing. Thus, when there is talk of blaming certain populations for the spread of the virus, it overlooks the fact that, in such conditions, it is impossible to behave in a socially responsible manner and in solidarity to contain the spread of the virus. In this respect, we could call Covid-19 not only a frontier but also a spatial crisis, where the importance of safe habitats comes to the fore. It seems that new spatial inequalities have emerged in the name of protecting public health.

Even in the later stages of the pandemic, it became apparent that there was some trade-off between public health and maintaining economic activity. The limits of the pandemic also became the limits of (im)mobility, which further entrenched selective border-crossing policies for people on the move and other mobile populations. Once again, this led to the marginalisation of already-vulnerable groups while stigmatising some of the previously privileged mobility carriers such as tourists and professionals.

Finally, Emily McDonnell (2020), returning to the question of reconfiguring borders in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, asks whether Covid-19 will eventually force us to rethink the global (im)mobility regime. Clearly, we could apply the concept of the migrantisation of the citizen (Anderson 2019) to the pandemic: immigration controls during the pandemic clearly affected citizens of certain nation states – and support for non-citizens (expressed, for example, in the criminalisation of solidarity) created further opportunities for the processes of informal and formal exclusion of citizens. Moreover, some of the measures that were once commonplace in reception centres, such as quarantine and self-isolation, are now ‘standard’ for citizens in many member states as well. Border management practices in the name of public health have spread across different spatial scales. The use of digital technologies to monitor population movements not only across the borders of nation states but also across administrative units and even public spaces is becoming increasingly important. Such technologies raise numerous ethical, legal and other social issues related to privacy,

surveillance, freedom of movement, discrimination and fairness that also deserve further attention in migration and mobility research.

Notes

1. The student researchers were Klara Andlovic, Špela Perner, Špela Vovk and Anja Zafošnik, whom we thank for their input and contributions.
2. Some of the conversations we use here as primary sources were published in whole or in part on the blog <https://virusnimameja.com/> – such as the interview with a medical professional and an activist – while we obtained other data from online interviews. The latter are documented on the blog in the form of several author texts (e.g., on the importance of NGOs in Slovenia and the wider region, NGO activities in Italy, media coverage of refugees during the Covid-19 pandemic in Slovenia and Greece, etc.). We have published short articles mostly in Slovenian and some in English. For more details on the chronology of the interviews, see the methodological section of the article: Zavratnik and Cukut Krilić (2021), where we also publish some of the preliminary results of the analysis. See more at: <https://virusnimameja.com>.
3. A ‘Portable Document A1’ (PD A1) is a certificate proving that the social-security legislation of the issuing member state applies and confirming that the worker concerned is not liable to pay contributions in another member state (Vah Jevšnik, Cukut Krilić and Toplak 2022).


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Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Health Professionals Wanted: The Case of Health Professionals from Western Balkan Countries to Europe

Isilda Mara* 

The Western Balkan countries have been faced with a rising outward mobility of health professionals, driven by the increasing demand for this category of worker, especially in European countries. Labour-market imbalances are pushing many health professionals to leave the Western Balkan region. As a consequence, shortages of health professionals are looming and access to health services in the region is put under strain. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the recent pattern of mobility of health professionals from Western Balkan (WB) countries. A gravity model is implemented to analyse the push-and-pull factors of mobility during 2000–2019 and towards European countries. The analysis finds that income differentials between WB and European countries are strong pull factors. Additionally, policy changes in the destination countries shape the mobility patterns and several European countries, especially Germany, have benefited from the mobility of health professionals from WB countries.

Keywords: health professionals, mobility, gravity modelling, Europe, Germany, Western Balkans

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Introduction and background information

The literature about the migration of health professionals, the drivers of this kind of mobility and its effects on the sending and receiving countries has been expanding rapidly. This has been motivated by the fact that many countries in the world are facing a rising demand for health professionals which cannot be tackled simply with health professionals trained at home. By 2030, the global demand for health professionals will double with respect to the previous decade but the supply of this category of workers will not be changing at a similar pace. Therefore, shortages of health professionals will prevail (see Liu, Goryakin, Maeda, Bruckner and Scheffler 2017; Scheffler, Campbell, Cometto, Maeda, Liu, Bruckner, Arnold and Evans 2018). In this context, foreign-trained health professionals have played and are expected to continue to play an important role (Grignon, Owusu and Sweetman 2013; Mullan 2005; OECD 2015). This issue became even more evident during the Covid-19 pandemic (Scarpetta, Dumont and Socha-Dietrich 2020).

At an international level, several studies have revealed that the drivers of health professionals' mobility can be both supply- and demand-driven (Buchan, Campbell, Dhillon and Charlesworth 2019; Davda, Gallagher and Radford 2018; Kroezen, Dussault, Craveiro, Dieleman, Jansen, Buchan, Barriball, Rafferty, Bremner and Sermeus 2015; Maeda and Socha-Dietrich 2021; Tjadens Weilandt and Eckert 2012). On the demand side, the retirement of baby-boomers, the rise in life expectancy and the ageing of the population are generating an ever-greater need for health professionals. On the supply side, better working conditions and earning opportunities abroad have been a magnet for many health professionals, especially those from the less-developed or developing countries. Some of the key findings of the studies cited above are that the receiving countries – mainly developed countries – have been benefiting from the mobility of health professionals trained abroad. The effects on the sending countries have been mixed – with both positive and negative effects. The positive effects are more obvious at the micro level, given that health professionals who migrated abroad have been benefiting from a better working environment, skills enhancement and higher earnings in the receiving countries. However, at the macro level, the emigration of health professionals has been accompanied by brain drain, rising shortages of health professionals and a loss of investment in the training of health professionals (OECD 2019b).

The literature indicates that European countries are facing similar challenges as at the global level. Employment in the health sector in Europe has experienced its strongest growth over the past two decades. Yet, because a large share of health professionals are going to retire in the not-too-distant future, demand for new ones will expand (CEDEFOP 2018). Accordingly, many countries in this and the next decade are likely to be characterised by increasing job opportunities in the health sector. Despite the rising number of health professionals in *per capita* terms, imbalances in the supply and demand of health professionals are prevailing among the European countries. Such imbalances have been generating a continuous battle to attract health professionals and a few wealthier European countries have been benefiting at the expense of poorer ones (Glinos 2015; Mara 2019). The EU15 countries have seen a high degree of outward mobility of doctors – mainly to EFTA countries, the US and Canada. Meanwhile, many doctors who left have been replaced by doctors from Central and Eastern European (CEE) and WB countries.¹ Switzerland and Norway have greatly benefited from receiving doctors from the EU15, while sending hardly any abroad themselves. In contrast, CEE and WB countries have experienced an intensive outflow of medical doctors who have barely been replaced by doctors from other countries (Kroezen *et al.* 2015; Mara 2020; Ognyanova, Maier, Wismar, Girasek and Busse 2012; Schultz and Rijks 2014; Williams, Jacob, Rakovac, Scotter and Wismar 2020; Wismar, Maier, Glinos, Bremner, Dussault and Figueras 2011). Thus, the chain mobility of health professionals has been striking, especially for Eastern European and WB countries. Some of the lessons learned are that further efforts must be made for a better coordination of mobility that would smooth out some of the

imbalances stemming from the free mobility of health professionals and reassuring that there are certain mutual benefits both for the sending and receiving countries.

In this context the issue of health professional mobility from WB countries, especially towards European countries, has gained momentum. More than 80 per cent of emigrants from the WB countries reside in one of the European countries, including health professionals (World Bank and wiiw 2018). The free visa regime applied in the Schengen area with respect to citizens from the Western Balkans and also other regulations introduced with respect to high-skilled professionals originating outside Europe (which affect citizens of the Western Balkan countries) – and particularly the Western Balkan Regulation (§26.2 German Employment Regulation) introduced in Germany in 2016 – have reshuffled the mobility patterns of health professionals from the region towards the EU.²

As the international literature suggests, the phenomenon of health professionals' mobility is very complex and its drivers are related to economic and institutional factors; however, it is also driven by linguistic, cultural and geographical proximity (Adovor, Czaika, Docquier and Moullan 2020). The phenomenon can be accompanied by imbalances in the supply and demand of health professionals, a sectoral-specific brain drain and a loss of investment in their training (OECD 2019b). As such, the health systems in these countries – which already suffer from low investment – end up being part of a vicious circle because investing further in the health system and education of health professionals is perceived as counterproductive. This has further negative repercussions on the accessibility and quality of health services.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study³ is to shed light on recent shifts in the demand and supply of health professionals and the challenges which lie ahead, especially as concerns the WB countries as a sending region and Europe as the main destination region.⁴ In particular, the aim is to investigate the drivers of mobility of health professionals from the WB and identify the main push-and-pull factors accounting also for policy changes – such as the Western Balkan Regulation (§26.2 German Employment Regulation) mentioned above (Brücker, Falkenhain, Fendel, Promberger, Raab, Trübswetter, Blažević and Trmkoli 2020).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section, following this introduction, presents a broad overview of how the pattern of demand and supply for health professionals has been shifting over the past decade between European countries and also between WB and European countries. The subsequent section analyses the drivers of mobility by using a gravity model that allows for both push and pull factors of mobility at a pair-country level. The following section then presents the estimation results of the gravity model, first starting with a general model of push and pull factors – namely between European and Western Balkan countries – and secondly focusing on the special case of the WB countries. The last section concludes and discusses some policy implications targeting medical doctors' mobility from WB countries.

Health workforce mobility: stylised facts

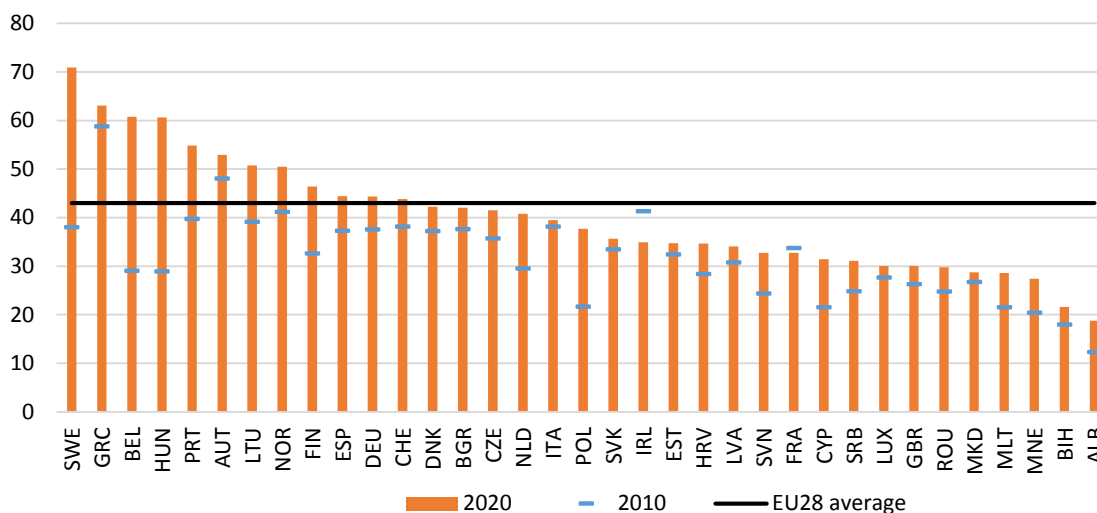
Supply and demand of health professionals

The density of the health workforce has improved across all European and WB countries. In 2010 there were 34 medical doctors and 80 nurses and midwives for 10,000 inhabitants whereas, by 2020, these ratios had risen to 43 and 95, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2).

Nevertheless, as the graphs portray, substantial differences prevail with respect to the density of the health professionals across European and WB countries. For a group of European countries (e.g. Sweden, Austria, Germany, Belgium and Finland) the supply of health professionals tends to be above or close to the EU28 average and this has improved further over time – both for medical doctors and nurses and midwives. In

contrast, the WB countries are at the bottom of the ranking for the number of health professionals in *per capita* terms and their levels are far below the EU28 average.

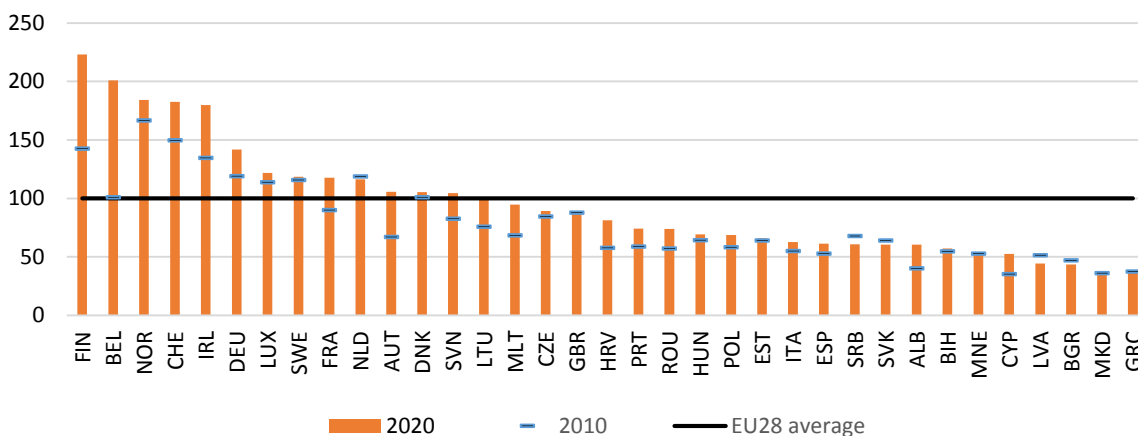
Figure 1. Medical doctors per 10,000 inhabitants, 2010 and 2020



Source: World Health Organisation.

Note: 2020 or the latest year available has been used for a number of countries.

Figure 2. Health professionals: nurses and midwifery personnel per 10,000 inhabitants, 2010– 2020

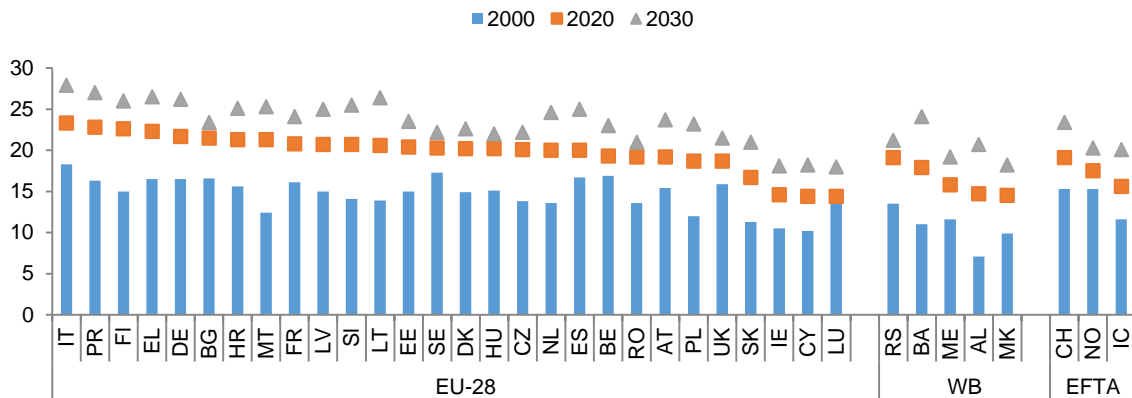


Source: World Health Organisation.

Note: 2020 or the latest year available has been used for a number of countries.

Despite improvements on the supply side, this will not be sufficient to meet needs from the demand side. The pressure on health services and care is expected to increase in the coming decades. Rising longevity and population ageing are putting a strain on healthcare provision. Recent demographic changes suggest that several European countries are experiencing a rise in the life expectancy of their populations (Mara 2020; WHO 2022; Williams *et al.* 2020). Western Balkan countries are also already showing clear signs of rapid ageing, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (see Figure 3). Such dynamics suggest that not only European but also WB countries will all be facing a rising demand for healthcare – especially for care-based related services – owing to the increasing longevity of their populations.

Figure 3. Population over 65 years by country groups, current and projected trend, in % of total population



Source: UN Population statistics.

Despite the increase in the supply of health professionals, the rise in demand is such that imbalances and shortages of this category of workers have emerged in a number of European and WB countries (European Commission 2017). Half of the European countries report shortages of medical doctors; this group comprises, in particular, the Nordic countries, the UK, Ireland, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, even though these countries have a density of health professionals above the EU28 average. In the EU-CEE countries, medical doctors are in short supply, especially in the Baltics, Slovakia, Slovenia, Croatia and Bulgaria (ETF 2022).

Apart from being demand-driven, shortages in the health workforce are also supply-driven. Quite a large proportion of health professionals in European countries are approaching retirement age. In most countries the share of health professionals above the age of 55 has been rising (Mara 2020) – on average, 1 in 3 health professionals in the EU is over 55. Accordingly, the vast majority of job opportunities for health professionals over this decade will be driven by replacement demand (Mara 2020).

Health professionals' mobility and push and pull factors

Countries pursue different strategies and policies to satisfy their current and future demand for health workers. In general terms, the demand for health professionals is met through the existing workforce in the health sector, graduates who have qualified in health and welfare disciplines, health professionals who are foreign-born and, more recently, automated technology that is assisting or replacing – to some extent – humans in healthcare.

Satisfying the demand for health professionals with a workforce from abroad has intensified in several European countries. The international mobility of health professionals has been advantageous for a number of net-receiving European countries. However, for the other countries – which are net senders – it has been detrimental and has accentuated further shortages of health professionals. Across Europe, 1 in 10 is foreign-born, with substantial differences noticeable in individual countries. In Ireland, almost half of the medical doctors are foreign-born while, in Sweden, 1 in 3 doctors originates from abroad (Mara 2020).

For some European countries, the turnover of health professionals' mobility is high. For example, Germany experiences a high exchange of medical doctors. Still, the net effect is negative, suggesting that Germany is a country that is losing medical doctors. In contrast, the number of foreign nurses who move to Germany is twice as high as the number of those who leave. Austria is another country where the outflow of medical doctors is exceeding the inflow whereas, for nurses, the net flow is positive. Other countries, such as Italy and

the Netherlands, are losing both medical doctors and nurses. Among Central and Eastern European countries, the net flow of medical doctors and nurses is predominantly negative (Mara 2020). As shown above, the density of health professionals in the WBs is among the lowest in Europe. Despite this, the outward mobility of health professionals has accelerated to unprecedented levels. According to the OECD (2019a) database, the stock of medical doctors abroad from the region was estimated at around 7,000 in 2021. This would correspond to 13 per cent of medical doctors available in the region (Table 1). As far as nurses are concerned, only a partial picture can be obtained about their outward mobility because a number of OECD countries report missing information. As such, the lack of sufficient and accurate data do not allow any sound inference to be made at an aggregate level.

Table 1. Health professionals' mobility from the Western Balkans: the case of medical doctors and nurses

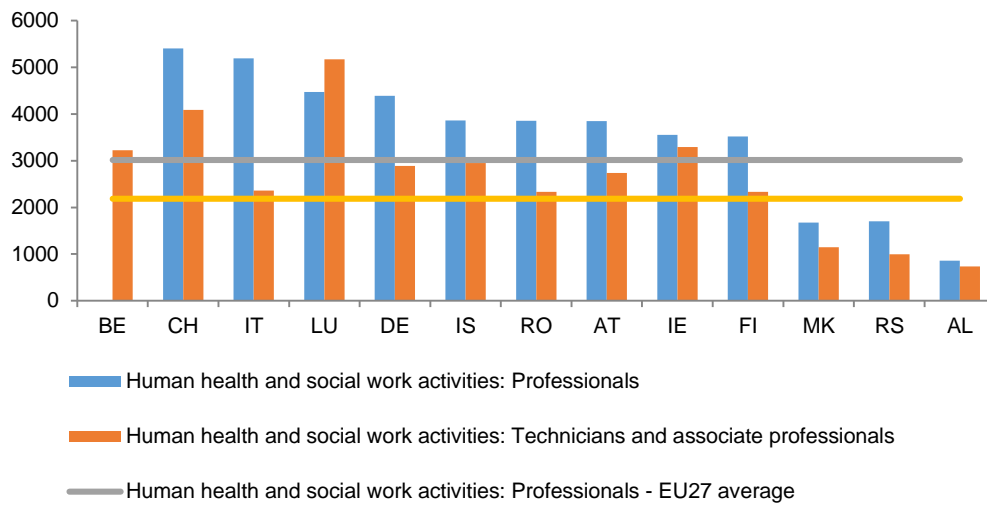
	Medical doctors				Nurses and midwives			
	Stock at home (A)	Year	Stock abroad 2019 (B)	Ratio B/A in %	Stock at home	Year	Stock abroad 2019	Outflow 2010–2019
AL	4,745	2019	1,028	22	14,658	2019	1,056	2,246
BA	7,413	2015	812	11	19,057	2018	273	2,823
ME	1,730	2018	46	3	3,283	2018	16	43
MK	6,219	2015	1,714	28	7,884	2015	107	2,020
RS	27,563	2016	2,729	10	53,881	2016	596	2,616

Source: Own elaboration using World Health Organisation statistics for the stock of medical doctors, nurses and midwives at home for Western Balkan countries. OECD (2019a) data are used for the stock of medical doctors and nurses abroad.

As the literature has suggested (e.g. Adovor *et al.* 2020), a strong pull factor for health professionals is the wage gap between earnings at home and earnings abroad. The comparison across countries of the level of earnings – in euros at purchasing power standards (PPS) – among health professionals, hospital nurses and health specialists shows that there are big gaps, especially between the WB and European countries (Figure 4). As such, the wage gaps are important drivers of emigration, especially for health personnel in the WBs.

In addition, a strong set of push factors for moving abroad are the poor working conditions and lack of employment opportunities in the home country. Public spending on health continues to be low. According to the World Bank, in 2018 the share of health expenditure to GDP in Albania was 5.3 per cent, in Bosnia and Herzegovina 8.9, in Montenegro 8.4, in North Macedonia 6.6 and, in Serbia 8.5; in comparison, in Germany it was 11.4, in Austria 10 and in the EU overall 10 per cent. The private health system is small and in many instances functions as a second source of employment for those already working in the public sector. Country studies unanimously and unambiguously report that health professionals are leaving not only because of better earnings prospects but also because of the poor quality of working conditions and the limited job openings in the WB (see ETF 2022). Rural areas in particular suffer from a lack of health services, due to limited investments in infrastructure, a dearth of medical centres and a consequent shortage of medical staff.

Figure 4. Gross monthly earnings for professionals and associate professionals providing human health and social work services in euros (PPS), 2018



Source: Eurostat: mean monthly earnings by economic activity and occupation [earn_ses18_48].

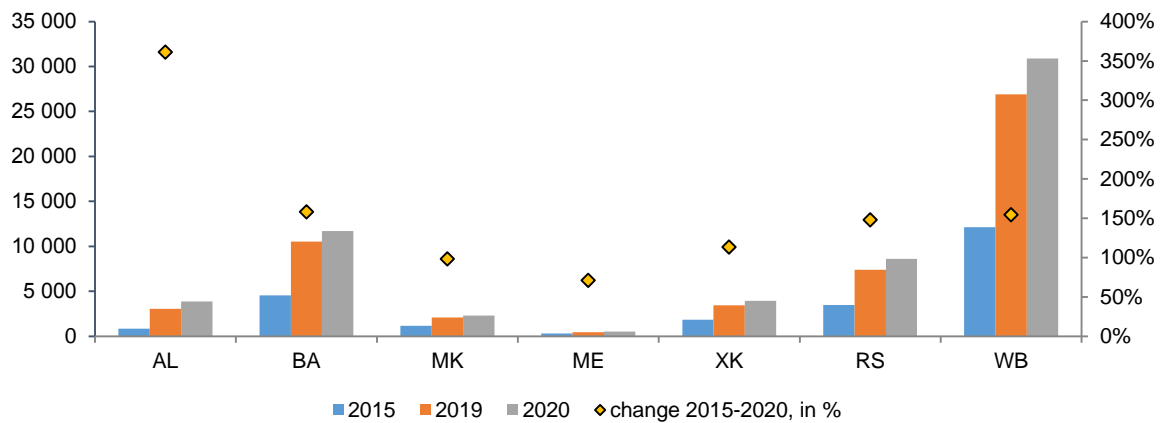
Policy changes in destination: the case of Germany

Especially over the last 5 years, Germany has turned into an attractive destination for health professionals from the region. As already mentioned, the large income gap between the WB and Germany acts as a strong magnet for low-paid health workers in the region. Nevertheless, another important driver of mobility is Germany's proactive recruitment policies for health professionals from the WB region, especially the aforementioned Western Balkan Regulation (§26.2 German Employment Regulation). As a result, between 2015 and 2020, the stock of health workers – including doctors, nurses as well as other specialist health professionals such as dentists, pharmacists or physiotherapists – in Germany from the WB6 (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia) has increased significantly (Figures 5 and 6) based on the data provided by the German Federal Labour Agency. Over this period, Germany has attracted more than 18,000 health professionals from the WBs – representing close to 20 per cent of foreign trained health professionals moving to Germany over the last 5 years. As such the stock of health professionals from the WBs in Germany exceeded 30,000 by 2020 – 2.5 times higher than in 2015 (Schmitz-Pranghe Oruč, Mielke and Ibričević 2020).

More than 37 per cent of health professionals from the WB6 in Germany are from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 28 per cent from Serbia, another 13 per cent each from Albania and Kosovo, 7 per cent from North Macedonia and fewer than 2 per cent from Montenegro. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia continue to be the main sending countries from the WBs to Germany. Albania has recently recorded a strong outflow of health professionals to Germany – between 2015 and 2020 its stock of health professionals there more than quadrupled, rising to close to 4,000. More than 16 per cent of health workers from the WB6 in Germany are 'health professionals', mainly represented by medical doctors (more than 70 per cent). The rest consists of associate health professionals, of whom the vast majority are nurses. Besides Germany, countries such as Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland, Croatia, Denmark and Italy, which are in need of health professionals from abroad, have been important destinations for those from the WB region. Beyond the WBs, Germany is an attractive country for health professionals from the EU-CEE, especially for doctors from Romania, Hungary,

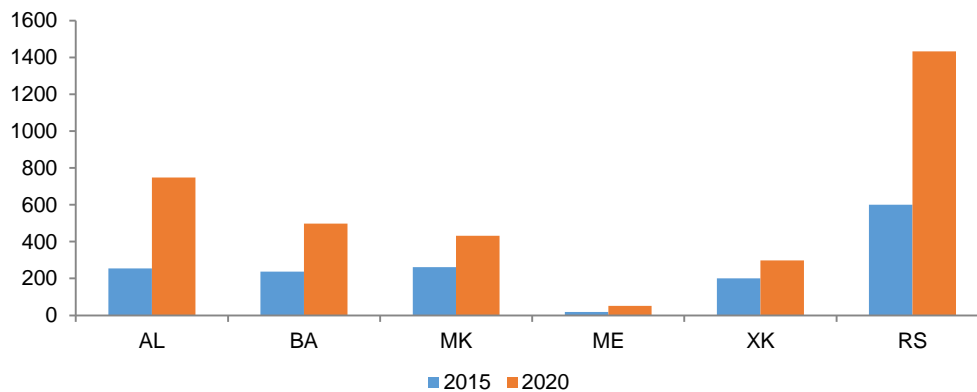
Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic. Medical doctors from the 2 group of countries – EU-CEE and WB – moving to Germany accounted for close to 60 per cent of the total inflow of foreign-trained doctors to Germany between 2010 and 2018. As for nurses, apart from the EU-CEE countries, recently a large number of them have been coming from Croatia or WB countries, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Albania.

Figure 5. Health professionals and associate health professionals from the WB6 in Germany and change in the stock of health professionals, 2015–2020



Source: <https://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de>.

Figure 6. The stock of medical doctors from the WB6 in Germany, 2015–2020 (March)



Source: <https://statistik.arbeitsagentur.de>.

Germany itself is an EU country which has recorded losses of medical doctors, despite receiving many health professionals from abroad. At a numerical level, the inflow of doctors has compensated for 90 per cent of Germany's outward mobility. As far as nurses are concerned, the inflow has been higher than the outflow. Between 2010 and 2018, more than 14,000 German doctors and 10,000 nurses preferred to leave the country, mainly moving to Switzerland but also to Austria or countries outside the EU. Such outward mobility has been driven by a high demand in these host countries as well as the relatively high wages offered to health professionals in Switzerland, Austria and Luxembourg.

The WB regulation did not impose any restrictions on minimum language or professional qualification requirements. Under the new regulations, there were two main conditions which WB6 citizens had to fulfil to attain a work permit in Germany: first, have a job offer by an employer in Germany (including the ‘priority check’). Second, the job offer should comply with German labour laws and minimum wage standards and should have been approved by the Federal Employment Agency. In late 2020, the German Federal Council (*Bundesrat*) approved the extension and amendment of the Regulation until 31 December 2023, with a new maximum number of 25,000 permits to be issued per year by the Employment Agency. The new regulation became effective from 1 January 2021.

Migration from the WB6 to Germany has increased enormously thanks to these new regulations, with an increase of 66 per cent between 2010 and 2019 – close to 900,000 people (ETF 2022). Thanks to this regulation, migration from the WBs to Germany rose significantly for health professionals and, in 2020, the health sector was one of these migrants’ top 10 occupations. An important share of them are health associate professionals, which includes mainly medical and pharmaceutical technicians, nursing and midwifery associate professionals and traditional and complementary medicine associate professionals.

Drivers of the mobility of health professionals: a gravity approach analysis

The gravity model of medical doctors’ mobility

For the analysis of the bilateral movements of health professionals, a gravity model is applied. The latter approach has been used in a number of studies (e.g. Landesmann, Mara and Vidovic 2015; Mara 2020) to analyse the mobility not just of the overall population but also of health professionals (Botezat and Ramos 2020). At the international level, gravity models have also been used for analysing the mobility of health professionals (Adovor *et al.* 2020; Beine, Bertoli and Fernández-Huertas Moraga 2016; Botezat and Ramos 2020). The rationale of a gravity framework is that an individual chooses to move abroad or not depending on his/her expectations about employment opportunities or the level of earnings in his/her country of origin in comparison with other countries. Apart from economic determinants, other time-invariant determinants which might facilitate mobility can be taken into account, such as geographical proximity or cultural and language affinities.

In the context of health professionals, by applying the gravity model we aim to capture the push-and-pull factors of mobility for the particular group of medical doctors. Expectations about employment opportunities outside the home country or a host country’s absorption capacity to retain or attract health professionals are recognised as important pull factors for the mobility of this group of workers. Higher earnings in this sector in a potential host country and relatively high wage differentials between sending and host countries are expected to have a positive impact on attracting health professionals to the potential host countries. Further, the demand for health professionals is expected to be driven by the health-service needs of the population. As outlined above, an ageing population certainly has a greater need for healthcare. Therefore, the demographic structure of the population and their differences across countries are expected to be important drivers of demand for health professionals. Countries where the demand for such personnel is high and the available financial resources are more abundant – e.g. for employing or offering a higher level of compensation to health professionals – tend to be more successful at retaining domestically trained doctors as well as attracting foreign-trained health professionals than countries which have financial constraints or offer lower wages in this sector.

Apart from the demand side, the supply side also matters. The supply of health professionals – for example, medical doctors – depends on the contingent of students and health graduates who join the labour market of health professionals. Therefore, we take into account these aspects of the demand-and-supply side of health professionals when estimating the gravity model.

The approach adopted in this study is first to analyse the push and pull factors of mobility in the context of a wider set of countries, namely the European and Western Balkan countries. The purpose here is first to estimate the effects of different push-and-pull factors of mobility and how robust they are for different set of countries, while controlling for origin and destination countries' fixed effects. Secondly, as we are more interested in analysing the push-and pull-factors of mobility in the context of WB countries, a subset of estimates are performed having the individual European countries as the main destination countries and WB countries as the sending countries. Lastly, we are interested in accounting for the effect of recent policy changes, such as the free visa regime and the Western Balkan employment regulation introduced in Germany in 2016. Therefore, further specifications will be estimated where the policy-change effects are captured by respective dummies for such policies.

Because of data availability, the gravity model for health professionals' mobility can be estimated using only the OECD statistics with respect to medical doctors, at pair-country level between European and Western Balkan countries and for the 2001–2019 period. The econometric approach applied here is similar to the one applied by Botezat and Ramos (2020). The estimated equation is defined as follows:

eq. (1)

$$SFD_{fit} = \beta_1 * \ln(1 + SFD_{ift-1}) + \beta_2 * \ln(dist_{if}) + \beta_3 * contiguity_{if} + \beta_4 com_language_{if} + \gamma * x_{ift-1} \varepsilon_{fit}$$

whereby the main determinants are:

- SFD_{fit} – the dependent variable – refers to the stock of foreign doctors residing in destination country (f) and originating from country (i), and SFD_{ift-1} accounts for the migration stock and network effects of health professionals (in this case medical doctors) for attracting health professionals from a given sending country (i) to a given destination (f). The choice of using stock data instead of flow data was motivated by the fact that flow data showed poor quality, especially in the context of Western Balkan countries. The information about inflow of medical doctors presented many missing data points. In contrast, stock data revealed fewer missing data points than flow data. For this reason, we used stock data to have more data points and consequently use more accurate observations for estimating the gravity model.
- We also control for a number of time-variant variables presented by vector X – specifically we have included a number of variables which could be important push-and-pull factors of mobility such as:
 - wage rates in the health sector in the destination and origin country, w_{ft} and w_{it} respectively (given that data on doctors' levels of earnings are not available, we use health-sector levels of earnings as a proxy⁵), as well as the gaps in income level between the sending and the destination country of health professionals captured by the ratio of GDP *per capita* in purchasing power parity (PPP) between sending and receiving countries;
 - the density of medical doctors per 10,000 inhabitants in the origin and sending countries as a proxy for the supply of medical doctors in the respective origin and destination countries;

- the share of health graduates in the respective foreign country and the country of origin as a proxy for the supply of health professionals;
- the share of the population aged 65+ in the respective foreign country and the country of origin as a proxy for the demand for health professionals.
- Other determinants, which are country-pair specific and constant over time, are represented by:
 - $dist_{if}$, the geographical distance between the sending and host country;
 - $contiguity_{if}$, sharing a border;
 - $com_language_{if}$ which refers to sharing the same official language.
- We also control for a number of policy changes in Europe which are considered relevant in the context of WB countries – such as a free visa regime and the WB employment regulation introduced in Germany in 2015 targeting migrants from WB countries.

Data and descriptive statistics

Several data sources have been used to empirically estimate the gravity model for the mobility of health professionals. Statistics for their bilateral mobility were obtained from the OECD's Health Workforce Migration database for the category of medical doctors. Data concerning the bilateral stock of medical doctors by country of origin in the OECD are available for the period 2001–2019 or the latest year available. For this analysis I used a selected number of OECD countries. The sample is composed of European destination countries, whereas the European and the WBs have been selected as the main sending countries. Other indicators, such as the density of the body of medical doctors, were obtained from World Health Organisation (WHO) Statistics. The shares of tertiary graduates on health and welfare programmes were obtained from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics. The shares of the population above the age of 65 were obtained from Eurostat and those on the remuneration of health professionals from the *wiiw* database, which uses national accounts data to calculate monthly wages in the health sector, both in euros and in purchasing power parity (PPP). The gravity variables, such as distance, common ethnic language and contiguity/common border as well as the GDP *per capita* in PPP were obtained from the Centre for Research and Expertise on the World Economy (CEPII). Table 2 presents some basic descriptive statistics on the main variables used for the gravity model estimation.

Estimation results of the gravity model

In this section, two sets of estimation results are presented. The first are the results attained by estimating the gravity model for a large set of countries where both sending and destination countries are represented by European and Western Balkan countries. The European countries are represented by the EU28, Switzerland and Norway and the WB countries by Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The results are presented in Table 3. In the second set of results, the gravity model is estimated in a subset of countries with the WB countries as the sending countries and European countries as the destination countries. In this subset of estimates, further specifications have been included which aim to capture the effects of policy changes. Furthermore, for robustness checks, other specifications for this subset of countries have been estimated and are presented in Table 4, to be discussed later.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics used for the gravity model, 2000–2019

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std dev.	Min.	Max.	Data source
Stock of foreign-trained doctors	4,745	194	440	0.00	4 911	OECD's Health Workforce Migration database
Density of medical doctors per 10,000	18,768	32.21	9.30	11.70	70.92	WHO statistics
Share of tertiary graduates on health and welfare programmes	14,749	13.30	5.19	2.20	28.96	UNESCO statistics
Share of population 65+	19,035	0.17	0.03	0.08	0.23	Eurostat
Origin GDP <i>per capita</i> , PPP (current thousands international \$)	18,843	31.75	16.82	4.03	121.29	Centre for Research and Expertise on the World Economy (CEPII)
Destination GDP <i>per capita</i> , PPP (current thousands international \$)	18,795	30.93	17.06	4.03	121.29	CEPII
Average monthly wages per employee, in human health and social work activities, current prices, million PPP	15,706	1,760	653	502	3,564	wiiw database
Dummy = 1 if §26.2 German Employment Regulation applies	20,317	0.00	0.03	0.00	1.00	Own elaboration
Dummy = 1 if free visa regime for the WBs applies	20,317	0.07	0.26	0.00	1.00	Own elaboration
Contiguity	20,317	0.08	0.28	0.00	1.00	CEPII
Common official language	18,941	0.04	0.19	0.00	1.00	CEPII
Geographical distance	18,941	1,335	728	8.45	3 780	CEPII

As was highlighted above, the empirical analysis aims to establish the main determinants of medical doctors' mobility in a general context and then, more specifically, in the context of WB countries. The general model of medical doctors' mobility is tested empirically by running the gravity model for a wide set of countries, where the dependent variable is the stock of migrants at pair-country level between WB and European countries. Since we want to account for both time-variant and time-invariant determinants, we apply OLS regressions. For the model selection we also run a few diagnostic tests such as slope homogeneity and cross-section independence of the error terms. The first test is relevant for understanding whether the effects of the parameters of interest are constant or vary across countries. Especially in this context, where we are dealing with a large set of countries – at least 35 countries, at pair-country level and for a long time series – 2001–2019 – it is very likely that cross-section dependence can be an issue which, if it is not addressed properly, might generate inconsistent estimates. The respective tests presented in Annex Table A1 indicate that we have a cross-sectional dependence in the data. To correct for this, the model has been estimated by running pooled OLS/WLS with Driscoll and Kraay standard errors following Hoechle (2007). The advantage of this approach is that it allows for the error terms to be heteroskedastic and robust to cross-section dependence.

Table 3. Determinants of medical doctors' mobility: gravity model estimates for Europe and WBs at pair country level, 2001–2019

Dependent variable (Stock of foreign-trained doctors)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Log Stock of foreign-trained doctors (t-1)	0.953*** (0.00312)	0.956*** (0.00583)	0.892*** (0.00960)	0.950*** (0.00620)	0.952*** (0.00615)	0.895*** (0.00959)	0.880*** (0.0100)	0.882*** (0.0100)
Contiguity	0.0651*** (0.0231)	0.0627*** (0.0233)	0.0893*** (0.0241)	0.0612*** (0.0236)	0.0606*** (0.0233)	0.0877*** (0.0238)	0.0871*** (0.0250)	0.0859*** (0.0247)
Common official language	0.0311 (0.0310)	0.0150 (0.0413)	0.00889 (0.0377)	0.0277 (0.0421)	0.0210 (0.0417)	0.00469 (0.0371)	0.0155 (0.0380)	0.0150 (0.0375)
Geographical distance	-0.0126 (0.0104)	-0.0172* (0.00947)	-0.0345*** (0.0109)	-0.0150 (0.0109)	-0.0153 (0.0108)	-0.0350*** (0.0107)	-0.0365*** (0.0126)	-0.0358*** (0.0125)
Log Density of medical doctors, origin (t-1)	0.0232*** (0.00634)	0.00980 (0.00726)	0.0213*** (0.00701)	0.0133 (0.00833)	-0.00128 (0.00872)	0.00928 (0.00694)	0.0144* (0.00812)	-0.00152 (0.00852)
Log Density of medical doctors, destination (t-1)	0.00636 (0.00658)	-0.00600 (0.00383)	-0.00628*** (0.00148)	0.00227 (0.00359)	-0.0105** (0.00448)	-0.0203*** (0.00334)	-0.00626*** (0.00153)	-0.0211*** (0.00341)
Log medical graduates, origin (t-1)	0.00318 (0.00439)	0.00575 (0.00438)	0.00627 (0.00449)	0.00347 (0.00662)	0.00323 (0.00643)	0.00487 (0.00446)	0.00735 (0.00630)	0.00301 (0.00621)
Log medical graduates, destination (t-1)	0.00595 (0.00446)	0.0102** (0.00518)	0.00819 (0.00670)	0.00679 (0.00528)	0.00825 (0.00536)	0.00788 (0.00654)	0.0101 (0.00669)	0.00853 (0.00651)
Log GDP_origin/GDP_destination (t-1)	-0.110*** (0.0294)	-0.102*** (0.0328)	-0.0958** (0.0425)	-0.160*** (0.0595)	-0.183*** (0.0595)	-0.0778* (0.0413)	-0.00626 (0.104)	-0.00833 (0.103)
Log remuneration health professionals, origin (t-1)	-0.0219 (0.0165)	0.000536 (0.0162)	-0.0281* (0.0156)	-0.134*** (0.0465)	0.0191 (0.0671)	-0.0212 (0.0154)	-0.101* (0.0534)	-0.0515 (0.0644)
Log remuneration health professionals, destination (t-1)	0.0498*** (0.0152)	0.0703*** (0.0123)	0.00781 (0.0213)	0.0439*** (0.0170)	0.0479*** (0.0175)	0.0747* (0.0419)	0.0440 (0.0315)	0.0682 (0.0434)
log share_population_65+(origin)/share_population_65+(destination) (t-1)	0.0399** (0.0200)	0.0415** (0.0191)	0.106*** (0.0240)	0.0177 (0.0326)	0.00552 (0.0321)	0.115*** (0.0238)	0.159** (0.0737)	0.152** (0.0729)
Constant	-0.0945 (0.140)	-0.347*** (0.111)	0.291** (0.145)	0.761** (0.341)	-0.219 (0.485)	-0.229 (0.272)	0.350 (0.299)	-0.140 (0.514)
Origin country FE				YES	YES		YES	YES
Destination country FE			YES			YES	YES	YES
Time FE		YES			YES	YES		YES
Observations	13,096	13,096	13,096	13,096	13,096	13,096	13,096	13,096
R-squared	0.894	0.896	0.900	0.895	0.896	0.902	0.901	0.903
Estimates	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS	Pooled OLS

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The estimation results in Table 3 show a positive significant sign with respect to the lagged stock of foreign-trained doctors and indicate their robustness across different specifications, accounting for the different fixed effects. This result suggests the importance of networks among health professionals in a given destination country for attracting other doctors from a given origin country. The results also indicate that variables which are time invariant – such as contiguity and geographical distance between countries – do matter and explain the mobility. For the European countries (Table 3) in particular, the contiguity and sharing of a common border positively affects the mobility of medical doctors; whereas, with increasing geographical distance, the mobility of medical doctors to other, further destinations is less likely to occur.

With regards to the estimation results about the density of the stock of medical doctors, we find that origin countries with a higher-density stock are likely to experience a larger body of migrants abroad, although the result is not robust across all the specifications. In contrast, the stock of foreign-trained doctors has a negative relationship with the medical doctor stock density in the destination country, implying that, with the rise of the stock of medical doctors in the destination country, that of foreign-trained doctors is reduced – a result which might be explained as a lower demand for foreign-trained doctors if domestic supply is rather high.

Regarding the estimation results about the remuneration of health professionals and how it affects their mobility, we observe a positive and significant relationship concerning the receiving-country wages; the results seem to hold, especially if we account for destination countries' fixed effects. A relatively higher level of earnings in the receiving country attracts more medical doctors from abroad. At the same time, we find a negative and significant coefficient concerning the origin-country wages, which suggests that higher wages in the domestic market might deter the outward mobility of medical doctors, when both origin- and destination-country fixed effects are counted. Therefore, countries which tend to have a higher remuneration of health professionals attract more health professionals from abroad. However, from the perspective of the sending countries, it is also true that higher wages at home might be accompanied by a lower number of medical doctors moving abroad. Therefore, remuneration in the health sector might be a strong pull factor to emigrate but might also deter the outward migration of health-sector workers. In terms of the size of coefficients, an increase in the remuneration at home of 10 per cent might deter the stock of doctors moving abroad by 10 per cent. While looking at the income gap in the origin and destination country, proxied by the level of GDP *per capita* in PPP, the results suggest that a higher income ratio – which implies the narrowing of the income gap between sending and receiving countries – for example with 10 per cent – would reduce emigration of health professionals.

With respect to the demand-side determinants, the results suggest a positive relationship of the ratio of the population share aged 65+ between sending and destination country and the stock of foreign-trained doctors. The positive sign of the coefficient suggests that the higher the gap in terms of the population aged 65+ between the origin and the destination country, the more likely we are to see doctors moving from origin to destination countries, which is explained by a higher demand for medical doctors for the latter owing to their higher share of the population aged 65+.

Estimation results of the gravity model for the Western Balkan countries

The second set of estimation results for the Western Balkan countries are presented in Table 4. The first specification has been estimated by running pooled OLS/WLS with Driscoll and Kraay standard errors following Hoechle (2007). In addition, for the robustness check, the model for the subset of WB countries has been estimated by running the Poisson pseudo maximum likelihood (PPML). When estimating gravity models with a large set of countries, one shortcoming which is often encountered is the probable high number of zeros or missing information for several indicators, either flow or stock data. Moreover, the log transformation of zero values among the observations further enlarges the sample of missing information. Therefore, estimating

the model for the subset of WB countries using the Poisson pseudo maximum likelihood (PPML) allows me to account for the large number of zeros and to cross-check the validity of the estimates (Santos Silva and Tenreyro 2010). Accordingly, in the PPML regressions, the errors are clustered at the pairing-country level. The results of the OLS and PPML are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Determinants of medical doctors' mobility from WB to Europe, 2001–2019

Dependent variable (Stock of foreign-trained doctors)	(2)	(3)
Log Stock of foreign-trained doctors (t-1)	0.885*** (0.0296)	0.706*** (0.195)
Contiguity	-0.00364 (0.00912)	
Common official language	0.0144 (0.0170)	0.234 (0.185)
Geographical distance	-0.0836** (0.0318)	-0.241 (0.381)
Log Density of medical doctors, origin (t-1)	0.00560* (0.00262)	0.0145* (0.00812)
Log Density of medical doctors, destination (t-1)	-0.0104** (0.00454)	0.0660 (0.118)
Log medical graduates, origin (t-1)	0.0258*** (0.00749)	0.0150 (0.00910)
Log medical graduates, destination (t-1)	0.0115 (0.0119)	0.0130 (0.0118)
Log GDP_origin/GDP_destination (t-1)	-0.0648* (0.0313)	0.0601 (0.183)
Log remuneration health professionals, origin (t-1)	-0.0303 (0.0185)	0.525 (0.491)
Log remuneration health professionals, destination (t-1)	-0.0163 (0.0696)	0.299** (0.136)
log share_population_65+(origin)/share_population_65+(destination) (t-1)	-0.00619 (0.0131)	1.836 (1.406)
Dummy = 1 if free visa regime for the WBs applies	0.0361*** (0.00679)	-0.203 (0.150)
Dummy = 1 if §26.2 German Employment Regulation applies	0.172* (0.0882)	2.528** (1.156)
Constant		-6.335* (3.753)
Observations	2,046	350
R-squared	0.918	0.998
Destination FE	YES	
Year FE	YES	
Destination_Time_FE		YES
Origin_FE		YES
	Pooled OLS	PPML

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses; + $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

The estimation results confirm the importance of networks in a destination country for attracting other doctors from a given origin country. Among time-invariant variables, the geographical distance matters and

negatively effects the outward mobility of medical doctors. Once again, the supply of medical doctors, including graduates, seems to be positively associated with the stock of doctors abroad. Particularly for the WB countries, the results suggest that a high share of health graduates is positively related with outward migration. The explanations for these results might be related to an excessive supply of medical doctors or the somewhat weak absorption capacity of health professionals by the domestic labour market, which might push the emigration of this category of workers.

With respect to the remuneration of medical doctors, we find that the income gap is an important driver of outward mobility for this group. In the context of WB countries, the results suggest that the narrowing of the income gap between sending and receiving countries – for example by 10 per cent – would reduce the emigration of medical doctors by 6.5 per cent.

With respect to the migration policy changes which encourage the mobility of people, together with changes in the migration regime which facilitate mobility for a particular group of countries – such as the WB Employment Regulation in Germany – the results indicate that the latter regulation has been quite an important pull factor for the migration of medical doctors from the WBs. The results are robust across specifications and the impact seems to have been stronger than the network effect. The emigration of medical doctors from the WBs has risen by almost 10 per cent due to this new regulation. These results emphasise the importance of mobility programmes and migration regime changes and their role for mobility, in this case of medical doctors. In the context of WB countries, the outward mobility of medical doctors had been driven by the remuneration of health professionals and facilitated by the new regulation of emigrants from the WBs in Germany, hinting that their mobility is both supply- and demand-driven. Domestic factors, however, are shown to be less relevant, though higher wages would deter outward mobility.

Main findings and conclusions

This study has analysed the patterns of mobility of health professionals across European countries with a specific focus on medical doctors from the Western Balkans. The paper first presented a number of stylised facts to sketch the demand and supply of health professionals and the role that their mobility has played in satisfying the demand for this category of workers across European countries. This overview found that, among EU countries, there are diverging patterns as far as both the demand and the supply of health professionals are concerned. A number of countries have managed to satisfy their demand by recruiting foreign-trained health professionals. The battle for health professionals among EU countries has produced both winners and losers. This implies that, for a group of countries – especially those from the EU-CEE and Western Balkan countries, which are mainly net senders of health professionals – severe drawbacks to their mobility prevail.

To better understand the drivers of mobility, a gravity model was estimated for the mobility of medical doctors covering European and WB countries over the period 2000–2019. This found that the prospect of better earnings and higher wage gaps between health professionals across Europe are certainly important drivers of the mobility of medical doctors. Geographical proximity and contiguity are relevant for explaining the mobility of health professionals from within Europe and for the WBs.

On the supply side, from the perspective of the destination country, a higher number of graduate health professionals might be accompanied by a lower dependence on health professionals from abroad. In contrast, from the perspective of the sending country, we might associate this with a higher supply of health professionals being sent abroad, which hints at low absorption capacities in the sending countries of medical doctors especially in the case of the WB countries.

On the demand side, the results confirm that, here, the mobility of health professionals does play a role. In particular, the age structure of the population and, consequently, the demand for long-term care, is driving the

mobility of doctors from the perspective of both the sending and the destination country, though the results are not confirmed for the WB countries.

Foreign-trained doctors, by and large, tend to complement the demand for health professionals; network effects also matter and are an important determinant of mobility among medical doctors. Furthermore, new changes in the regulations which manage migration and the employment of migrants from the WBs in general – such as that introduced by Germany in 2015 – are attracting more and more health professionals from the WBs to Germany.

New policy measures in the countries of origin – the WBs – or bilateral agreements between sending and destination countries, need to be introduced, with the aim of balancing the mobility of health professionals such that the demand for them is satisfied in both the sending and the destination country. Furthermore, this must be combined with rising wages for this category of health professional in order to deter their outward mobility. Besides, what seems to matter for the mobility of medical doctors in general and, in particular, for the WB countries, are not only higher wages in the destination country but also a higher standard of living and quality of life.

The circular migration of health professionals or short-term exchange programmes between countries might be a much more effective approach. Already the WB region has produced high rates of outward mobility, including that of health professionals. Therefore, a further intensification of outward mobility for this category of workers might be devastating for the region. Also, skill development and mobility programmes such as those offered by Germany in the WBs – the Dekra Academy and Heimerer College (ETF 2022) – are desirable but should be better regulated and assure a balanced supply of health professionals for the domestic and foreign market.

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Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this article, the WBs include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. There were not sufficient data for Kosovo to be included in the analysis, except where otherwise specified.
2. The so-called ‘Western Balkan Regulation’ (§26.2 German Employment Regulation) was introduced to: (i) create a legal pathway to migrate to Germany and reduce the number of irregular migrants and asylum-seekers from the WB6; (ii) provide access to labour migrants from the WB6 regardless of their

- skill level; and (iii) meet labour market needs in Germany – both for low- and high-skilled workers in sectors affected by labour shortages (ETF 2022).
3. This study partly draws from two other studies conducted by the author within the framework of the ETF and BMASGK projects, and it partly draws from the previously issued online reports. For details, see ETF project – <https://wiiw.ac.at/migration-and-human-capital-in-the-western-balkans-pj-237.html>; BMASGK project – <https://wiiw.ac.at/arbee-international-grundlagen-und-angewandte-arbeitsmarktanalysen-pj-212.html>.
 4. For this analysis, ‘Europe’ is defined as the EU28, plus Norway and Switzerland.
 5. Health professionals’ remuneration, defined as the average monthly wages per employee, in human health and social work activities, are provided in current prices, in million PPP.

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Annex 1**Table A1. Diagnostic tests**

		Test	Statistics tests	p-value
Cross-sectional dependence tests	Ho: there is cross-sectional independence	Pesaran	151.895	0.000
		Breusch-Pagan LM test	563.588	0.000
		Slope homogeneity tests	Ho: slope coefficients are homogeneous	Delta
		Delta adjusted	5.257	0.000

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Emigration in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Empirical Evidence from the Last Two Decades

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In this study, we empirically analyse intentions to emigrate from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), focusing on individual, household, regional and socio-economic determinants, including specific influences relevant to the post-conflict nature of this society. We rely on a series of annual country-representative survey data collected over the period 2006–2010 and the latest repeated survey from 2019. This gives us the possibility to see whether there are changes in observed determinants with a decade's difference, all investigated through non-linear econometric models. Moreover, we supplement quantitative research with qualitative in-depth interviews to enrich our results with deeper insights collected from both emigrants and potential emigrants in BiH. Our findings indicate that higher intentions to emigrate are linked to typical individual and household conditions: young, educated and low-income respondents all report high intentions to do so. However, the socio-economic environment characterised by economic – and, even more, by political – instability increases these intentions considerably. Our comparative analysis reports that the socio-economic environment has taken primacy over individual characteristics as drivers of emigrations which dominated a decade ago. Conventional thinking that economic drivers of emigration intentions dominate nowadays have not been confirmed. Policymakers should focus on improving primarily political stability as a measure that will decrease emigration intentions in this post-conflict society.

Keywords: emigration intentions, emigration driver, survey data, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction

People have been moving throughout human history. The main driver of migration is often linked to the search for better living conditions, which have been associated with economic, political, security, environmental and other determinants. This paper is focused on Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is a post-conflict and emigration country; however, in the recent past, it has also been a transit country for international migration to the European Union. Contemporary migration in BiH can be categorised into three waves. First, when BiH was part of the Former Yugoslavia (1945–1990), economic reasons – driven by the increasing demand for labour force by developed European economies – supported the emigration of a productive labour force. Second, during the Bosnian war (1992–1995), one quarter of the population was mostly forced to move out of the country (IASCI/IOM 2010), making BiH's diaspora one of the largest in Europe today. The third, post-conflict, period can be observed after 2000. This period was mostly associated with an unfavourable socio-economic situation, which is combined with other post-conflict-related challenges. However, emigration intensified in the second decade of the twenty-first century (after 2015) and has been associated with significant labour migration, in particular of the younger and more-educated labour force (Efendic 2021).

Linked to these emigration flows, the purpose of this article is to uncover determinants that support the very high emigration intentions that exist nowadays in Bosnian society. As this country faces post-conflict, socio-economic and institutionally related challenges, including quite high unemployment and a low standard of living, we are particularly interested in examining what the most influential forces of emigration intentions and real emigration are – conventional economic or, probably, factors more linked to the post-conflict nature of this society.

The study uses a mixed-method approach based on primary data which were collected through representative surveys and qualitative interviews with target groups. Firstly, we use econometric analysis and quantitative survey data to replicate the emigration intention model conducted for the period 2006–2010 with 2019 data, which gives us possibility to come up with comparative perspectives on emigration intentions over the last decade. Additionally, we rely on a qualitative methodology based on a series of in-depth interviews from 2019 to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons and motivations for emigration intentions.

Emigration intentions are the best predictors of future emigration because they provide insights into the factors influencing the move before it occurs and before emigrants are lost in statistical records. The data in this study allow for a representative analysis of the phenomenon, so the most interesting indicators are observed, the potential determinants of emigration intentions are discussed and, importantly, the research is designed to report empirical outcomes from both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The overall finding is that, currently, high emigration intentions are very much supported by an unstable socio-economic environment and especially political instability while, a decade ago, individual factors were stronger in their influence on aspirations to leave the country. This sends a strong signal to the policymakers in this country.

The paper is organised as follows. In the next section, we present a standard literature review and organise it around the determinants examined in the empirical section. Next, we introduce the context of emigration in BiH, the data and key descriptive statistics. The penultimate section reports on our empirical analysis and discusses the results and limitations of the study. Then comes the conclusion.

Literature review

International migration is a complex, dynamic and multidimensional phenomenon involving a whole range of different motives for emigration, often based on the subjective assessments of individuals who wanted to leave the home country, either temporarily or permanently (Borozan 2014). This is a phenomenon that can be

approached from several angles due to the fact that migration brings uncertain outcomes for society but also for the individual who wants to emigrate. Decisions for long-term emigration also affect the immediate environment of migrants, such as their family and friends, as well as future generations growing up outside their country of origin, often in social and economic systems that are culturally different from those in their country of origin.

Given the complex nature of migration, it is difficult to identify the general causes and consequences of emigration as distinct from other socio-economic and political processes with which migration is closely related (Zbinden, Dahinden and Efendic 2016). It is also important to note that migration is perceived as a uniquely individual experience. Massey *et al.* (1993) identify a set of partial theories and models of migration and point out that, currently, there is no integrated theory of international migration that would unite all significant direct and indirect indicators related to this phenomenon. De Haas (2010) believes that a general theory of migration, due to its complexity, is unlikely to be scientifically achieved.

Although the likelihood of emigration is largely determined by the intention to emigrate, migration intentions have been largely ignored in previous neoclassical structural models (de Haas 2010) because researchers relied on the individual's actual migration activities, predicting the future behaviour of potential migrants based on historical data but not on expressed intentions (Manski 1990). Thus, this approach has ignored the study of potential migrant profiles before the actual migration, while more-recent research has included migration intentions in models that have identified aspirations as good predictors of future migration and migrant behaviour (e.g. Čičić *et al.* 2019; Creighton 2013; Efendic 2016; van Dalen and Henkens 2013). Many authors agree that intentions to emigrate are the primary predictor of actual migrations that are recorded at a later stage (e.g. Ajzen 1985; Armitage and Conner 2001; Creighton 2013; de Jong 2000; Dustmann 2003; Lu 1998; Simmons 1985; van Dalen and Henkens 2013). In this respect, the analysis of emigration intentions is very important for scientific and policy purposes.

Loschmann and Siegel (2013) argue that the analysis of emigration intentions has an advantage over historical data on emigration, bearing in mind that motives and intentions give a better structural understanding of reasons for emigration and inform migration policies which could be better activated before emigration (Simmons 1985). Such policies might indeed be important as emigration can change the population structure of a society (van Dalen, Groenewold and Schoorl 2005) and also indirectly influence the education system, labour market and overall socio-economic activity in the society.

Migration decisions are very often linked to individual (Bahna 2008) and personal characteristics (Berry 2001). Many authors identify different individual causes which motivate intentions and migrations; these determinants mostly include age, gender, level of education and marital status (Brockerhoff and Hongsook 1993). A number of researchers report that age is the most frequently identified determinant of migration that systematically affects emigration intentions (e.g. Kennan and Walker 2011; van Dalen *et al.* 2005). Put simply, the conventional finding is that younger individuals are more likely to intend to emigrate and to do so. This effect is not isolated but, very often, interacts with other individual, household and societal influences. For example, van Dalen and Henkens (2008) find that emigration intentions are much higher among young individuals in good health. Gibson and McKenzie (2011) argue that the perception of local labour-market conditions is the key trigger of youth migration. If individuals are young, unemployed and educated, there is a higher incentive for emigration abroad (Kennan and Walker 2011; van Dalen *et al.* 2005). Bosnia and Herzegovina are characterised by high unemployment which, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), was around 16 per cent in 2019 (SEEJGD 2019) but much higher for younger respondents. Apparently, youth unemployment can be a fertile ground for increasing intentions to emigrate to societies with better prospects for employment and living.

A very popular phenomenon in the literature is the migration of the qualified labour force. More-educated, -skilled and -qualified individuals typically show stronger desires for emigration in comparison to the less-educated and less-qualified (Akee 2010; Duval and Wolff 2016; Gibson and McKenzie 2011). The main argument for this difference is that more-qualified individuals have a higher probability of finding better-paid jobs abroad (Haug 2008). Thissen *et al.* (2010) have found that highly educated individuals have a stronger intention to leave the country, which can cause the well-known problem of brain drain. However, the education of individuals for migration purposes that are not realised can sometimes lead to brain gain within the country, although this is hard to quantify (Abdullov, Epstein and Gang 2020).

Among the important individual characteristics that affect migration intentions, we can include marital status. Krieger (2004) found that individuals who are not married and are without partners make decisions to migrate more easily. In line with this, larger families typically develop strong ties with children and spouses, which limit their migration intentions. However, larger families can involve more people in potential migration – sometimes even whole communities migrate through ‘chain migrations’, as was the case with the war- and post-war-related migration from BiH (Halilovich 2012, 2013a, 2013b). In their search for better migration prospects, some individuals use family migration ties as a strategy to improve their migration outcomes (Halilovich 2012; Haug 2008) and also migration capital in terms of migration networks (Halilovich 2013b), which can be important in understanding current and future migration (Ivlevs and King 2012). Generally speaking, more social capital in the form of informal migration networks stimulates migration intentions (Haug 2008). In line with this, individuals with previous migration experience often have stronger migration aspirations than the non-migrant population, which is why the conflict- and post-conflict-related migrations in BiH could be important in understanding today’s intentions to migrate. To acknowledge this, during the war over 50 per cent of the population in BiH migrated either internally or externally (MHRRBiH 2016) and this effect should be part of the empirical models that follow.

Most of the migration theories today are based on the idea that emigration is motivated by a desire of individuals to improve their standard of living (Todaro 1996; van Dalen and Henkens 2008) or the welfare of their families (Friebel, Gallego and Mendola 2013). This is very important for transition societies that can barely compete with developed economic systems. Accordingly, many authors see economic determinants as primary factors affecting migration (Bahna 2008; Caragliu *et al.* 2013; Ravenstein 1885; Thissen *et al.* 2010) or determinants that often surpass other influences in their importance (Constantinou and Diamantides 1985; Haug 2008). However, other related factors, such as personal life satisfaction and the perception of one’s own economic situation, can be important in their impact on individual decisions to migrate. Individual economic influences are the most often observed through the level of personal income (Loschmann and Siegel 2013; Lovo 2014) or family income (van Dalen and Henkens 2013; Yang 2000) and are mostly identified as relevant predictors. The direction of influence is that a lower level of income is frequently found to be associated as a trigger of migration. However, migration is costly and some financial minimum is required, which means that the level of income and its direction should be treated with caution and examined in specific contexts, which we do in our study. Indeed, the only prior empirical research on emigration intentions in BiH (Efendic 2016) implies that higher aspirations for migration over the period 2006–2010 are associated with the weaker economic performance of individuals. Interestingly, unemployment status in this study did not affect aspirations to a significant extent. Overall, this research found that the economic status of individuals affected aspirations for migration a decade ago (Efendic 2016).

After migration, emigrants can support the population in the home country in different ways – both directly and indirectly – although the most often is by using the social and financial capital which they gain abroad. Remittances from abroad, investments and access to capital are treated as the most important financial influences on the domestic economy (Efendic, Babić and Rebmann 2014). Remittances are a measurable

financial instrument emanating from international migrants and they present an important external financial source for individuals, families and even societies. Although remittances can be invested in the home country, they often end up covering daily consumption (Nielsen and Riddle 2009), which is precisely the case in BiH, where over 80 per cent of remittances end up financing everyday needs (Efendic *et al.* 2014). Several studies have found that the distribution of this financial source has a positive effect on reducing poverty in BiH (Adams and Page 2003; McKenzie and Rapoport 2010) but remittances also serve to keep strong ties with family members (Lucas and Stark 1985; Stark and Bloom 1985). However, remittances can also be seen as an indicator of the good opportunities that exist abroad; thus, they can motivate the domestic population to leave the country. Garip and Asad (2015) indeed identify that remittances can be used as a financial support that helps potential migrants in their future emigration. This is why it is important for emigration and remittances to be controlled in BiH's context, as the level of remittances to this country is close to 10 per cent of the gross domestic production annually (CBBiH 2020).

The literature recognises that migrants and non-migrants have different risk-aversion profiles (Goldbach and Schlüter 2018), which is consistent with individual-level theories of migration decisions (Huber and Nowotny 2020). In other words, an individual's attitude towards risk and willingness to engage in risky activities determine both emigration intention and behaviour. In this regard, Huber and Nowotny (2020) empirically confirm that risk aversion has a strong and statistically significant negative effect on both domestic and international migration willingness, positing that the strength of the impact also depends on the riskiness of the country because people who are not prone to risk do not like to live in a risky environment. Simply put, risk-averse individuals are less likely to emigrate (Heitmueller 2005), which is the effect that we aim to check in our models.

The post-conflict period in BiH is marked by a low level of trust in public institutions (Efendic and Pugh 2015), which might negatively affect aspirations for emigration from this society. Generally said, post-conflict societies are often characterised by inefficient formal institutions which do not align with informal practices and rules on the ground; in such interaction, institutions do not adequately support economic development (Williams and Vorley 2017). Formal institutions, with their bureaucracy and high transaction costs, increase the total costs of living and risk for entrepreneurs (Tonoyan *et al.* 2010), motivating the more informal activities that are associated with a weak economic system and high incidence of the informal economy – Pasovic and Efendic (2018) estimate it at around 30 per cent of GDP. Consequently, it is important to investigate how perceived levels of institutional efficiency might affect aspirations for emigration in BiH.

As we have already pointed out, post-conflict societies are characterised by a number of social and economic challenges, including slow economic activity, political instability and institutional inefficiency, all of which might influence emigration intentions. Indeed, Constantinou and Diamantides (1985) found that not only the economic but also the political environment are potential factors that affect emigration intentions. In BiH, the general public's perception of the political situation is that this is an unstable political environment causing insecurity, political fragmentation and a lack of future prospects, thus increasing intentions for emigration in BiH (Efendic 2016; Williams and Efendic 2019).

Ethnically related challenges are among the potentially important post-conflict influences on emigration aspirations in BiH, as the Bosnian war structurally changed the local ethnic composition of the country and the level of ethnic tolerance among the different ethnic groups (Efendic and Pugh 2018). For example, Duval and Wolff (2016) argue that ethnic discrimination stimulates the emigration intentions of the Roma population in Central and Southeast Europe. Similarly, Docquier and Rapoport (2003) find that ethnic-minority groups can have stronger aspirations for emigration than the ethnic majority group. This can be especially the case when ethnic minorities are institutionally discriminated against – as in BiH (Efendic, Pugh and Adnett 2011)

– and it is more likely that such individuals or groups have stronger aspirations to leave the country. This is somewhat country-specific to BiH and will be taken into account in our empirical modelling.

Our literature review recognises the importance of the analysis of emigration intentions for the post-conflict context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the key emigration drivers that are important to observe. As we have pointed out, there is no unique theory of migration nor a unique list of potentially important drivers for further elaboration but, rather, analysis is usually linked to the existing and available data. However, our literature review establishes grounds for all emigration drivers that will be examined in the empirical model used to analyse emigration intentions in BiH. Next, we introduce the BiH context and the available data.

Emigration from Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to World Bank (2017) estimates, the total emigration stock from BiH was 44.5 per cent of the resident population, which placed the country sixteenth in the world out of 214 countries. According to the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of BiH (MSBiH 2020), the diaspora of BiH was even larger and accounted for over half of the country's current population, which included migrants from the distinct phases of migration introduced earlier. No matter what we accept as a more accurate estimate, the size of the Bosnian diaspora today is significantly large. Most emigrant stocks from BiH are found in Croatia and Serbia within the region, as well as in Germany and Austria within the EU and in Switzerland (Efendic, Kovac and Shapiro 2022).

The size of the emigration stock from BiH is likely to be even more prominent in the future. Emigration from BiH has intensified over the past decade (2010–2020) and, in particular, over the last few years (Leitner 2021). This has contributed to a negative population growth rate, leading to a decrease in the number of citizens. Many estimates (e.g. ASBiH 2018) suggest that the country's population nowadays could be less than 3 million while the last pre-war census recorded 4.1 million citizens.

The recent Eurostat statistics of residence permits within the EU show the increasing popularity of new EU member states in the current emigration flows from BiH, as well as the continuing importance of some old member states such as Germany. The total number of persons from BiH who received a residence permit in 32 European countries in 2018 is 54,107, while the total number for the past 10 years is 228,230 persons. The largest numbers of permits for BiH citizens were issued in Germany, Croatia, Slovenia and Austria. A significant increase in the number of persons who received a residence permit is evident. Thus, in 2018, 45 per cent more BiH residents received a residence permit in another country compared to 2017 – and, even then, there was an increase of 37 per cent compared to 2016. Out of the total number of residence permits, most were issued for a period of 12 months and more (31 048), while 19,544 permits were issued for a period of 6 to 11 months and 3,512 for 3 to 5 months. This should also be considered because there are circular migrations – i.e. workers who spend several months a year in another country for education or work. These workers or students are an extremely valuable resource because they bring back their knowledge, experience and money earned to BiH – in other words, they are the bearers of human and financial capital.

The data on emigration from BiH, although scarce, still indicate that this country faces the huge challenge of the continuously reducing size of its population, its shrinking labour force and other related socio-economic issues. The high number of intentions to emigrate recorded in 2019, as discussed in the next section, suggests that emigration will continue to be significant in the near future, which stimulates a deeper investigation of emigration intentions in this society.

Methodology

The paper employs a mixed-methods approach, which adds depth and richness to the analysis by combining quantitative data (survey) with qualitative (semi-structured interviews) insights from the target groups, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons and motivations behind emigration intentions. This study uses primary data collected in BiH by professional research agencies, which followed the standards of a representative sample of the adult population. For the period up to 2010, we use UNDP survey data from the household sector in BiH. A series of quarterly surveys were conducted by a professional survey agency to support the UNDP BiH project ‘Early Warning System’ over the period from 2002 to 2010 (UNDP BiH 2000–2010). Thirty waves of data were collected and our effective sample comprises around 40,000 observations. In addition, we use a repeated representative survey from 2019 with a sample of 2,028 respondents, which was organised by the Academy of Science and Arts of BiH and again implemented by a professional research agency.¹ As both surveys included the same questions relevant for our analysis, we are able to investigate emigration intentions for these distinct periods as well as examine similarities and differences with a decadal difference.

In addition, we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with a select group of individuals to gain insight into the reasons, motivations and actual experiences of BiH citizens with regard to emigration intentions and actual emigration. The sample was designed to include people from industries that are heavily impacted by emigration, such as IT and healthcare. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that individuals from various regions, educational backgrounds, age groups and employment statuses, including those currently living abroad and returnees, were represented. The interviews were conducted in person with the help of an unstructured questionnaire, and the data were analysed descriptively by experienced researchers. A total of 13 people were interviewed, with codes ranging from I_1 to I_13. Nine of the participants were BiH residents and four were actual emigrants interviewed during their visit to BiH. The interviews were conducted in July 2019 and the narratives were recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

Emigration intentions: data and descriptive statistics

The primary goal of this study is to examine the emigration aspirations of BiH’s citizens or their intention to leave the country, either temporarily or permanently. In response to this question, the majority of respondents, 34 per cent, said they would leave BiH permanently and move to another country, 24 per cent would temporarily leave BiH, while 22 per cent have no plans to emigrate; others do not know or want to answer. According to the UNDP BiH (2002–2010), on average, approximately 45 per cent of respondents expressed a readiness for permanent migration abroad during this period. Thus, our research shows that, nearly a decade later, the intention to emigrate permanently is slightly lower. As previous surveys did not ask about temporary emigration, we focus on the category of respondents who want to emigrate permanently.

Looking at other responses from this survey (Čičić *et al.* 2019), a slightly higher percentage of men expressed an intention to leave – 35 per cent compared to 32 per cent of women. Interestingly, 39 per cent of respondents with a university degree expressed an intention to leave BiH permanently, while 33 per cent of respondents with a high-school diploma have the same intention. Most respondents who intend to leave BiH permanently are in the age group 30 to 39 (44 per cent), while 40 per cent of those aged 18 to 29 also have emigration aspirations. As expected, the oldest age group has the lowest percentage.

Those (58 per cent) who expressed a desire to leave BiH either permanently or temporarily responded to the survey question about which country they would like to live in. The majority of respondents chose Germany (42 per cent). Other countries of interest to respondents include Austria (12), Switzerland (8) and Sweden (7 per cent).

After the introduction of the data in Table 1, we report the descriptive statistics for variables used in empirical modelling; the empirical analysis based on these data follows.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables used in empirical analysis

Variable	Description	Observed	Mean	Std Dev.	Min.	Max.
<i>Individual and household characteristics</i>						
Age	1=>35 years, 0=35+	2,028	0.438	0.496	0	1
Gender	1=male, 0=female	2,028	0.404	0.491	0	1
Education	1=higher education, 0=middle or low	2,028	0.415	0.493	0	1
Employment	1=employed, 0=other	2,028	0.570	0.495	0	1
Area of living	1=rural, 0=urban	2,028	0.449	0.497	0	1
Level of family income	1=below average, 0=average or above	2,028	0.181	0.385	0	1
Marital status	1=married, 0=no	2,002	0.601	0.490	0	1
Risk aversion	1=risk averse, 0=not willing to take risks	2,028	0.732	0.443	0	1
Remittances	1=receive remittances, 0=no remittances	1,944	0.236	0.425	0	1
<i>Socio-economic determinants</i>						
Economic situation	1 = worse, 0 = better	2,028	0.483	0.500	0	1
Political situation	1 = worse, 0 = better	2,028	0.541	0.498	0	1
Institutional quality	1 = worse, 0 = better	2,028	2.352	0.728	1	5
<i>Post-conflict determinants</i>						
Ethnic tensions	1=exist, 0=do not exist	2,028	0.058	0.233	0	1
Returnees	1=returnees, 0=other	2,028	0.047	0.212	0	1
Internal migrants	1=internal migrants, 0=other	2,028	0.173	0.378	0	1
Refugees	1=refugees, 0=other	2,028	0.011	0.104	0	1

Note: we do not report descriptive statistics for ‘do not know’ responses or regional and municipal dummies for space reasons but they are controlled for in the empirical models.

Aspirations for emigration in BiH – an empirical analysis

Our empirical analysis was conducted in two stages.² The first step was to replicate the emigration intentions model from Efendic (2016), the model which was estimated for the period 2006–2010 (i.e. Model I) in order to identify potential changes in comparison to the latest data (i.e., 2019 vs 2006–2010). It is interesting to estimate the same model with a time difference of 1 decade: this is Model II.

The second step was to estimate an extended model with additional factors identified in the literature review as potentially relevant or specific to BiH. This is Model III. All these models are based on determinants which, in line with our previous discussion, can be categorised into individual influences, societal and post-conflict-related influences.³ Table 2 reports a comparative presentation of these 3 different models estimated for different periods and with varying specifications.

To make interpretation easier, the majority of variables are set up as binaries, including the dependent variable. The models are estimated using the non-linear probit model in the first stage (as the dependent variable is expressed in binary form), while marginal effects are calculated after the probit estimate and reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Emigration aspiration models: marginal effects after probit estimate

Dependent variable (1=aspirations to permanently leave BiH, 0=other)		Initial model 2006–2010 data		Replicated Model I with 2019 data		Final model 2019 data	
		Model I	Model II	Model II	Model III		
Variable	Description of variables	y/dx	> z	y/dx	> z	y/dx	> z
<i>Individual and household characteristics</i>							
Age	1=>35 years; 0=35+	0.34	0.000	0.16	0.000	0.17	0.000
Gender	1=male, 0=female	0.01	0.200	0.01	0.907	0.24	0.405
Education	1=higher education, 0=middle/low	0.20	0.000	0.08	0.020	0.05	0.126
Employment	1=employed, 0=other	0.04	0.003	0.03	0.370	0.05	0.111
Area of living	1=rural, 0=urban	0.01	0.652	0.06	0.118	0.05	0.090
Level of income	1=below average, 0=average/above	0.08	0.000	0.01	0.865	0.03	0.465
Marital status	1=married, 0=not married	-	-	-	-	0.02	0.548
Risk aversion	1=risk averse, 0=not risk averse	-	-	-	-	0.06	0.082
Remittances	1=receives remittances, 0=does not	-	-	-	-	0.11	0.001
<i>Socio-economic determinants</i>							
Economic situation	1=worse, 0=better	0.03	0.028	0.14	0.001	0.13	0.001
Political situation	1=worse, 0=better	0.06	0.000	0.26	0.000	0.19	0.000
Institutional quality	1 minimum to 5 maximum	-	-	-	-	0.13	0.000
<i>Post-conflict determinants</i>							
Ethnic tensions	1=exist, 0=do not exist	0.01	0.793	0.18	0.006	0.04	0.539
Returnees	1=returnees, 0=other	0.01	0.662	0.06	0.481	0.04	0.603
Internal migrants	1=internal migrants, 0=other	0.13	0.000	0.08	0.071	0.04	0.307
Refugees	1=refugees, 0=other	0.09	0.000	0.23	0.114	0.26	0.022
<i>Number of observations</i>		12,165		1,110		1,506	
<i>Period in focus</i>		2006–2010		2019		2019	
<i>Regional dummies (18 regions controlled)</i>		Yes		Yes		Yes	
<i>Municipal dummies (200 municipalities controlled)</i>		Yes		No		No/Yes	
<i>'I don't know' included in the analysis</i>		Yes		Yes		Yes	
<i>Estimated probability</i>		0.47		0.44		0.44	

Notes: we do not report probit coefficients as they are not useful for interpretation, which we tackle by estimating marginal effects after probit estimates in Stata 14 software. Marginal effects for regions and 'do not know' responses are not reported for reasons of space. Municipal dummies are included in Model III to check consistency in the results; the probit model provides a very similar estimate without changes in significant variables and with a very similar magnitude. However, the software could not calculate marginal effects.

If we examine the first category of influence on emigration intentions (respondents who intend to leave BiH permanently), which we refer to as individual characteristics, we observe a number of interesting outcomes. First, although the age of the respondents is the strongest individual predictor of emigration intentions in both estimated models (Model I and Model II), the effect was reduced from 34 to 16 per cent. In sum, although younger respondents show stronger emigration aspirations, for 16 per cent in comparison to older respondents (35+ years), this effect is twice as weak as a decade earlier.

Another similar change is identified in the analysis of the effect of respondents' education, where the probability of expressing the intent to emigrate decreases from 20 to 8 per cent for those with higher levels of education compared to those with lower levels. The potential brain-drain effect was significantly greater a decade ago than it is today, indicating that the effect of differences in individual education on emigration intentions has decreased significantly, although it is still somewhat skewed in favour of more-educated BiH citizens.

Another intriguing finding relates to the employment status effect. In Model I, employed individuals indicated somewhat weaker intentions to leave the country compared to other categories of the labour force. However, in 2019, there was no difference on this basis. Therefore, the conventional assumption that unemployed individuals in BiH leave or want to leave the country systematically more has not been confirmed, as employed individuals have comparable intentions. A similar finding provides insight into the effect of family income which, a decade ago, led to approximately 8 per cent stronger intentions to leave the country among those coming from families with lower incomes. In 2019, this difference disappeared, indicating that this economic factor does not influence individuals' desire to leave the country in a systematic manner.

In the subsequent categorisation of determinants, the socio-economic environment is as significant in elucidating emigration intentions as it was in the preceding decade, albeit with a structural upward shift. From 2006–2010, the perception of an unfavourable political and economic situation increased by 3 and 6 percentage points, respectively, to 14 and 26 percentage points in 2019. In the current study, the increased negative impact of the socio-economic environment is 4 times greater than it was a decade ago, indicating that perceptions of the socio-economic environment in BiH have significantly deteriorated. The findings suggest that the socio-economic environment has supplanted the influence of individual characteristics on the increased desire to emigrate over the past decade. Currently, the socio-economic environment has the greatest impact on potential migrants.

Such results are not only a significant indicator of how the general situation is perceived in the country but also a signal to policymakers that they must tailor their actions to specific groups. Political and economic instability, exemplified by a protracted period of political conflict, political uncertainty, the problem of non-government formation and, in conjunction with this, a lack of economic development, all increase the desire to leave BiH.

Within the observed set of post-conflict determinants, the significance of ethnic intolerance in 2019 stands out, in contrast to the initial model from a decade ago in which this determinant was not statistically significant. Specifically, respondents who have encountered ethnic-related problems are 18 per cent more likely to be considering leaving BiH. The possible origins of this type of discrimination must be investigated further, taking into account the effects of this social – but also very likely institutional – discrimination.

We decided to expand the replaced model (Model II) with the additionally potentially relevant determinants introduced in our literature review and, importantly, which are available in the 2019 dataset (although not before). In relation to our earlier discussion of whether the potential individual determinants cited by the literature were significant, we added to this group the marital status of respondents, their risk tolerance and whether or not they receive remittances from abroad. In the socio-economic determinants category, in addition to the perception of the economic and political environment, we also control the effect of the perception of the efficiency of public institutions in BiH, which has been shown in numerous studies to be instrumental in elucidating a variety of social phenomena. Our final and extended model (Model III), based on multiple factors

and simultaneously controlled influences drawn from recent literature, certainly increases the significance of the results obtained, which is the basis for our final interpretation of the empirical results.

Individual characteristics in the final model are insignificant in increasing emigration intentions in the majority of cases, apart from the effect of age and remittances, with the conventional finding being that younger respondents have approximately 17 per cent stronger emigration intentions than older respondents. Although the effect of age is important, we note that, in previous research, it was twice as high, which suggests that the elderly population's intentions to emigrate have been increasing. It is interesting to note that education, employment, gender and income do not influence emigration intentions systematically. If we divide the level of education into more categories – primary, secondary and higher education – respondents with secondary and higher education have approximately 20 per cent greater emigration aspirations than those with only primary education. This result is not unexpected (see Leitner 2021) and does not definitively confirm the existence of a brain-drain phenomenon.

It is worth noting that individuals who receive remittances have approximately 10 per cent greater emigration intentions, indicating that remittances may be a factor luring the population abroad, either due to the perception of higher living standards abroad or as a potential means of financing emigration. If we observe the significance at a weaker level (10 per cent) than the conventional 5 per cent level, we find that the effect of the urban population and the more risk-prone population increases emigration intentions by approximately 5 per cent in this scenario. On the basis of these findings, we conclude that more young people from urban areas, who are generally more risk-aware and especially if they receive remittances from abroad, express a stronger intention to leave the country in comparison to others.

All socio-economic factors that we monitor through the perception of the country's general economic, political and institutional (in)stability influence emigration intentions. Those who believe the economic situation is deteriorating are 13 per cent more likely to declare emigration intentions, while those who perceive political instability are 19 per cent more likely to do so. The perception of institutions' inefficiency increases emigration intentions by 13 per cent. This finding reflects the unstable political climate that characterised 2019, in which election results from the previous year cannot yet be implemented (at the time of writing) but a quite similar situation characterised the later period (2020–2022). The indicators obtained for socio-economic characteristics demonstrate a greater influence compared to individual characteristics, which can be interpreted as a sign of widespread discontent with the socio-economic environment in the country. These findings are entirely consistent with the initial findings presented earlier in this paper. In the final model, post-conflict determinants involving ethnic intolerance and categories of returnees and internal migrants lose statistical significance.

Individual influences as potential emigration drivers in BiH are less influential than the socio-economic environment as measured by political instability, perception of the economic situation and institutional efficiency, according to our empirical findings. Consequently, the primary conclusion of this empirical analysis is that potential emigrants in BiH are currently more affected by the country's environment, particularly the political climate, than by individual difficulties and influences. We believe that this finding can be taken as relevant to other similar fragile, unstable and post-conflict societies.

Further interesting results can be obtained by looking at the combined effects of different determinants in the model. Since it is possible to report a good number of combinations for different variables used and for the two observed samples, we are limited as to how much detail to go into in one paper. However, we do find confirmation (by using the Bonferroni adjusted method and STATA software for calculations) that the determinants of emigration intentions in the model do not work only singly but in different combinations as well. Moreover, we are sensitive to the issue of potential endogeneity in the model, considering the fact that these are cross-sectional data. Still, the biggest attention related to potential endogeneity might be that we use

education and income variables in the same specification, having in mind well-established theoretical and empirical arguments that education generally is an explanatory variable of individual income. However, in our case, income is a family-level variable, so we believe that this potential endogeneity problem is less of an issue. Still, we cannot be sure that endogeneity is tackled fully, which we acknowledge as a limitation of this paper.

Emigrations and intentions – in-depth analysis

To gain a better understanding of the reasons and motivations for emigration intentions and the actual emigration of the citizens of BiH, we conducted in-depth interviews with a selected group of individuals. As some sectors of the economy are particularly affected by emigration (e.g. the IT and health sectors), the sample was designed to include such people. Moreover, an effort was made to include individuals from different regions, educational backgrounds, ages and employment statuses as well as those who currently live abroad and those who are returnees. The interviews were conducted in person with an unstructured questionnaire and analysed in a descriptive manner. In total, interviews were collected from 13 participants, who were coded in the range I_1 to I_13. In the sample, 9 individuals live in BiH, while 4 are actual emigrants who were interviewed during their visit to BiH. The interviews were executed in July 2019; they are recorded, transcribed and anonymised following standard academic practice. A description of the interviewees is available in Table 3 (Appendix 1).

Our analysis of responses coming from people who left BiH (actual emigrants) suggests that emigration was not always or primarily motivated by financial reasons. Specifically, respondents I_12 and I_13 left BiH with their families, where both spouses were employed with above-average incomes. Furthermore, a respondent (I_11) who left BiH and now lives in the Czech Republic stated: ‘It is ironic that I left a very good job behind to come to another country and work for much less because it is safer everywhere except in Bosnia’. Young people, on the other hand, frequently decide to emigrate after completing part or all of their studies outside BiH. As an example, I_11 again stated that she received a full scholarship for a Master’s programme at a prestigious university and that she planned to return to BiH after completing her studies. She continues, ‘Other options have opened up, which have kept me out of BiH for 7 years [...] I never intended to leave BiH forever, but I have always been a person who made decisions as opportunities arose, and this was one that could not be passed up’. Based on the responses from these interviewees, it is possible to conclude that the motivating factors for leaving, for both young people and entire families, are primarily related to a sense of security and perceptions of the future rather than finances.

It is interesting to note that only two people stated that they would never leave BiH – an employee of a state institution and a respondent who returned from the US after 17 years to live in BiH. However, most respondents do not have a fully expressed emigration intention – i.e. they are currently satisfied with life in BiH but do not want to rule out the possibility of leaving in the future. Personal and professional development through learning about new cultures and expanding personal and professional acquaintances is clearly motivating this group of respondents. ‘I am not actively thinking about leaving’ [respondent I_2 says] ‘but if I received a business offer that I consider adequate, I would leave BiH. Leaving BiH appeals to me more in terms of new experiences, career development and learning than as a permanent departure, because it may be better somewhere else’. In this regard, younger respondents believe that more-developed countries provide better opportunities for future development, as evidenced by the following statement:

I have a desire to leave BiH, because I believe that, in other countries, I have more opportunities for development, better education system, better offer when it comes to international companies, better living

environment and ultimately better economic and political situation and health system. Another reason is that living in one of the EU countries leads to a number of advantages, both business and private, for example better connections and more travel opportunities, which are a very important hobby for me personally. I used to live and study abroad for a year – half a year in Portugal and half a year in Spain on an international exchange. The reason for my return is to finish school in BiH and the reason why I did not continue to look for a job abroad is my family – i.e., my parents – and my current unwillingness to do so (I_6).

Finally, a number of respondents are explicit in their intention to leave BiH. Injustice, corruption, insecurity and the general political and social situation are the main reasons for wanting to leave. According to one interviewee,

It has long been a public secret that the most important reference here is to be politically close to the governing structures. In addition, I feel completely insecure and unprotected in BiH. I do not trust our justice system. I consider it my obligation to protect my children from this system and I see no other way than to go to a more stable and secure country (I_8).

During the interviews, respondents were asked about their perceptions of BiH's current economic, political and social situations. Unemployment is, as expected, the most serious economic issue. Corruption, which, according to our respondents, prevents business ventures – both investment and entrepreneurship and finding employment – comes in second place in terms of number of comments. It seems that this is linked to a lack of faith in the system and previous disappointments. Respondent I_13, who left BiH, is adamant in her stance: 'I think that there is no future in Bosnia, corruption is only spreading, the people are becoming more and more corrupt'.

On the other hand, not all of the interviewed individuals hold pessimistic views of the current economic climate. Thus, an entrepreneur from the western part of BiH cites economic conditions as the reason for his decision to stay in BiH and establish an information technology company. The young, promising electrical engineer believes that his work, dedication and education can contribute to the development of BiH and the country's economic prosperity. A high-school graduate expressed the same opinion regarding her personal contribution, which contributes to a positive atmosphere.

Regarding the perception of the economic situation in BiH, we can conclude that finding employment and the fear of unemployment, as well as the complicated system for accessing jobs, are the primary economic issues. None of the respondents, whether they left or stayed in BiH, cited higher earnings as a reason for their decision.

The political environment, according to our respondents, is in a worse state than the economic environment. Consequently, they state: 'It appears to me that the political situation is even worse than the economic situation' (I_6) or 'The political situation is the worst' (I_3). Instability and uncertainty are the most significant issues. Thus, this university professor states: 'I believe we live in an extremely unregulated society with a very weak legal and state system that [only] provides legal, educational, health and any other type of insecurity' (I_9).

Several respondents claim that they do not follow the country's political situation at all because they feel powerless to do or contribute anything, that 'the same politicians are always elected' (I_11) and that they are sick of hearing the same post-war rhetoric and to be constantly reminded of 'undefined fears of another war' (I_12). Our respondents are people who have either left BiH or are in the category the most likely to leave (e.g. IT professionals, medical personnel, young and prospective high-school or university students, etc.) and their message is very clear. They want to focus on themselves, think about the future rather than the past and contribute to their own personal and professional development. They are clearly lucrative for the labour market

now – in their best and most productive years – and they want to work, create and be happy. Thus, pessimism in society, caused in part by the image of the constant departure of young people, as well as negative and frequently unverified populist statements in the media about hopelessness in BiH, create an environment in which young people do not have the opportunity to consider their future positively.

Summing up, our qualitative research shows that respondents who left BiH need to justify such a life decision to themselves and others. As one interviewee said, ‘I can only say that I’m sorry this had to happen and I’m sorry to see that everything down there is falling apart’ (I_10). Another respondent outside BiH described her view of the reasons why people leave or do not return to BiH:

In general, based on my own personal experience, I believe that young people leave and then settle elsewhere because they observe a different way of life, equal opportunities for all young people and an emphasis on quality and effort over one’s name, economic status and family ties. Life in Central Europe affords the chance to attend an exhibition, concert, play or another event in Vienna, Prague, Budapest or Bratislava... For a pitiful amount of money, it is astounding that a student can plan a weekend trip and fly to Spain for 50 euros, earn more than their parents at the age of 24 and live in a peaceful country while reading only negative news from BiH (I_11).

It is interesting to note that the view is very similar but quite the opposite – i.e. on life in BiH, a young returnee says:

Every day, I encounter people’s scepticism about my choice of residence. The fact is that many young people want to leave and seek a better life elsewhere. I am glad to hear this because I believe they are undervalued in their home country, where they were born and raised. I agreed to do anything at first and gradually progressed [waitress in the hotel – reception – front office manager – director of operations]. However, college graduates want a job for which they are qualified and do not want to do anything else. The state is responsible for regulating both the education system and the labour market, especially in the public sector (I_7).

Our overall conclusion is that qualitative analysis supports the findings of the quantitative analysis in conveying the message that the socio-economic environment strongly influences emigration decisions and that individual challenges and economic problems are frequently of second-order importance.

Conclusion

Bosnia and Herzegovina is experiencing a permanent demographic decline. In other words, mortality and emigration are more dominant than birth rates and immigration, resulting in overall depopulation and accelerating the ageing of the population as one of the foremost challenges facing the country’s contemporary society. In addition, our primary data from the 2019 representative sample show that 34 per cent of respondents have aspirations for permanent emigration from BiH and 24 per cent have aspirations for temporary emigration, indicating potential further depopulation in the near future. Moreover, as Halilovich *et al.* (2018) report, emigrants from BiH integrate very well into their host countries, creating new political identities, thus making it more difficult to contemplate return to BiH.

Intentions to emigrate from BiH are a complex social phenomenon influenced by a number of factors pertaining to individuals, the environment where they live and post-conflict societal challenges, as demonstrated by the empirical findings of this study. We were able to observe the desire to leave BiH in a dynamic context over a 10-year time period, which adds to the importance of this study. The results obtained

indicate that the relevance of individual factors as migration drivers (age, marital status, education, employment, etc.) pales in comparison to the influence of the socio-economic and, especially, the political environment. Although younger individuals have emigration intentions that are approximately 17 per cent stronger than those of older individuals, this result is not unexpected; however, in a dynamic context, this age effect has significantly diminished. On the other hand, perceptions of political instability, the poor economic situation in the country and institutional inefficiency are systematic and the strongest contributors to emigration intentions. This is consistent with previous research (e.g. Franc, Časni and Barišić 2019) which indicates that GDP in the immigration country and the unemployment rate in the home country are strong motivators for migration, especially among the younger generation. Similarly, Halilovich *et al.* (2018) conclude that a difficult economic situation and delays in successful labour-market transition are strong drivers for migration, especially for young people and – interestingly – for those over-educated who look for non-standard or better employment opportunities abroad.

The conclusions obtained from our quantitative analysis are confirmed by the qualitative side of our research. Our respondents observed that the inefficient institutional system in BiH (from education and health systems to their trust in public institutions and political elites) negatively impacts on their quality of life and, as a result, they choose to leave. Our informants believe that they are overburdened with too many socio-economic problems, negative attitudes and rhetoric that prevent them from focusing on themselves and their professional and personal development within the country; hence, an existing strategy for many seems to be emigration.

Previous analysis and research have clearly shown that urgent and systematic implementation of socio-economic and political reforms in BiH would reduce intentions to emigrate. Increasing economic prosperity, urgent political stabilisation and improved institutional efficiency would undoubtedly relax citizens and enable them to focus on their daily lives and their own perspectives within the country instead of feeding their emigration aspirations.

Several aspects of this study can be highlighted as significant contributions. First and foremost, an updated analysis of previous studies is provided, allowing for the examination of potential changes and trends in emigration intentions over time, as well as potential changes in the determinants that influence emigration intentions. The paper then employs a mixed-methods approach to add depth and richness to the analysis by providing both quantitative data and qualitative insights from the target groups, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the reasons and motivations for emigration intentions. Qualitative interviews add valuable perspectives on the current economic, political and social situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, enriching the overall analysis.

The study has practical implications as well. Our research found that the deterioration of the socio-economic environment, combined with political instability, has a significant impact on people's desire to emigrate. This observation can help policy-makers to address the underlying causes of emigration and develop strategies to improve BiH's socio-economic and political conditions. Furthermore, the paper can help policy-makers to understand the factors that encourage emigration and the importance of addressing specific challenges. Based on our empirical findings, these specific challenges primarily relate to the socio-economic environment and political stability.

The main limitation of this study is that the findings are limited to Bosnia and Herzegovina and may not be directly applicable to other countries or regions. The results cannot be generalised because of the unique socio-economic and political conditions in BiH. Furthermore, the study focused on two time periods, 2006–2010 and 2019, which may not capture the full dynamics of emigration intentions over a longer time period. Finally, we did not explicitly consider the potential interactions among the determinants of emigration intentions due to reasons of space. In this regard, a limitation of our study is the cross-sectional nature of the data and limited possibility to address potential endogeneity, which is always a concern in this kind of research.

Notes

1. Data collection was conducted by the professional research agency, VALICON, using a combination of face-to-face methods (1/3 of the questionnaire) and CAPI or Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (2/3 of the questionnaire).
2. The empirical analysis in this paper was conducted as part of the project: ‘Emigration Study Bosnia and Herzegovina’, supported by the Government of the Federation BiH and implemented by a multidisciplinary team from the Academy of Science and Arts of BiH (ASABiH). An integrated study from this project has been published by ASABiH (see Čičić *et al.* 2019; https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339487818_Studija_o_emigracijama_-_Bosna_i_Hercegovina). This article uses extended parts of this online study.
3. Note, this distinction is only for the purpose of easier interpretation as it is not always clear where to place some determinants – e.g. remittances can also be a post-conflict influence.

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Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix 1

Table 3. Description of interviewees

I_1 Youth	Female, 18, unmarried and a high-school graduate. She lives in Sarajevo, Novo Sarajevo, with her mother and brother. Unemployed.
I_2 Youth	Male, 23, unmarried, Master's student (II cycle) at Sarajevo's Faculty of Electrical Engineering. Lives in Novo Sarajevo with his parents. Has an older sister who also lives in Sarajevo. Unemployed but working part-time as an associate student.
I_3 Youth	Female, 24, unmarried, recently graduated from the School of Economics and Business at the University of Sarajevo. She lives in Novo Sarajevo with her parents. Her older brother also lives in Sarajevo with his family. Employed.
I_4 IT	Male, 27, single, lives alone in Mostar. Runs his own IT company, 5 years of work experience. Programmer by profession. He has parents and a sister who live in BiH.
I_5 IT	Female, 29, single, lives alone in Banja Luka. Employed as a scrum master and coach in an IT company. Ten years' work experience. She has parents and a younger brother who also live in Banja Luka.
I_6 Medicine	Female, single, employed in a private medical institution. By profession Master of Radiology with 5 years' work experience. Lives with her mother in Sarajevo, Novi Grad. Has an older sister who lives with her family in Herzegovina and two brothers who live outside BiH.
I_7 Returnee	Female, 24, single, lives alone in Sarajevo, Novi Grad. Employed, 5 years of work experience in the hotel industry. Her parents and sister live in the USA.
I_8 Unemployed	Female, 37, married. Unemployed and without work experience, except for internship. She lives with her husband and 2 children in Sarajevo, Novi Grad. She has a mother who also lives in Sarajevo and an older sister with her family.
I_9 State institution	Male, 45, married. Employed at the Faculty of Pharmacy in Sarajevo with 19 years' work experience. Lives with his wife and two children in Sarajevo, Center. His mother and sister also live in BiH.
I_10 Emigrant	Female, 29, unmarried, 5 years' work experience, PhD in management/business. She left BiH 7 years ago and lives and works in the Czech Republic. Her parents and younger brother live in Sarajevo.
I_11 Emigrant	Female, 29, unmarried, Bachelor of Management. She lives and works in the Czech Republic. Her parents and younger brother live in Sarajevo.
I_12 Emigrant	Female, 40, married, 24 years' work experience, graduate economist, certified accountant and broker. She left BiH 3 years ago with her husband and two children. She now lives and works in Germany, where she lived in the early 1990s. Her parents and brother with family live in Sarajevo.
I_13 Emigrant	Female, 39, married, 12 years' work experience. By profession an ophthalmologist. Now lives and works in Germany. Her parents and sister with family live in BiH.

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Albanian Students Abroad: A Potential Brain Drain?

Russell King* , Ilir Gëdeshi**

Since 1991, Albania has become a fertile terrain for the study of migration and its relationship to development. One aspect of the country's intense and diverse experience of emigration which has received less attention is the movement of its students into higher education abroad. To what extent does this student emigration constitute a potential brain drain? We answer this question via a mixed-method research endeavour consisting of an online survey (N=651) of Albanian students enrolled in foreign universities and follow-up in-depth interviews (N=21) with a sample of the survey respondents. The survey and interviews were carried out in 2019–2020. The survey collected data on students' social and academic background, reasons for going abroad to study, life in the host country, attitudes towards returning to Albania and perceived barriers to return. Half of the respondents do not intend to return immediately after graduating. The remainder have a more open or uncertain mindset, including 30 per cent who say they will return only after a period spent working or doing further studies abroad. Those who intend to return, either sooner or later, do so out of a combination of family ties, nostalgia and wanting to 'give something back' to their home country. However, the barriers to return are perceived as formidable: low pay, lack of good jobs, corruption and a general feeling that 'there is no future' in Albania. The scale of loss of young brains is thus potentially considerable and a major policy concern for the future of the country.

Keywords: Albania, student emigration, brain drain, development, corruption

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Introduction

Due to the scale of emigration over the past three decades, Albania has been described as ‘a country on the move’ (Carletto, Davis, Stampini and Zezza 2006) and as ‘a laboratory for the study of migration and development’ (King 2005). Since the country opened up to the outside world after the collapse of the long-entrenched communist regime in the early 1990s, a ‘stock’ of Albanians living abroad has accumulated which is equivalent to around 40 per cent of the population resident in Albania.¹ After three decades, this migration is still ongoing, albeit with a changing profile – less a migration driven by poverty, desperation and protest, as it was in the 1990s, and more, nowadays, a structural feature of Albanian society, affecting particularly the younger and more educated components of the population (King and Gëdeshi 2020).

One aspect of Albania’s changing experience of migration which has received less attention is the movement of students to pursue higher education abroad. Despite the existence of public universities in all major urban centres (Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, Durrës, Korça, Vlora and Gjirokastrë), as well as a recent expansion of private and franchised institutions of higher education, mainly in Tirana, Albania has one of the highest rates of ‘exporting’ its students in Europe. We aim to unpack the phenomenon of Albanian student emigration, both to explore its main characteristics (motivations, courses of study, destination countries, plans for return to Albania etc.) and to tease out the wider implications of this movement. We deploy two main research instruments: an online survey, answered by 651 Albanian students studying abroad, and follow-up interviews with 21 such students. Given our key finding that large numbers of students do not intend to return to Albania, we suggest that this loss of highly educated young people constitutes a putative brain drain to be added to the already-studied brain drain of PhD-holders (Gëdeshi and King 2021).

Whilst ‘international student migration’ and ‘brain drain’ are not the same thing and, in fact, have spawned largely separate literatures so that the two phenomena are rarely linked, one of the functions of our paper is precisely to make that connection. We do so for two reasons. First, the notion of brain drain is often used in Albania when referring to the widespread desire of highly educated young people, including students, to leave the country (Gëdeshi and King 2021; Trimçev 2005). Second, we qualify the term by adding ‘potential’: if the students who are studying abroad do not (intend to) eventually return, then their emigration indeed turns into a brain drain.

The paper develops as follows. The next section reviews key literature on international student migration to set the context for the Albanian case. Then, we specify a number of questions pertinent to characterising and explaining Albanian student migration, including students’ plans for the future. The subsequent section outlines the two research techniques used to collect empirical data. The longest part of the paper presents our findings, divided into sections dealing with individual research questions. We conclude the paper by summing up and discussing some policy implications.

International student migration: contextualising the Albanian case

International student migration (henceforth ‘ISM’) was recognised as a significant component of global migration only since about 2000. On the whole, student migrants, often referred to as ‘mobile students’ or ‘international students’ rather than as migrants *per se*, have not been seen as a ‘problem’ – unlike asylum-seekers, so-called illegal migrants or some categories of somatically, culturally and socio-economically ‘different’ labour migrants, who have been the target of exclusionary and racist attitudes and policies by host societies. Students, by contrast, are generally seen as desirable migrants who move to enrich their personal human capital, after which they would either return to their home country or, if they remained in their chosen host

country, would contribute to its high-skilled workforce. This sanitised view of ISM as an unproblematic ‘good thing’ needs to be nuanced; we do this later.

In the last two decades, the literature on ISM has grown rapidly. Several important books have been published (*inter alia*, Bilecen 2014; Brooks and Waters 2011; de Wit, Agarwal, Said, Schoole and Sirozi 2008; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Gürüz 2011; Murphy-Lejeune 2002; Van Mol 2014; Waters and Brooks 2021) alongside a number of special issues of journals (see Bilecen and Van Mol 2017; King and Raghuram 2013; Riaño, Van Mol and Raghuram 2018) as well as a dedicated journal, the *Journal of International Students*, published since 2011. As far as we are able to tell, none of this established literature pays any attention to Albania. We do, however, note a growing interest in ISM from European post-socialist countries to the ‘West’ (Chankseliani 2016; Genova 2016; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Holloway, O’Hara and Pimlott-Wilson 2012; Lulle and Buzinska 2017; Marcu 2015; Mosneaga 2012; Wilken and Dahlberg 2017).

The literature on ISM displays two contrasting approaches: a statistical/geographical one, mapping and quantifying the movements of students globally and in different parts of the world such as Europe; and a more socio-anthropological perspective, focusing on students’ motivations, perceptions, experiences, identities and future plans. Our study mainly follows the latter approach, although we are also concerned to briefly portray the scale and patterns of Albania student migration as contextual data.

Table 1. Albanian students abroad by host country, 2017

Country	No.	%
Italy	10,364	59.4
Greece	1,206	6.9
Turkey	989	5.7
Germany	886	5.1
USA	824	4.7
France	550	3.2
Austria	364	2.1
Romania	294	1.7
UK	272	1.6
Bulgaria	242	1.4
Other countries	1,457	8.4
Total	17,448	100.00

Source: UNESCO, Institute of Statistics, Global Flow of Tertiary Level Students (<http://unesco.org/en/uis-studnet-flow>).

How, then, to explain the destination pattern for Albanian student migration? Table 1 presents UNESCO data for Albanian students in their 10 most popular destinations. According to Börjesson (2017), global patterns of ISM follow three principles. The first is geographical proximity. Students wanting to study abroad will, other things being equal, opt for destinations which are relatively close in order to economise on travel costs, facilitate return visits home and, perhaps also, minimise cultural difference. Albanians’ preference for countries in Europe, especially nearby Italy and Greece, supports this principle, with 85 per cent studying in an EU country. The second principle is that students move from lesser- to more-developed countries in order to access higher quality and more prestigious institutions and educational systems. Again, the Albanian data support this proposition. Albanian universities are perceived as inferior to those in Western Europe and the United States. Börjesson’s third principle is that students move internationally along channels corresponding to previous colonial relations, especially as reflected by language, educational systems and culture. Certainly, this holds for the former colonies of the UK, France, Spain and Portugal. For Albania, the principle is less applicable, except insofar as there was a quasi-colonial relationship between pre-communist Albania and

Fascist Italy. More recently, in the later communist years and in post-communist times, the popularity of Italian TV channels and their cultural impact has created a kind of neo-colonial relationship (Mai 2003). Italian TV and other social media continue to shape young Albanians' 'geographical imagination' of the 'West' as a desirable place to live, study and work (Mai 2001; cf. also Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2021, 2022: 52–87).

There is a fourth principle, not mentioned by Börjesson but relevant to the Albanian case. This is the principle that 'students follow migrants'. The fact that Italy and Greece head the table for Albanian students' destination countries is related not just to geographical and cultural proximity but also to these countries hosting the largest communities of Albanian migrants, dating from the 1990s. Hence, many Albanian families have relatives in one or both of these countries who can offer accommodation and other forms of help to their student kin coming from Albania.

We can also interpret the Albanian case through the broader conceptual frames that have been applied to ISM (see Findlay 2010; King and Findlay 2012; Raghuram 2013). First, ISM can be set within the linked processes of globalisation and the marketisation of higher education. Increasingly, national university systems are harmonised in order to facilitate international academic cooperation and mobility, and this has tended to go hand-in-hand with systems of ranking and prestige in which countries and their higher education institutions compete with each other on the European and world academic stage (Findlay, King, Smith, Geddes and Skeldon 2012).

Second, migrating students can be seen as a subset of high-skilled migration (Mosneaga 2010), albeit the large literature on highly skilled migrants makes only passing reference to students, probably because the latter are not thought of as possessing (yet) the necessary high levels of skills and professional expertise. In this line of thinking, international students are a kind of proto-high-skilled category. They are *en route* to acquiring a high-skilled status and therefore soon to be subject to the career-enhancing migratory trajectories that high-skilled migrants follow, moving to places where their qualifications and talents are most needed and/or best rewarded.

Here, however, comes a dilemma: where highly trained international students are most needed (e.g. in their home countries) may not be the place where they can be most highly rewarded financially (in high-income countries in Europe or North America). Thus, we can regard Albanian ISM as an incipient brain drain if most students end up staying abroad after the completion of their studies. This can be interpreted as pernicious because the costs of the students' upbringing (food, clothing, housing, socialising and educating up to the threshold age of higher education) are borne by the (relatively poor) country of departure, whilst the (richer) country of destination benefits from this early investment in the production of brainpower. Very few students move from more- to less-developed countries for their higher education; indeed Albania's student migration is largely oneway-traffic out of Albania.

Thirdly, it has been argued that internationally mobile students represent a privileged migratory elite – actually, an elite within an elite, given that, in most countries, university study is mainly a trajectory for students from better-off families (Waters 2012). Not just for the students, but also for their parents and wider families, pursuing higher education abroad for the younger generation enhances social status, especially if the students enrol in what are regarded as prestigious or even 'world-class' universities (Waters 2006).

The simplistic view of the international student as 'a privileged individual from a relatively well-heeled background' needs to be revised (King and Raghuram 2013: 134), even if, as we shall see, the generalisation does hold true for Albania. Several more-recent studies show a much more diversified pattern, including cases where students from poorer family backgrounds struggle to make ends meet and to progress their lives. Rather than being welcomed as 'unproblematic' sojourners, international students from certain origins are seen as less desirable and are subject to racialisation and other forms of exclusion (see, for example, Fong 2011; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2022; Jiang 2021; Nada, Ploner, van Mol and Araújo 2023).

Researching Albanian ISM: key questions

How do the main themes in ISM theory and literature outlined in the previous section translate to the Albanian context? We nominate eight key questions.

4. How can we account for the large scale of student migration from Albania?
5. What are the main reasons Albanian students give for deciding to study abroad?
6. To what extent is studying abroad circumscribed by 'class' and family socio-economic background?
7. Which countries do Albanian students choose to study in, and why?
8. Which programmes of study do Albanian students opt for abroad, and why?
9. How do Albanian students evaluate their study-abroad experience? In particular, what do they perceive as the main benefits of studying abroad, especially in relation to their future careers?
10. What are the students' plans for the future: stay abroad in their current country of study; return to Albania, either sooner or later; or move on elsewhere?
11. Given the likelihood that many students will not return, what are the consequences and policy implications of this putative brain drain for Albania?

We attempt to provide answers to these questions via a mixed-methods approach, described in the next section.

Methods

This research derives from a wider-scale project on Albanian students and their perceptions and experiences of studying abroad.² For the present paper two research instruments provide the bulk of the data utilised.

The first was an online survey of Albanian students studying abroad for either a bachelor's or taught master's degree. This survey was carried out between May and November 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted students' ability to travel and study abroad. The survey sample was compiled using contact addresses from previous research projects, personal networks and social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. In an ideal research world, these access points are not ideal platforms for harvesting empirical data but this critique overlooks the realities and challenges of surveying an unknown and geographically scattered target population.

After establishing initial contact with potential respondents, a copy of the online questionnaire and a cover letter were sent, requesting participation in the survey. In cases of non-reply, two further reminders were sent out. The overall response rate was encouraging: 71 per cent of those circulated answered the online survey, 1 per cent responded but declined to participate and 28 per cent did not respond at all.

An important disadvantage of the survey is that it does not ensure a statistically representative sample of the total population of Albanians studying abroad. Whilst this could compromise the validity of our analysis, we have no reason to believe that our survey sample is significantly biased in any way. Rather, we would point out that 651 responses to an online survey and a response rate of 71 per cent constitute quite an impressive result.

The survey contained 35 individual questions grouped under a number of thematic headings: socio-demographic profile of the student and their parental background; current position regarding study programme, location of study, method of financing studying abroad; decision-making factors and motivations for study-abroad; overall experience in the host institution and country; expectations to return to Albania, or not, following the completion of studies.

In the second research approach, 21 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with Albanian students who were at the time pursuing their studies abroad in various countries. The interviews were conducted in late 2019 and early 2020. Some of the interviews were by Skype, others were conducted face-to-face with the students when they were visiting their families in Albania. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and relevant extracts translated from Albanian to English for analysis. Standard ethical procedures were followed

when conducting the interviews – informed consent, permission to record, anonymity ensured etc. As with the online survey, we cannot claim these interviews as a representative sample. Rather, the results are illustrative and provide both depth and detail to the online survey findings. When we quote from the interviews in the ensuing analysis, we give the students pseudonyms and do not include any information, such as place of origin in Albania, which might compromise confidentiality.

We acknowledge that the survey and interview data are 3–4 years old by the time this paper is published. Our continued monitoring of the situation ‘on the ground’ – not difficult in a small country like Albania – reassures us that the story has not changed since our data were collected. Our contacts in Albanian high schools and universities tell us that, if anything, the desire to study abroad has increased in recent years.

We now present and discuss our research findings. We take each of the eight questions specified above and try to answer them with a mixture of data from the online survey and the in-depth interviews.

Why are so many Albanian students choosing to study abroad?

Compared to other countries in the Western Balkans (WB) and also in the wider realm of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Albania has a high level of outward student mobility. At the simple level of annual flows of tertiary-level students moving abroad, Albania has the largest numbers of all seven WB countries, despite the fact that Albania has a smaller population (2.9 million) than other countries such as Serbia (7.1m), Croatia (4.2m) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.8m). When the student numbers abroad are indexed against the total population, Kritz and Gurek (2018) rank Albania amongst the top countries of the world. Moreover, where other countries in the CEE region have comparably high rates, this is usually because of historical links to neighbouring countries with which they were, until recently, united (e.g. Slovak students to Czechia, Montenegrin students to Serbia, Bosnian students to neighbouring states of the former Yugoslavia).

How might we account for Albania’s high outflow of student migrants? The following suggestions are hypotheses rather than empirically testable explanations. First, Albania rapidly expanded its universities and research institutes during the communist era³ so that, even during this period of political and cultural closure, the population of university students grew from 7000 in 1960 to over 27,000 in 1990. In 1989 there were 137,316 graduates in Albania, 4.3 per cent of the population. Therefore, at the start of the post-communist transition, the Albanian population was more highly educated than other countries with a similar per capita average income.⁴

Secondly, during the communist era there was an established practice of sending favoured students abroad for specialised training. This, in any case, is a common syndrome in small countries where the full range of academic and research fields cannot be covered because of insufficient threshold numbers. Albanian students went initially to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries such as Romania and Bulgaria. Then, after Albania’s break with the Soviet Union, students went to China in the late 1960s and 1970s. After the rupture with China, France was favoured for selected students in the 1980s, especially for postgraduate research.

A third reason to be suggested relates to the rapidly developing situation of the country after 1990. Such was the abruptness of the transition – from the most closed and autarchic of the CEE countries to one of the most chaotically open, with hundreds of thousands of migrants streaming across the borders with Greece and taking boats to Italy in the 1990s – that Albania suddenly became a society that was oriented to the outside world from which it had been cut off for so long. By 2000, large emigrant communities had become established abroad – 800,000 according to one estimate (Barjaba 2000), most of them in Greece and Italy. It was therefore natural that, with this new ‘culture of migration’, students would follow other migrants already abroad.

A possible fourth reason could be the perceived low quality of Albanian higher education, despite its profile of expansion. In the post-communist period numbers of enrolled students have grown apace: from 27,359 in 1990 to 40,267 in 2000, 134,877 in 2010 and 139,043 in 2018 (Gërmenji and Milo 2011; INSTAT 2015, 2019).

Whilst the hypothesis of a limited supply of university places does not hold true, there is evidence that the quality of the courses and teaching is seen as poor. No Albanian university appears in the widely cited QS World University Ranking. One of the factors affecting the quality of university education is its low budget allocation. According to Eurostat data, in 2014 Albania spent 3.3 per cent of its GDP on education (all levels), whereas the average for the EU countries was 5.3 per cent; this difference is all the more significant when we realise that Albania has a much lower GDP. In the meantime, the emigration of many of the younger, more energetic and talented university staff has further diminished the capacity of Albanian universities to deliver a high-quality product (Gëdeshi and King 2021).

Motivations to study abroad

The previous discussion on the perceived quality of Albanian higher education compared to what could be experienced abroad, was illustrated in many of the interviews. In the first of the quotes from the interviews, Andra compares university teaching in Albania with that in the UK, where she is studying:

Universities in the UK engage students in active learning through dialogue. The whole process is student-centred, which means you do not just study from a textbook, but each week the student is given a list of study materials and when you go to class the professor explains and you ask questions and discuss. In Albania, you just learn from the textbook... you do not have any alternative resources.

Other students point out that in Albanian universities libraries are poorly stocked, knowledge is not applied in a practical manner, and scientific research is limited in quantity and quality. Relatedly, foreign universities offer qualifications which are more reputable in international labour markets. According to Gjergji,

The quality of universities in Germany is much higher [than in Albania] and I know that with the diploma that I will receive I will have better chances of finding a job in Germany or in any other EU country.

Table 2. Factors determining the decision to study abroad (%)

	Very important	Slightly important	Not important	Not applicable
I saw study abroad as a unique adventure	14.9	39.7	34.1	11.2
My family was keen for me to study abroad	25.2	39.1	24.4	11.3
I wanted to study at a prestigious university	66.2	26.3	5.5	2.0
I saw study abroad as a step towards an international career	77.2	18.0	3.4	1.4
There were limited places or courses at Albanian universities	3.2	11.2	37.1	48.5

Source: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad.

In the online survey, students were presented with a range of factors that could have determined their decision to stay abroad, and they were asked to rate each factor on a scale of importance. Table 2 gives their responses. The results confirm that it is not the limited supply of places or courses at Albanian universities that drives students to go abroad. Rather, the two dominant factors influencing their decisions are the chance to

access an international career, as stated by Gjergji in the quote above, and the ambition to study at an internationally recognised, ‘good’ university. These two factors are closely inter-related and condition each other, but the desire for a successful career is the dominant one – 77.2 per cent rate this factor ‘very important’.

Besides these factors, two others are somewhat relevant, according to the online survey. One quarter of respondents asserted that the support of their family was ‘very important’ (plus 39 per cent who scored it as ‘slightly important’). As well as general moral support and encouragement, family can play a vital role in helping to finance the study-abroad project. Lastly, some students see going abroad as an adventure, 15 per cent rating it ‘very important’ and another 40 per cent as ‘slightly important’. Amongst the aspects of this motive elaborated in the interviews, studying abroad was seen as a way to experience freedom, to escape the traditional norms of Albanian society and to be open to a different culture and a richer social life. Here is a typical interview extract which stresses this latter point, from Ermira, studying in Florence, Italy:

When I left Albania my initial thought was simply to get a better education... What I also thought was to benefit from a higher level of culture, to go to a country that is more developed and has a certain history... and is more open...

Based on the students’ responses to the online questionnaire and their narrated accounts in the interviews, we get a clear idea of the main drivers of this educational migration. The main motivation is to get a better job than could be acquired if they had stayed in Albania for their higher studies. The same general conclusion arises from other studies of ‘East–West’ student migration in Europe, for example from two doctoral theses on Denmark as a host country (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg 2018; Mosneaga 2012). For some of our respondents, the foreign degree, from an internationally recognised, even highly prestigious, university, is seen as the route to a better placement in the Albanian labour market when they return. In the words of Elton, a student in Germany:

When you see your friends who have graduated abroad and then find a good job when they return to Albania, you feel you also want to apply to study abroad for a better qualification [than available in Albania].

For other respondents, the decision to study abroad is motivated more by the wish to remain abroad and develop an ‘international’ career, either in the host country of study or elsewhere. Studying abroad for a number of years is seen as a first, valuable step in the integration process – learning the language, adapting to the society and culture, developing friendships and, ultimately, professional contacts and networks. In many cases, we found that students who initially intended to return to Albania upon completion of their studies, changed their minds in favour of staying abroad. The idea to switch their plans evolves over time, depending on their degree of integration in the host country and the opportunities that open up – either for further study and research or for employment and career development. We come back to the important topic of students’ future plans later in the paper.

Who studies abroad?

Generally, those students who can afford to study abroad come from families with sufficient financial, human and social capital to support their venture in various ways. They come from family backgrounds in business, the professions and the higher echelons of government. Table 3 offers strong evidence for the importance of parental background. It compares the parental occupational profile of the online-survey respondents (Albanian students abroad) with two other groups: the parents of students enrolled in Albanian universities, and the

parents of high-school students. These comparator groups were surveyed as part of the larger research project from which this paper derives, but are included here only for the purposes of comparison.

Table 3. Occupational status of parents of Albanian students abroad and in Albania (%)

	Albanian students abroad (N=651)		Students in Albania (N=1650)		High-school students (N=450)	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Manual worker	13.0	4.5	23.0	10.8	25.0	14.0
Clerical and sales	21.6	22.1	17.2	12.6	16.3	14.7
Professionals	25.3	33.5	12.7	15.4	8.9	17.7
Business	28.2	13.6	20.5	9.5	30.6	10.4
Homemaker	0.2	13.9	0.5	36.5	0.5	23.4
Other	11.7	12.3	26.1	15.3	18.6	20.0

Source: Authors' surveys of Albanian students abroad and in Albania.

Note: 'Other' includes farmer, pensioner, unemployed, no answer.

The table shows that the students abroad are largely the offspring of professionals (doctors, lawyers, architects, university professors, IT experts, journalists etc.) and of business persons (owners, directors, managers, partners etc.). For the fathers of the students abroad, 53.5 per cent are in these two occupational sectors (business and professions), compared to 33.2 per cent of fathers of students attending Albanian universities, and 39.5 per cent of the fathers of high-school pupils. For mothers, the contrast is even more striking: respectively 47.1 per cent, 24.9 per cent and 28.1 per cent. Mid-level occupations in the clerical, sales and administrative sectors are also more frequent amongst the parents of students abroad, compared to the other two groups. By contrast, parental occupations in manual work and the disparate but generally low-status 'other' category are much more widespread amongst the parents of students studying in Albania.

The key message from Table 3 is that study abroad is a vehicle for the social reproduction of elite status within Albanian families and from one generation to another – a trend widely noted in studies of ISM in other geographical contexts (e.g. King, Findlay, Ahrens and Dunne 2011; Lulle and Buzinska 2017; Waters 2006, 2012).

Even within this broadly elite category, there are some subdivisions noted in the survey data. For example, the wealthiest and most politically powerful families send their children to high-ranking universities in the UK (Russell Group universities) and the USA (Ivy League), and to a lesser extent to Switzerland, the Netherlands and France. This requires heavy investments not only in tuition fees and accommodation (though scholarships may be competed for) but also in good private schools in Albania and in intensive language training. The survey data show that 62 per cent of the parents of students studying in the UK are business persons, professionals or senior state officials.

Interviews with study-abroad students confirm the crucial importance of the various types of capital noted above. Arjan, a student in Germany, speaks about his friends and acquaintances who are Albanian international students:

The parents of my friends are intellectuals. Most of them come from the middle and upper classes. I don't know any [Albanian] student in Germany whose parents are workers.

Interviewees stressed that it was only the high-flyers in their schools who were able to win scholarships to study abroad. Therefore, we detect a double selectivity process in operation: it is the ‘brightest and best’ who leave; and those who leave to study abroad are much more likely to have parents who are graduates; who have, in other words, ‘intellectual capital’. Table 4 makes this latter comparison on the basis of the same three survey groups as Table 3. Study-abroad students are twice as likely to have both parents who are graduates, and half as likely to have neither parent as a graduate.

Table 4. University education of parents of Albanian students abroad and in Albania (%)

Q: Do your parents have university education?	Albanian students abroad (N=651)	Students in Albania (N=1650)	High-school students (N=450)
Yes, both of them	55.9	27.6	26.2
Yes, father only	8.0	11.8	15.1
Yes, mother only	11.1	8.0	11.9
No, neither of them	25.0	52.7	45.8

Source: Authors’ surveys of Albanian students abroad and in Albania.

Beyond family wealth acquired through being a member of the business, intellectual, professional or political classes, another source of capital to finance students’ enrolment in universities abroad is the savings accumulated from parents’ prior emigration. The sheer scale of emigration – with an estimated ‘stock’ of around 1.4 million Albanians abroad – means that most individuals and families in Albania have relatives abroad, or they themselves have spent time abroad in emigration. According to the online survey, more than one in five respondents are from ‘emigrant families’ where at least one parent (nearly always the father) has been an emigrant, 47 per cent of them in Greece and 25 per cent in Italy.⁵ Most returned in the 2010s because of the long-running economic crisis in these two countries. According to the interview accounts, one of the main objectives of parents’ emigration was precisely to acquire the financial means to give their children a better education. Elga, a student in Italy, describes this process:

Albanians have always made sacrifices for their children... Albanian families [with experience of emigration], being somewhat disappointed by the economic and social environment in Albania, have a stronger desire to push their children to migrate abroad. Perhaps, knowing first-hand [from their own migration experience] it is not easy to start a new life abroad, they invest for the future of their children.

Of course, financially sponsoring their offspring to study abroad is extremely expensive, and the less wealthy adopt other strategies, such as encouraging their children to study for their first degree in Albania and then to go abroad for the shorter one- or two-year master’s degree. Other families send their children for their bachelor studies to ‘less prestigious’ higher education destinations such as Turkey, Bulgaria or Cyprus, where tuition and living costs are low, and then send them for master’s studies to universities in Germany, the Netherlands or the UK where the prestige and quality of degree are higher, but so are the costs.

Some Albanian students abroad benefit from grants, scholarships and bursaries, either from the Albanian government or from host countries and their individual universities. According to the online survey, 21 per cent have such awards as their main financial support (Table 5). In Albania, the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth has an Excellence Fund to sponsor selected, high-performing students who apply to study abroad; for many years this scheme was backed by the Open Society (Soros Foundation). Also, countries such as Italy,

Hungary, Poland and Cyprus offer bursaries to students coming from poorer countries. Albana, a student in Italy, benefitted from this scheme:

In Italy it is a good thing that you can be entitled to a bursary. Albanians can qualify for this because, compared to Italians, we have lower incomes... Italy has many bursaries... but you have to provide documents as evidence of family income.

Table 5. Main sources of funding for Albanian students abroad

Q: What is the main source of funding for your studies?	No.	%
Self-financing (mainly part-time work)	199	30.6
Parental support	288	44.2
Grant or bursary	138	21.2
Other (loans etc.)	26	4.0
Total	651	100.0

Source: Author's survey of Albanian students abroad.

Table 6. Part-time employment of Albanian students in the host country

Q: Do you have a part-time job?	No.	%
No	348	53.5
Yes, fewer than 8 hours per week	74	11.4
8–20 hours per week	162	24.9
More than 20 hours per week	67	10.3
Total	651	100.0

Source: Author's survey of Albanian students abroad.

Table 5 shows that, alongside parental support and grants and bursaries, students' self-financing is the third important means of sustaining their studies abroad, nominated by more than 30 per cent of respondents as their main source of finance. The questionnaire allowed respondents to check more than one category of financial support and in Table 6, which drills down into the self-support option in more detail, we see that, overall, 46 per cent of the respondents have a part-time job in the host country. Moreover, many work long hours to support their studies. In the interviews, students related many variations on this theme. We select below a typical example, from Mirlinda in Italy:

After I finished my exams in the first year, I started to work... I worked in a shopping centre. I did this for eight months, working seven days a week, 12 hours each day. Therefore it was not easy to study... Then I started an internship with a company, which is now my stable work place... I work 45 hours a week, Monday to Friday... Many Albanian students I know in Italy have a job; none of them stays only in the lecture room in the mornings and lives a social life in the evenings. Absolutely not. They work. Many work as waiters or dish-washers, whereas the luckier ones find a more decent job. But generally, all Albanian students here in Italy work.

In many cases, doing part-time is not only an opportunity to earn an income to cover their living expenses, but also a chance to establish social connections, to integrate, and even to make possible contacts for the future.

Countries of study

We presented the UNESCO data on the country locations of Albanian students abroad in Table 1. These data referred to 2017. Table 7 gives the destinations of the online survey respondents which suggests a somewhat different geographical distribution, above all the rise of Germany as the most popular destination country. Interviewees who were studying in Germany were keenly aware of the increased interest in studying there in recent years. Here is what Endri, a student who has been in Germany for many years, says:

Recently, the number of Albanian students here has been on the rise. When I arrived here, there were only a handful of Albanian students... Whereas now I see more and more of them; numbers are increasing...

And Arben, gives his reasons for choosing to study there:

Germany is one of the favourites [for Albanian students] because its universities offer top-quality education at almost no fee. For six months I pay 150 euros, whereas in France you would have to pay up to 2000 euros per semester. In addition, Germany at the moment is the leading country in the European Union and offers the best employment opportunities... Germany, I would say, has become the number one country for Albanians to study abroad.

Table 7. Destinations countries of Albanian students abroad

Country	No.	%
Germany	166	25.5
Italy	110	17.0
Turkey	84	12.9
France	45	6.9
Netherlands	37	5.7
USA	31	4.8
UK	26	4.0
Bulgaria	24	3.7
Austria	18	2.8
Belgium	16	2.5
Romania	11	1.7
Poland	10	1.5
Czechia	10	1.5
Greece	9	1.4
Sweden	8	1.2
Other countries	46	6.9
Total	651	100.00

Source: Authors' survey of students abroad.

The case of Germany as the favoured destination currently for Albanian students wanting to study abroad is interesting as it reflects an attractive combination of good academic reputation and low course fees (albeit fairly high living costs). It somewhat subverts the correlations noted earlier between high-quality university systems and high fees and living costs (e.g. USA, UK, France, etc.), and between lower-standard university systems and low fees and living costs (e.g. Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania etc.). In the case of Germany, the

perception is not only of an economically powerful advanced country but also one that offers good social support to migrants of all kinds, including refugees and asylum-seekers (Gëdeshi and King 2022). A study on migration intentions of a large sample of the Albanian population (N=1421) carried out as part of the European Values Survey in 2018 revealed that 52 per cent of 18–40 year-olds expressed their wish to emigrate, and Germany was the top target destination (King and Gëdeshi 2020).

A final contributing factor conditioning students' choice of destination country, and the university in that country, is the presence of relatives and friends already in that location. Almost 44 per cent of the students in the survey said they had contacts with Albanians in the host country before selecting the target university. This is evaluated as important when accessing living accommodation, help with preparing documentation and finding a part-time job. In the words of Majlinda:

I have two cousins in England... who have finished their bachelor studies and are continuing with their master's degrees. Being in constant communication with them, I had all the necessary information to apply for a university place in England.

Fields of study

Albanian students follow diverse academic programmes when they are abroad as international students, but the additional question that arises is whether their fields of study differ markedly from those followed by the non-migrant students who remain in Albania. Table 8 sheds light on this question, by comparing the online survey results with statistics on the total population of university students in Albania.

Table 8. Main fields of study of Albanians students abroad and in Albania (%)

Main field of study	Albanian students abroad (N=643)	Albanian students in Albania 2018
Education	0.3	7.2
Arts and Humanities	2.3	10.3
Social Sciences	14.5	10.1
Business, Management and Law	27.9	24.1
Natural Sciences and Maths	11.2	5.1
ICT	18.0	7.2
Engineering and Construction	18.4	14.4
Health and Welfare Services	6.4	14.9
Other and Unknown	1.0	6.7

Sources: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad; INSTAT (2019).

There are broad similarities in the proportions of students in some academic fields (Social Sciences; Business, Management and Law; Engineering and Construction), but clear differences in others. Students who study in Albania are more represented in Education, Arts and Humanities, and Health and Welfare, whereas those heading abroad opt disproportionately for Natural Sciences, Maths, and Information and Communications Technology. These latter options are chosen largely because degrees in these fields lead to the best-paid graduate jobs, especially for students who want to stay abroad to pursue their careers.

Interview narratives shed further light on the rationales behind the choice of study-fields, and in particular, the concentration on scientific and technical subjects. Here is what Endri, a student of Informatics in Germany, had to say:

Choosing the field of study is conditioned by employment opportunities [here in Germany]... Of all the Albanian students that I have known here... most of them study in the scientific field; Economics and Medicine also attract considerable numbers... there are significant numbers studying Electronics, Informatics and Mathematics. In [names big city in Germany], I do not know of any Albanian student studying Social Sciences. They [Albanian students in Germany] are driven by the fact that if you graduate in Economics or Informatics, it is easier to find a job... also if you graduate in Mathematics. If, on the other hand, you graduate in Social Sciences, you don't know what the future has in store.

Benefits of studying abroad

When students were asked a question in the survey about their level of satisfaction with their experience of studying abroad, an overwhelming proportion of them (96 per cent) declared themselves to be 'very satisfied' (62.5 per cent) or 'satisfied' (33.6 per cent). Just 3.4 per cent maintained a neutral stance and only 0.5 per cent were either 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied'. In another set of survey questions, we probed various dimensions of their experience; Table 9 contains the results. The figures are largely self-explanatory. The most positively expressed benefits were ascribed to 'improving academic and professional knowledge', 'importance for career development' (wherever that may take place), and 'personal maturity and development' – all assigned shares of over 80 per cent of respondents seeing them as 'extremely valuable'. Also noteworthy are high shares (over 60 per cent checking 'extremely valuable') for acquiring new knowledge of languages and another country and its culture.

Table 9. Students' assessment of the benefits of studying abroad (%)

	Extremely valuable	Valuable	Somewhat valuable	Not at all valuable
Enhancing my academic and professional knowledge	90.2	8.9	0.9	0.0
Importance for my overall career development	84.3	13.8	1.8	0.0
Importance for developing a specifically international career	80.1	17.7	2.2	0.0
Importance for my plans to settle permanently abroad	39.4	36.8	19.3	4.5
Improving my language skills	66.5	24.7	7.9	0.9
Knowledge and understanding of another country	60.5	31.3	7.1	1.1
Personal maturity and development	86.3	12.7	0.9	0.0
New ways of thinking about my home country	58.8	31.6	7.8	1.7

Source: Authors' survey of Albanian students abroad.

Reading through the comments made by students in response to an open question on the schedule which invited respondents to make written comments on their study-abroad experience, four themes stand out, each illustrated below by a typical example. The first enlarges on the quality of teaching and learning.

I have not finished my first year yet, and I am already very happy with the quality of lectures and academic knowledge (Luljeta, UK).

The second stresses the openness of discussion about ideas and concepts, promoting a deeper and more critical understanding of the subject being studied.

Individuality and critical thinking are respected and encouraged, motivating you to freely express yourself and critically reflect on all aspects, even on the opinions of the professors (Nora, Germany).

Third, meritocracy and appreciation of good work are highlighted, as shown in this comment:

I often have to remind my relatives that the US is not a heavenly place, as assumed by many Albanians. I always tell them that to achieve something, you have to work very hard, but the difference, which makes me want to study in the US, is that my work is appreciated here, unlike in Albania (Eriselda, US).

Fourth, significant benefits from study abroad are found in its effects on personal maturity and self-realisation; these are benefits which extend beyond the qualification earned.

It's a life experience, more than a diploma, irrespective of how reputable the latter may be (Landi, Sweden).

The fourth point was elaborated at greater length in several interviews. As an example, Ana, a student in Germany, says:

My experience thus far in Germany has changed me as an individual; it has changed the way I perceive life in general and daily situations. I have matured, I have developed as a person, and I have been able to set clear goals about what I want to take from and give to the surrounding environment and beyond. It has given me opportunities and has opened doors I did not believe were possible. Most importantly, it has given me independence, appreciation and self-confidence.

Future plans, and attitudes towards return

The final set of questions on both the survey and interview schedules relates to the key question posed in the title of this paper: will the students return from abroad and, if not, does this constitute a brain drain? Rather than pose a simple 'yes or no' question about intention to return, we wanted to respect the more complex options likely to be going through students' minds when they contemplate the future. Hence, the survey question presented them with a range of alternative intentions and trajectories. These reflected the interactions between the decision to stay or return and the transition from study to work, and the timing of any intended return – immediately after graduating or longer-term. Table 10 spells these out, along with the numbers and percentages of responses to each option. The figures are rather stark, and definitely speak of an incipient brain drain. More than half of the respondents do not intend to go back to Albania 'for the foreseeable future'. Only 5.4 per cent intend to return to Albania immediately after completing their current programme of studies

abroad. The second most frequently cited option, 31.3 per cent, is to return to Albania after a period spent working abroad. Also worthy of note is the number of ‘other’ trajectories, around one in eight of the respondents: these comprised a variety of plans, including onward-migrating to a ‘third’ country, plans to continue studying, or other plans dictated more by personal circumstances such as marriage, having children etc.

Table 10. Albanian students abroad: future plans and return to Albania

Q: Regarding your plans to return to Albania, which of the following statements most closely matches your expectations?	No.	%
I do not intend to return to Albania in the foreseeable future	327	50.5
Return to Albania immediately after graduating, to look for employment	30	4.6
Return to Albania immediately after graduating, for further study	5	0.8
Return to Albania to look for employment, after a period spent working abroad	195	30.1
Return to Albania to study, after a period of working abroad	8	1.2
Other plans	83	12.8
Total	648	100.0

Source: Authors’ survey of Albanian students abroad.

It must be emphasised that the options set out in Table 10 are intentions and it is well-known in migration studies that reality may turn out differently. Those intending to return soon after graduating may change their minds during the course of the rest of their study programme. Those intending to stay on and undertake employment abroad may not find what they are looking for. Those who say they intend not to return to Albania in the foreseeable future may change their minds due, for example, to family pressure, nostalgia, or an unexpected event, not foreseen at the present time, such as marriage to a ‘local’ or inheriting a business. It is difficult to predict how these mismatches between intentions and outcomes will work out but, in general, the pattern revealed in the migration literature tends towards a kind of ‘myth of return’ (Anwar 1979) whereby an intended return is repeatedly deferred or, perhaps, never takes place. Consider, for instance, the interview extract from Arjan:

When I came to Germany to study, I was not exactly thinking of staying here. I remember always saying ‘I am going back’ [to Albania]... Then, as I began to gradually integrate, getting to know more friends, I changed my position. Now I am certain I am going to stay in Germany.

Endri, already quoted earlier, confirmed the trend to stay on in Germany:

I have many Albanian friends here and I can say that 90 per cent of them want to stay in Germany... There are also incentives from the German state to attract technology graduates [to stay]...

The combination of the strong German labour market and government measures to incentivise foreign students in selected labour-shortage fields to stay on after graduation means that Germany has a high (intended) retention rate of Albanian (and other international) students. The survey data show that 80 per cent of Albanian

respondents in Germany who do not intend returning to Albania want to stay in Germany; the remainder opt for other European countries or the US.

In other host countries, the attractions of staying on are not so strong. Edira is a student in a small university city in Central Italy.

In this city, employment opportunities for graduates are limited. In other Italian cities, maybe the situation is different, I don't know. I will try to find something here [in Italy]. Other Albanians take any job just to stay in Italy... I have heard of very few cases of return to Albania. They mostly go to Germany or England...

The survey data confirm Edira's diagnosis. Of the total student respondents from Italy who say they do not intend to return to Albania, only 37 per cent say they want to stay in Italy and 63 per cent want to move on to other European countries, especially Germany, the UK and the Netherlands. The share of the 'non-returnees' who intend to onward-migrate rather than stay in their current host country is much higher in Turkey (88.4 per cent) and in CEE countries like Bulgaria, Romania and Poland (but here the figures are based on much smaller samples – see Table 7). For all first-destination countries, the preferred onward migration destinations are the more prosperous EU countries, especially Germany, and the US.

After the intention not to return, the second most frequent survey response was to defer return until some years of work experience has been acquired abroad (Table 10). On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a way of postponing a difficult decision; on the other hand, it could reflect a wish to maximise experience and human capital, so that the return, whenever it takes place, is more successful and impactful. Indeed, many Albanian students abroad express a desire to 'contribute something' to their home country's development. Agon, a student in Germany, makes this personal argument as follows:

After some years of working abroad, I want to return to Albania and try to change something in my home country... I think that it is a moral obligation of every person to contribute, however modestly, in a positive way.

Other students, in their narratives, combine the 'duty' argument to return with a sense of satisfaction at (potentially) being able to effect change in a small country. This is the case of Ervin, doing postgraduate studies in the UK:

Albania has its advantages for me. First I have there a certain social capital; I have friends and acquaintances... Also, in Albania, you are able to see the impact of your work if you engage in a certain policy. In the UK, the machinery is so big and bureaucratic that you are totally detached from the impact of your work.

Ervin's wish to return to Albania to effect change there turns our attention to the groups in Table 10 who *do* intend to return, sooner or later. According to the survey responses and the interviews, those who plan to return are those who have 'contacts' in Albania, for example whose parents run a business or are high state officials. In these cases, the chances to find a decent job or to advance in professional career in Albania are much higher. Anisa, a student in Italy, says:

Most of the students [here in Italy] want to stay. Only a few want to return. It is mostly those who have a secure job lined up in Albania: they say they want to return because they know what awaits them. This is how things work in Albania – to know someone [who can help you].

Other students may have more personal reasons to intend to return; often these are related to family circumstances, as in the case of Dritan, a postgraduate student in the UK:

Until now, I have tried to avoid the dilemma – whether to stay here or return. But the main reason, in my case, to return to Albania, is my family, my parents. I would rather not leave them alone; this is important.

Dritan's final remark is interesting and probably reflects the Albanian cultural tradition of it being the duty of the youngest son in the family to take care of the parents in their old age. This means that the son should return to be near to his parents and to attend to their financial and care needs – even if, in practice, it will be the younger son's wife who administers the care (King and Vullnetari 2009).

Undoubtedly, the challenge of finding employment with a decent income is the main economic factor that deters Albanian students abroad from returning. Added to this are several other obstacles mentioned especially in the interviews, often with a very critical and despairing tone. These barriers revolve around the interrelated effects of corruption, political instability, the lack of professionalism and efficiency in all sectors of society, and the need to have 'connections' in order to achieve almost anything in life – a job, a building permit, a business license, and so on. We end this section of the paper with a series of interview quotes which voice participants' direct experience and perceptions of these issues.

Nepotism is widespread in Albania; it is flagrant. To get a job you need to know someone who knows someone. I have many friends in Albania and I would say that only 10 per cent of them have managed to find a job based on their own merits and qualifications. The others were helped by someone of influence (Pranvera, Italy).

In Albania, the salaries are very low... Your salary does not permit you to live a life on your own, to cover your living costs, let alone go somewhere abroad on holiday (Edmond, Germany).

In Albania, you may have a job today, but tomorrow, after elections, governments change and you lose your job. Here [in Germany], your job is safe. If you have a contract, it is difficult for it to be terminated, unless you commit some serious crime (Alban, Germany).

Having presented a range of empirical data on the motivations, experiences and future plans of a large sample of Albanian students abroad, in the closing sections of the paper we consider the wider consequences of our findings and their implications for future policies to alleviate brain drain and encourage 'brain return'.

Consequences

Given our key finding that most Albanian students abroad do not contemplate an imminent return once their studies are finished, what are the consequences of this potential brain drain? There are two main impacts: the financial one, and the loss of highly educated and (potentially) highly skilled human capital.

The non-return of university students represents the embodied loss of tens of millions of euros per year for a country that is one of the poorest, not only in the Western Balkans, but in Europe as a whole. This loss is made up of several financial components whose size and scale can, however, only be speculatively estimated.

The first element pertains to the cost of 'producing' Albanian students up to the moment when they leave the country, either to start their bachelor degree abroad or, having already completed their first degree in Albania, for postgraduate studies abroad. In its study on the *Cost of Youth Migration*, the Westminster

Foundation for Democracy (2020) estimates the costs of raising a young person in Albania to the end of their secondary education to be 9267 euros and to the completion of tertiary education (in Albania) 18,283 euros, in 2018. If there are 17,448 Albanian students abroad (UNESCO figure for 2017; Table 1), then some kind of calculation can be made for this loss of invested preparation in human capital. If all 17,448 students left at the end of their secondary/high school education, the loss would amount to around 160 million euros. If, however, a proportion of them left after completing their first degree in Albania, then the cost multiplier is almost twice as high (18,283 vs 9267 euros) for that (unknown) proportion.

A second calculation, equally speculative, can be made on the basis of the costs of the study programme. According to the interviews with students, the average cost per month (tuition fees plus accommodation, food and other living expenses) ranges from 650 euros in Greece to 2000 euros in the UK. For the two most popular destinations the monthly figures are 750 in Italy and 850 in Germany. If we take the average annual costs for all students at 8000 euros, we might conclude that, for the 17,448 Albanian students abroad, the total annual amount channelled out of Albania to fund the studies of students abroad is around 140 million euros. This is certainly an impoverishing process for an already-poor country like Albania. Erinda, an interviewee in France, put her finger on a widespread view when she said:

Through brain drain, the Albanian state is losing its own investment. This is one of the largest losses currently for Albania.

Erinda, like other interviewees, was alive to the multi-dimensionality of the Albanian brain drain: the loss both of talent in the form of the country's best qualified students, most of whom, it would appear, do not intend to return any time soon; and of capital and human investment in the upraising and ongoing education of that talent.

How might these costs be mitigated? Part of the financial cost can theoretically be recouped by remittances – the classic 'pay-back' for the initial investment in migration. But will the students, once they start working abroad, behave like the earlier labour migrants to Greece and Italy who, originating mainly from poor rural families, had a high propensity to save and send a large share of their foreign earnings back home? (de Zwager *et al.* 2005; Vullnetari and King 2011). We already noted that many students are, at least partially, supported by their parents who send them money to help with their fees and living expenses whilst they are studying abroad.⁷ Moreover, because most of the students in our survey come from elite or middle-class, urban-based families, there is less (or no) need to send remittances. In the words of Anila, who recently graduated in Medicine in the Netherlands,

I do not send remittances, in the form of cash, because my parents do not need that. I do, however, send them gifts and other stuff. Of course, should the need arise, I would try to send money also.

Apart from sending remittances to their families if and when they start working abroad, there are other ways that, in the future, graduated students who do not return might help the development of their home country. Survey and interview data show that, whilst abroad, Albanian students retain close links with their family and friends in Albania. Thus, kinship solidarity and social capital with a broader network are both maintained. Close connections are kept via social media, the internet, Facebook, Skype, etc. According to the online survey, 97 per cent of respondents regularly communicate via email or other web channels with friends in Albania. Almost 47 per cent have spoken to 1–5 friends during the week before they answered the survey, 33 per cent to 6–10 friends, 15 per cent to 11–20 and 2 per cent to over 20 friends.⁸

Another important means of staying in touch with Albania is through the news media: following Albanian news on the internet or TV broadcasts. Besart, an interviewee in Germany, tells how he keeps up-to-date on political, economic and social events in Albania:

I am informed about what happens in Albania... I read the news regularly and learn everything from the internet... I find half an hour to an hour [every day] to read all the news [about Albania].

Finally, there are visits: 93 per cent of the survey respondents visited Albania at least once during the first year of their studies abroad, and this proportion drops slightly to 86 per cent for those in their final year of study.⁹ Whilst these visits are primarily motivated by the need to keep in touch with family and friends, they also enable the students to observe how Albania is developing (or not) and to keep thinking about options for return. During these visits, students are also able to transmit new ideas and concepts about values, behaviour, social and family relationships, civil society etc. to their families, friends and wider communities in Albania.¹⁰

Many of the students we contacted for the research maintained close friendships with their peers who had enrolled at Albanian universities and some of these participants emphasised the need for close cooperation with those in Albania and with Albanian universities. Ermira, a student in Germany, wrote the following in an open comment on her survey questionnaire:

We need more cooperation between students abroad and those in Albania. I believe that if, in the future, Albanian professionals return and work together with those in Albania, then the country would develop more and there would be no need for Albanians to emigrate.

Ermira's forward-looking suggestion highlights the need for Albanian students and graduate professionals working abroad to keep in close social, educational and professional contact with their opposite numbers in Albania. Whether this will happen and, if it does, how effective this will be, are moot questions. A 2018 survey of Albania's so-called scientific diaspora (basically, PhD-holders working abroad) showed that they, too, desired closer academic and professional cooperation with universities, research institutes and consultancies in Albania, but found it hard to achieve this, largely, they said, because of a lack of initiative and willingness on the Albanian side (Gëdeshi and King 2021). Despite the widely expressed desire for international collaboration, only 22 per cent of the respondents in this latter survey (N=725) actually did cooperate, and only sporadically, with universities and scientific institutions in Albania. Hence it was unlikely that the doctoral brain drain would be easily reversed under these conditions, or that non-returnees living abroad could make a meaningful contribution in terms of transmitting some of their expertise to Albania.

Conclusions: the wider picture and policy implications

What interpretive and policy lessons can be deduced from the evidence contained in this paper? This is the eighth and final question on the list presented at the outset.

The first thing to say is that ISM is widely regarded as a 'normal' and beneficial process, especially in the global North. It helps to ease the friction and imbalances in international markets for skilled labour, and fosters intercultural awareness. From the point of view of the individual student or graduate, ISM is usually seen as highly positive, as this international experience makes for an interesting and rewarding (but also often challenging) life episode and, in many cases, is a step towards a successful international career (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). This is the optimistic reading of ISM; the more problematic implications, related to financial hardship, academic

struggles and the stigmatisation of certain categories of students, were noted earlier, especially with reference to the experiences of Chinese students in the US (Fong 2011; Jiang 2021).

The problem with the Albanian case of student migration is that is highly imbalanced, with very few incoming students. The relative scale of the loss of embryonic skilled human capital is beyond that experienced by virtually all other European countries. Along with the mass exodus of lower-skilled labour since the early 1990s, student and graduate outflows are a symptom of the structural weakness of the Albanian economy. The outflows of students and workers bear witness to Albanian's peripheral position, not so much geographically but economically and geopolitically, within the European sphere. This implies not only the weak structure of the Albanian economy, which is over-reliant on consumption underwritten by foreign-earned income and remittances, but also of the low status and under-funding of Albanian universities.

There are two key issues which need to be confronted at a policy level when interpreting Albanian ISM (Gribble 2008). The first thing is the large scale, relative to the age-appropriate population, of Albanians' propensity to study abroad. This 'export' of both undergraduate and postgraduate students seems, on the basis of our survey data and international comparative statistics, to be greater than almost any other country in Europe. It is all the more remarkable given the generally low income levels in Albania and the fact that it is not enmeshed in any system of post-colonial relationship. Moreover, all Albanian students studying abroad must do so in a language other than their own.

The key question thus becomes: how can this loss of young brains be stemmed, especially given that the expressed intentions of young and educated people to leave Albania appear to be higher than ever before (King and Gëdeshi 2020). The obvious recommendation to be made – but so much easier to say than to implement – is to ensure better prospects for Albanian youth to stay in Albania for their higher education and subsequent careers. This would require several things: improving the standard of Albanian universities and linking them more effectively into international academic networks, including for short-term student exchanges so that students are not 'lost' but ensured to return; creating better job prospects for graduates, with higher incomes and clearer career structures; and, on a wider plane, improving the social welfare system, and clamping down on corruption at all levels of society.

The second key issue concerns prospects for return. Although many students and graduates studying and working abroad want to keep their ties to Albania, both with their families and their wider social and professional networks, in reality their return intentions are shaped by pragmatic, largely economic considerations. Hence, the second key policy challenge arises: what needs to be done to encourage those who have moved abroad to return? The reasons for non-return given by our participants in the survey and in interviews are clear and consistent with other surveys on youth migration (King and Gëdeshi 2020) and on the scientific diaspora (Gëdeshi and King 2021). The 'repel' factors for non-return are the same as those which drive young people to leave in the first place, namely low incomes, poor career prospects, deficient social and physical infrastructure, dissatisfaction with the political culture of corruption and nepotism, and an overall sense that 'there is no future in Albania'. Even if greater numbers of students could be incentivised to return, what guarantees are there that they would not become disillusioned and therefore pushed to emigrate again? (cf. Christofi and Thompson 2007). The challenge for the Albanian government going forward is to reduce the negative factors which make people leave and discourage them from coming back.

Notes

1. Estimates range from 1.2 to 1.6 million for the Albanian emigrant population. The total population living in Albania is less than 3 million. For some useful comparative data see the World Bank's *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016* where the relative scale of emigration from Albania is seen

- to be roughly on a par with some other Western Balkan countries (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro) but much higher than others (Croatia, North Macedonia and Serbia).
2. The research was funded by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. Parts of the present paper are taken from our report to FES, which was issued in both Albanian and English in November 2020.
 3. The University of Tirana was founded in 1957 and others soon followed, along with the Albanian Academy of Sciences in 1972.
 4. This conclusion is based on data sourced from the Ministry of Economy (1991) of Albania and the World Bank (2010).
 5. In the online survey respondents were asked: ‘Have either of your parents ever lived outside Albania for more than six months? If so, where and for how long?’
 6. We repeat that this is a rough estimate and should be treated circumspectly. For instance, some of the students have scholarships or bursaries, others may work in order to minimise the financial burden on their family, and others may find accommodation with their emigrant relatives in the host country.
 7. This is an illustration of ‘reverse remittances’, where the country exporting part of its human capital is also sending abroad financial resources (Mazzucato 2011).
 8. Students were asked the question: ‘Other than your family, state the number of friends in Albania you contacted last week by email or on the web’.
 9. Students were asked: ‘How often did you return to Albania during your first year and during your last year (if a final-year student)?’
 10. This is what Levitt (1998) refers to as ‘social remittances’.


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‘For a Better Life’? The Role of Networks in Social (Im)Mobility after Return to Albania

Ruth Vollmer* 

This article addresses the question of what influences the opportunities for social mobility in the context of return migration to Albania from a meso-level perspective. It applies a network-theory-based analysis to 104 qualitative interviews with a diverse sample of returned migrants, conducted in Albania between 2019 and 2022. The interviews are clustered into three categories according to the stated economic need for migration. The analysis shows that the geographical dispersion, the support capacities and the influence of these networks on migration decision-making differ significantly between the three categories. Despite some dynamics, individual network embeddedness reflects the overall socio-economic and ethno-political stratifications of the origin society and distinctively shapes migrants’ modalities and means of migration, the opportunities for resource accumulation abroad and their ability to re-establish themselves after return. Thus, social networks mainly contribute to continuity rather than change in terms of social stratification, even over the course of migration(s) and return(s). Yet, these effects are mediating, not determining, outcomes and are context-dependent. Lastly, network effects differ not only between but also within the categories, depending, for example, on the gender or age of the migrant.

Keywords: social mobility, return migration, social networks, inequality, Albania

Introduction

The exceptionally high levels of migration and rising migration potential in and from Albania (King and Gëdeshi 2020) call for further inquiry. The fact that Albania ranks second last in Europe regarding opportunities for social upward mobility (WEF 2020) inspired me to conduct an analysis of a qualitative interview dataset on migration and return from this angle: to see if and for whom migration may constitute a means to achieving social upward mobility which would not be possible otherwise.

Migration and return are social processes and thus ought to be studied in their social context (cf. Hagan and Wassink 2020); this article thus focuses on interlinkages between spatial and social mobility while specifically considering the role of migrants' social networks as a meso-level and potentially mediating factor in this regard. Social mobility is linked with economic development in a variety of ways (WEF 2020: 8). Empirical studies mainly point to a positive impact of social mobility on economic development indicators ranging from per-capita income to child mortality (see, e.g., Neidhöfer, Ciaschi, Gasparini and Serrano 2021). Research on the links between return migration and development points to a more complex relationship (King 2022; King and Kuschminder 2022). In this article, I will look at social mobility as a potential outcome of return migration, i.e. in terms of aspired-to achievements that have been made possible by the migration and which materialise or are maintained after return. My aim is to contribute to an understanding of the mechanisms which facilitate or constrain social mobility after return and, as large-scale quantitative studies thus far have not yielded conclusive results in this regard, I will focus on meso-level factors such as migrants' networks, which have not received much attention in this particular context. Empirically, this paper draws on qualitative interviews with 104 returned migrants in Albania, collected between June 2019 and April 2022 and representing a diversity of regional and socio-economic backgrounds as well as migration trajectories.

Links between social and spatial mobility

A growing body of literature deals with the subject of social mobility after migrants' return (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Two strands of research can be distinguished: one focusing on the economic outcomes of migration and return, the other delving into the individual trajectories of migrants in their social and political contexts. Studies from the first strand are usually quantitative and often based on survey data. Their results thus far are inconclusive – for instance, identifying occupational upward mobility under certain conditions in Egypt (El-Mallakh and Wahba 2021), more downward than upward mobility in Bulgaria (Nonchev and Hristova 2021) or, in the case of Mexico, finding that 'US work experience is associated with higher odds of both upward and downward occupational mobility and entry into self-employment' (Hagan and Wassink 2019: 53).

For Albania, such studies have found indications for the occupational upward mobility of migrants returning from Italy and countries further away but not from Greece (Carletto and Kilic 2011). There are also indications of human and financial capital transfers by returning migrants, although with impacts concentrated in and around the capital city of Tirana and without significant developmental effects (Germenji and Milo 2009). In view of the higher propensity of return migrants to become self-employed, Piracha and Vadean (2010) introduced the distinction between 'own-account work' and entrepreneurship, thus highlighting contrasting reintegration trajectories.

Following Cassarino's (2004) call to broaden the theorising of return migration beyond economic and financial considerations, researchers began to study the 'heterogeneous patterns of resource accumulation and their uneven consequences for labor market reintegration and mobility upon return' (Hagan and Wassink 2020: 535). This strand of research understands migration and return as complex social processes, emphasises the

importance of the temporal dimension (Hagan and Wassink 2020) and identifies a need to understand reintegration processes more strongly through the experiences of the returning migrants themselves (Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019).

Qualitative studies on return migration to Albania – for example, in the wake of the financial crisis in Greece and Italy (e.g. Cena and Heim 2021; Kerpaçi 2019; Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019) – have established that social relations and perceptions in migration destinations, circumstances of return decision-making, transnational connectedness and mobility as well as local-context conditions after return all play a role in shaping economic reintegration. However, existing research has rarely addressed the role of pre-existing socio-economic inequalities in shaping the outcomes of return. Research on return to Afghanistan found that inequalities became reinforced through migration and return due to ‘unequal opportunities to accumulate skills, knowledge, and savings whilst abroad’ (van Houte, Siegal and Davids 2015: 693). Another study attributes these effects to the social-network embeddedness of the migrating and displaced persons, mainly the variations in the support capacities of their networks (Grawert and Mielke 2018). Previous studies have established the impact of transnational family networks on the decision to migrate (Stampini, Carletto and Davis 2014) and an important role of family networks for both migration and return to Albania (Kopliku Dema and Drishti 2022). This makes Albanian migration a well-suited example into which to further dive by looking at the role of networks across the entire cycle(s) of migration, including reintegration.

Network theory

In migration studies, network theory has become one of the most influential paradigms through which the emergence and – even more so – the perpetuation of migration systems are explained (Sha 2021; Vandenbelt 2020). The general assumption is that migrants’ transnational social ties facilitate migration by lowering its costs and risks (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993). Regarding return migration, maintaining contacts in the country of origin is understood to be positively associated with the willingness to return and return migrants are assumed to have expanded their social capital during migration (Cassarino 2004). These general applications of network theory have been criticised for – among other things – their lack of specification regarding when, why and for whom migration is facilitated and which type of connection plays a role (de Haas 2010).

For a more nuanced understanding, distinguishing between social networks and social capital is essential (Kuschminder 2017). Social capital here is defined as the resources which are embedded in and accessible through social networks and connections (Lin 2001). The distinction between social relationships *per se* and the type and value of resources that a person can mobilise through relationships is present in Bourdieu’s initial writing on the subject but has become blurred over time (Kuschminder 2017). It draws attention to the varying support capacities of different networks and to the fact that resources which are available in a network are not automatically accessible to any member of the network at any time. Access to network-based resources is a result of active networking (Schapendonk 2015) and depends on network internal norms, e.g. hierarchies or reciprocity; it is also a function of individual and shifting positionalities and mediated through social categories (Anthias 2008; Grawert and Mielke 2018).

Unlike social-capital theory, which views social relations *as* resources and establishes the closure and density of networks as requirements for mutual benefits, social-network theory assumes that dense networks are more likely to convey redundant information (Kuschminder 2017; Lin 2001; Portes 1998) and that weaker ties (i.e. less-frequent and less-intimate contacts) are more likely to be sources of *new* knowledge and resources (Granovetter 1973). The study of social networks also recognises that socio-economic and ethno-political stratifications within societies are often mirrored in transnational networks (de Haas 2010: 1602; Portes 1998)

but equally understands networks and networking to be dynamic. With this in mind, the empirical part of this paper will look into the influence of different types of social connection – including but not limited to kinship and family relations – on migration and resource accumulation patterns abroad.

Data collection and methodology

The data for this paper were collected from 2019 to 2022 by the author and by Albanian researchers based on a semi-structured interview guideline and on a shared ethical guideline. It took place in the context of a project that studied reintegration trajectories over time and with German government funding. The author first went to Albania for this project in 2019 and has familiarised herself with the context since then through several subsequent visits. The collaboration and regular exchanges with the Albanian researchers contributed tremendously in this regard, which also helped with the contextualisation during the process of data collection and analysis. Respondents were selected through the (professional and private) networks of the author and the local researchers, through organisations providing reintegration assistance and through snowball sampling, while aiming for maximal diversity of the sample. A total of 104 respondents were interviewed for this analysis – 48 males and 56 females. Possibly, the gender (im)balance within the research team had an influence on the gender ratio of the respondents, as the majority of return migrants are known to be male. Of the female respondents in this sample, however, the majority had migrated and returned in the context of family migration. Data collection followed pre-defined ethical procedures: all respondents were informed about the aim and framework of the study, guaranteed full anonymity and asked for their consent to the use of the data. Participation was entirely voluntary and unpaid; respondents were also informed about their right to end the interview at any point or to withdraw their consent to the use of the data after the interview. Consent to be contacted a second time was granted by all respondents on the occasion of the first interview. For various reasons (such as the re-migration and availability constraints of the researchers), just over one third of the respondents were, in fact, interviewed a second time. Some respondents, mainly those returned from Germany against their will, expressed the hope that participation in the study would support their wish to go back to Germany, despite our utmost clarity that the interviews would not result in any (positive or negative) changes regarding opportunities for legal migration or assistance. This occurred in interviews conducted by the German as well as by Albanian researchers. The selection of interview locations followed the aim to include diverse contexts from across Albania. Interviews were conducted in Tirana, Kamëz, Durrës, Fushë-Krujë, Shkodra, Korça, Kavajë, Kukës, Fushë-Arrëz, Fier, Roscovec and Peshkopia, including villages and suburbs around some of these towns, as well as villages in the municipality of Himarë. The returns occurred at one or more points in time within the past three decades, from various places and for all kinds of reasons, both willingly and unwillingly. For this article, interview transcripts were analysed according to four aspects, which correspond to questions or sections in the interview guideline:

- aspirations at the point of departure and migration decision-making;
- constraints and opportunities whilst abroad;
- type of return and the transferability of acquired resources; and
- social mobility after return.

Information corresponding to these four points was extracted manually from each interview and compiled in a table to visualise the diachronic dimension.

Through testing and adapting typologies from the literature, the three clusters (see below) emerged as a pattern and interviews were ordered accordingly for further analysis. While the main source is qualitative interview data – which express subjective perceptions, experiences and meaning-making by returned migrants – participant observation, exchanges within the research team, additional interviews with experts and other

stakeholders (state and non-state) as well as literature and statistics were consulted in order to triangulate the data to the greatest extent possible.

Country context: Albania

Albania has experienced unique migration dynamics in the past three decades (see e.g. Barjaba and Barjaba 2015; Gëdeshi and King 2020; Gemi and Triandafyllidou 2021; King 2005; Vullnetari 2013). Under communist rule (1946 to 1990), the country became increasingly isolated and both internal and international migration were extremely restricted. When this political and economic system disintegrated and the borders opened in 1991, people were faced with ‘an almost complete production shutdown, a paucity of capital and a lack of managers trained to deal with the vagaries of a market economy’ (Zickel and Iwaskiw 1994: 118). Migration became an essential coping and livelihood strategy and Greece and Italy emerged as the main destination countries, while the economic and political transition took time. In 1997, the collapse of several financial pyramid or Ponzi schemes destroyed people’s hard-earned savings – equaling around 40 per cent of the national GDP at the time (Burazeri, Goda, Sulo, Stefa and Kark 2008). This sparked widespread violent protests, more migration and a major political crisis. A decade later, the global financial crisis of 2008 severely affected the two main destination countries of Albanian migration, triggering large numbers of premature returns and significantly reducing income-generating opportunities and remittances (Cena and Heim 2021; Gemi and Triandafyllidou 2021; Kerpaçi and Kuka 2019). In 2015, Albania became the second largest sending country of asylum-seekers in Germany, though with low recognition rates (Dubow, Tan and Kuschminder 2021; Gëdeshi and King 2020; Hackaj and Shehaj 2017). Thus, while return migration to Albania became increasingly significant and visible over time, with peaks in 2010–13 and 2015–16, this was not for positive reasons (Gëdeshi and King 2022).

Economic framework conditions impede reintegration in many cases, which needs to be considered with a view to opportunities for social mobility. Most industries and agricultural infrastructures were neither maintained nor modernised after the transition; today, around 54 per cent of Albania’s GDP is generated by the service sector (Central Intelligence Agency 2016). In terms of production, clothing and footwear constitute a large share of exports (around 35 per cent); however, evidence exists of ‘regular labor law and human rights violations’ in this sector (Arqimandriti, Llubani, Ljarja, Musiolek and Luginbühl 2016). According to the Social Mobility Index, the most problematic field is employment – specifically access to work opportunities. Unemployment is higher for people with high and medium levels of education (around 20 per cent compared to 14 for people with basic education), but 54.4 per cent of workers are in ‘vulnerable employment’ (WEF 2020: 39) and youth unemployment is twice as high as unemployment for the members of the oldest working-age cohort (Leitner 2021). Economic policy is liberal and 35 per cent of the economy is estimated to belong to the informal sector; the Gini Index ranking for income inequality is higher than the EU-28 average, 49 per cent of the population were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019 (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022) and there is a large urban–rural divide.

With this contextual background in mind, I now turn to the presentation of the empirical results of the research.

Clustering migration aspirations and network capabilities

To include the socio-economic background prior to migration, the interviews were clustered into three groups, based on the main reasons that people reported for their decision to migrate.¹ The interviews strongly support the understanding that it is the total sum of the resources that an individual or family possesses *and* can mobilise

through their social relations that defines necessities and capabilities to migrate. Drawing on and adding to the distinction between an instrumental and an intrinsic aspiration to migrate (de Haas 2021), I clustered the interviews into three types of migrant: intrinsically, instrumentally and survival-or-crisis-motivated (cf. also Betts 2013, who uses survival for migration resulting from governance failures). These three clusters serve as a heuristic tool to include the situation prior to migration as well as deliberations and expectations regarding the migration itself. This allows me to assess the links between aspiring migrants' resources and their migration decision more holistically than would, for example, data on household income or property ownership, as it includes the network dimension.

The *intrinsically motivated* are people leaving without *economic* necessity. They want to see the world, gain experiences, join family members or acquire additional resources, such as human capital, which they could also acquire without migration. Some leave with concrete plans to return, while most assume more vaguely that, sooner or later, they will return. In this group, there are two sub-types: those leaving Albania with the main aim of pursuing higher education abroad and others migrating mostly for social reasons, for example (re-)uniting with a spouse.

Keta, who moved to Greece in the mid-1990s to live with her husband, leaving a well-qualified job, fits the intrinsically motivated typology. She comes from a well-situated family and notes about her migration that

We decided to migrate for a better life as a couple. It's not that we lived the hard life immigrants do, only working hard to make money. We made money and we spent money. We were young and went for fun and enjoyed the Greek lifestyle.

Second, the *instrumentally motivated* are people who mainly leave to find remedies to economic problems which they feel cannot be solved by staying, such as a lack of (family) income or a need for investment capital, as well as health problems. While some pursue a specific aim, the majority in this group are engaged in a somewhat more open search for opportunities, such as the opportunity to work or to gain documents. The time for return is also often unspecified, as it relates to the fulfillment of migration-related objectives.

Ilir comes from a middle-class family in a small town in Northern Albania. His family owns property and runs a small business there but opportunities are limited and his migration falls under the category of the instrumentally motivated. As he states:

Since I was 15 years old, I worked here after school. My aim was to earn money and to invest money into the family business. But here, there is no possibility to really earn money (...). Abroad, it is much easier to earn a certain amount in a short period of time – here not. When I was 25, I went to the UK, illegally.

Finally, the *survival-or-crisis-motivated* are people who leave to escape overwhelmingly difficult conditions, either economically or in terms of security. Their migration decisions respond to structural challenges – which affect them so badly that their basic needs cannot be reliably met – or to insecurity, such as the lawlessness resulting from the pyramid crisis, the demolition of houses for urban development, revenge threats against family members or domestic violence. Most of them hope to leave for good and have no aspirations to return, unless under fundamentally different conditions.

Loreta comes from a small village in the North of Albania. She married young and her first children were twins, one of them with severe health problems. She tried to make money for her family as a vegetable seller, as her husband did not have an income:

My husband was not faithful to me and on top of that he would beat me almost every day. He never brought money home. (...) Then my husband left for Germany. And I was left in the middle of the road. I slept with my children in an old car. (...) That was when I decided to leave. (...) So, we followed him to Germany.

The differential effects of social networks on emigration

Network connections played a variety of roles, which differed within and between the three above-mentioned groups. For *intrinsically motivated migrants*, connections in the destination country had a strong effect in terms of informing the decision to migrate and choosing the destination but were not instrumental in organising or financing the move. Only for international students did connections at the destination play a (minor) role; choosing the destination was based on personal and family interests, the expected quality of education or the availability of scholarships (see King and Gëdeshi 2023, in this issue). Qualified employment abroad was rare and mediated through loose connections or through forging new ones.

The group of *instrumentally motivated migrants* shows the strongest network effects, which is consistent with the finding that migrant networks play the largest role in the context of labour migration (van Meeteren and Pereira 2018). By providing information about opportunities, facilitating the journey logistically and financially, and supporting the migrants upon arrival with shelter and connections to employers, transnational ties determine the time and the destination of migration.

The role of network connections can go beyond facilitating the migration of aspiring migrants to increasing or inducing an aspiration to migrate (cf. de Haas 2010). A young man from Durrës explains why he went to Italy in 2008, at the beginning of the financial crisis, even though he thought that he would be wasting his time there:

In 2008, one of my friends, who was living in Italy, invited me to go to work in Italy. He would help me to do the papers. I didn't want to leave but I had given him my word, so I moved there.

For the *crisis-or-survival-motivated* migrants, network effects depended on the time of departure. Those who left around 1997–98 either tapped into existing channels and networks and moved, for example, to Greece or Italy or they relied on more costly and complicated ways to travel to the US or the UK, realising that the momentum of the ‘almost civil war’ was providing them with an opportunity for a permanent stay there. In contrast, the asylum migration to Northern European destinations after 2010 consisted mainly of people who did not have contacts at the destination prior to the migration. Thus, the information these migrants had about their destinations was not from first-hand sources but from contacts in Albania. An asylum-seeker who had returned from Germany remembers: ‘We asked for economic asylum, but later we found out that there was no such kind of asylum’. It was the combination of rumours about Germany accepting people that were possibly initiated by informal commercial networks – and hearing about many people leaving – which informed people’s decision-making (see also Gëdeshi and King 2020). Collyer (2005) correspondingly found that asylum migration is not predicted by network theory and Epstein and Hillman (1998) spoke of ‘herd effects’ as opposed to network effects for this scenario.

Only a few were able to mobilise resources for the migration through their own private networks; they were more likely to depend on loans from banks or money-lenders. In this group, in particular, are instances of ambivalent or outright harmful network relations. Failure to receive support or being exposed to harm (such as domestic abuse or revenge threats against entire families) were among the reasons to migrate.

Social mobility after intrinsically motivated migration and return

For most *intrinsically motivated* migrants (non-students), life abroad was characterised by professional downward mobility – working as a cashier, waitress or household help despite their academic degrees and/or professional experience.² This was due to legal, bureaucratic, social and linguistic obstacles to accessing professions corresponding to their qualifications. Also, their migration aspirations were not linked with career objectives or the need to support family members.

Reasons to return ranged from wanting to end occupational downward mobility, expecting better opportunities in Albania in terms of self-realisation and family concerns. Most people in this group were able to plan their return and set the time for it themselves. Yet, transferable gains from the migration were limited. Only exceptionally did people in this group set up businesses in Albania with money and skills gained abroad. Few had substantially expanded their transnational networks, which allowed them to re-emigrate under professionally and socially more rewarding circumstances. Most commonly, the migration was reported to have influenced the respondents' personal development. Social remittances also played a role, for example when returned entrepreneurs refused to follow expected practices of bribing tax officials and public agents; however, this cannot be generalised. For their relatively smooth reintegration, these migrants relied mainly on resourceful local networks and less on assets from the migration. This is well summed up in the following quote:

Currently, I have no difficulties. To be plain, I never had any. All my relatives are well off and in leading job positions in different sectors of the public administration, thus making it easier for me and my husband to start over after returning. In Albania, connections are really important in achieving goals. It is not that we did not deserve the job positions; we were well qualified, however one always needs some help.

The clientelistic nature of these networks, however, is at the same time an obstacle to the reintegration of migrants who lack these connections. Even in those few cases where legal reasons ended the migration prematurely, respondents were able to rely on their local and family networks for a relatively smooth reintegration, indicating that resources from network connections are more relevant than the type of return, at least in the middle-to-long term. At the same time, low salaries and legal uncertainties affected some respondents even in this relatively privileged group. Some had to rely on financial support from parents or they accumulated debts, even while working full-time. Obstacles to transferring financial resources from the migration also relate to the context of legal insecurity: respondents reported huge difficulties in acquiring building permits – putting some houses built with remittances at risk of demolition – and some purchases of land or houses were contested in court for years due to conflicting property claims, thus making the investment unusable.

The other type of migrants without immediate economic necessity are people who move abroad for higher education. Despite facing initial difficulties regarding access to information – e.g., on the recognition of certificates or the diverse access criteria of universities – this appears to be the main migration channel to acquiring new skills, which can be capitalised on later in almost all cases.

Return was the first choice for many of these educational migrants but not for all. Besides the wish to build a career and contribute to development in Albania, frustration about integration barriers and discrimination in destination countries also influenced their decision-making. Local network connections played a smaller role for reintegration in this group. In fact, some respondents strongly emphasised never having relied on anything except their CVs, which include the degrees from renowned foreign universities. Others benefitted from brain-gain programmes and related organisations providing otherwise-lacking connections and financial incentives. Still,

a lack of connections and perhaps a degree that did not match a lot of vacancies can present obstacles to professional reintegration. Contradicting some of the other accounts is the experience of this respondent from Korça: ‘I studied abroad, but there is a clan (mentality) here. Therefore, I never got to prove myself in my profession’.

Business founders and entrepreneurs from this group³ often appreciate that Albania allows them to realise their projects with lower investment capital and more flexibility than would have been possible abroad. While this can mean ‘working significantly more for less money’, some choose deliberately to accept a lower income to establish their (niche) businesses according to their own vision. In these cases, migration has an impact mainly in terms of values or ideas, while business premises may already be in family ownership and investment capital is earned along the way. In terms of development implications, most of the returnee businesses in this sample are unlikely to create employment for more than a handful of people and not all are registered.

Social mobility after instrumentally motivated migration and return

Not just the migration, also opportunities abroad were most strongly shaped by network effects in the group of *instrumentally motivated migrants*. All the respondents who went to Greece and Italy were helped by family members or other close contacts with finding work and accommodation upon arrival. Especially in the early years, they were mostly confined to low-skilled work due to the predominantly irregular nature of their migration (cf. King, Piracha and Vullnetari 2010). After some years and coinciding with regularisation opportunities, a few businesses and joint ventures emerged, not many surviving the financial crisis though. The aim to earn money was usually achieved (at least up to 2008) but gaining new skills occurred only in the context of practical work experience and through the education of children.

People from this group have also migrated to and returned from the UK, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, France, Turkey and Qatar. Only in one case (Qatar) was a work contract negotiated prior to departure. Generally, migrants also relied on networks to choose destinations and find opportunities, mostly unskilled, either on Schengen tourist visas or undocumented. Thus they were constrained by the lack of regularisation, without health care or any kind of insurance. It turned out that having connections was not always sufficient to receive support: one student, who had hoped to pay his study fees by working in Germany, ended up in an asylum-seekers’ home, because ‘My relatives didn’t do anything to help me, to tell the truth’ and another migrant could not find legal work in any of the four EU countries he went to despite having connections in each of them.

Returns in this group were for family reasons, the effects of the financial crisis or for legal reasons. Some also grew tired of the exhausting work and difficult living conditions abroad and chose to return (sometimes triggering siblings to leave at around the same time). A minority returned at a self-determined time – e.g. in order to start their own business with their savings from abroad. Difficulties emerged when the return was unexpected, such as when a work contract was suddenly cancelled or when the financial crisis destroyed the hope of building a life abroad. Mostly, however, people expected their return sooner or later and simply moved on with their lives, at times through re-migration.

Regarding resource transfers, added skills from practical work experience were rarely applied after return, either because they were acquired in production processes not taking place in Albania or because the respondents could not find employment in the same field after return. Others had completed higher education or, in fact, interrupted it to migrate and were not hoping to accumulate anything abroad except for some income. Earning enough to be able to save was a challenge for many due to low incomes and sometimes high living costs. Also, earnings were more often remitted than accumulated. Respondents who returned with savings were wary of investment risks. One respondent, who had worked for three years informally in

construction in London, describes weighing his commitment to support the family business against his doubts regarding its economic viability:

In the beginning, I needed a lot of time to think. Should I stay here, or migrate again? I took a year of reflection: is it worth investing here? After a year, I decided to rebuild and renovate the family business and invested a lot.

Other respondents, mainly single young men, live off their savings until they are used up and then migrate again. All in all, there are few instances of actual social mobility from migration. On the contrary, several respondents in this group have interrupted or not even started higher education – due to a migration opportunity opening up – some of whom later regret not having pursued their degree. Others in turn have invested in their higher education in Albania and either did not find work in the corresponding field or left it again due to unsatisfactory conditions. Businesses were mainly opened in sectors with high competition and low profit margins. Generally, the structural, institutional and political context is fraught with insecurities for small entrepreneurs and protection against income losses from external shocks, such as the earthquake of 2019 or the Covid lockdown, is minimal.

In those instances when people achieved social mobility after their return, the migration played much less of a role compared with the realisation that migration was also not going to work as a solution. Upon return – without having accomplished their migration-related aims – some decided to complete their education or to invest in their livelihood in Albania by other means and thereby accomplish their goals.

What most people in this group owe to their migration is not so much change but continuity in terms of maintaining a livelihood. ‘For me, a good life is not having to ask anyone for help and to depend only on myself for a living’, stated one returned migrant from Greece; another returned labour migrant felt satisfied about having achieved the aims of his migration, which had been ‘to raise my children and to educate them’.

Social mobility after crisis-or-survival-motivated migration and return

Regarding the Albanian crisis migration of 1997, in this sample the parents’ generation experienced occupational downward mobility but their move enabled their children, some of whom later returned to Albania, to benefit from education systems in the destination countries. A recently returned founder of a small start-up in the north of Albania recalls:

My father was an architect by training but, due to the language barrier, he only found work as a construction worker. My mother used to be an accountant in Albania but, in England, she developed a mental illness and never went back to work.

Other people from this group are mainly those who applied for asylum in Northern European and Scandinavian countries after 2010. The reasons for the asylum migration have been extensively documented elsewhere (e.g. Gëdeshi and King 2020). A minority had contacts in the destination country which, however, proved to be of little use, as people could not even choose their place of residence once registered as asylum-seekers.

Regarding opportunities, some were able to work informally, the majority were not. Education, daycare and extracurricular activities for children were appreciated when they took place; some of the children picked up the new language quite quickly. However, the average duration of stay was too short to have a lasting impact on people’s professional or educational careers. In some cases, treatment for serious health conditions and other immaterial benefits accrued. Depending on the type and place of their accommodation they

established new contacts – both with citizens of the destination country and with other immigrant communities – and gained better knowledge of the actual conditions for labour migration. Some report that they appreciated the exposure to a less discriminatory environment and that the education system enhanced their children's self-esteem. For many, this experience has made them determined to provide their children with an education that they hoped would allow them to re-migrate.

Return was, in almost all cases, legally mandatory and implemented through so-called voluntary return schemes or deportation. A few returned without waiting for the outcome of their asylum claim, either after learning that finding work abroad was highly unlikely or due to family or other reasons in Albania. Even migrants who say they feared for their life upon return had to leave.

In terms of reintegration, there was only a minor difference between assisted return and deportation. Cash and even valuables were confiscated by the police and not returned during deportations. More importantly, the re-entry ban to Schengen countries prevents people from making use of their newly gained networks, language skills and knowledge about regular migration opportunities. Some waited for the end of it, while others, often out of economic need, accepted services offered by 'lawyers', to remove the entry ban for money, which only increased their debts. A young student from Kamëz, who returned with her family from Germany in 2017, reported in 2022:

My father tried to go to Germany again five months ago. He had this entry ban. He had asked a lawyer to have it removed and (...) was told that he could travel freely. But at the German border he was fined 1,200 Euros and banned again for another three years.

Re-migration aspirations were also blocked for other, non-legal reasons; a young woman, who lives with her three children in an informal settlement, in a small hut that she built with savings from living in Germany as an asylum-seeker, says: 'I would like to go back to Germany but I cannot afford the journey. I am indebted to everyone I know; nobody is going to give me any more money'. The EU entry ban also blocks previous livelihood strategies, such as transporting goods from Greece to Albania. The one tangible benefit were language skills which helped some – mainly young – returnees find work in call centres. For many, however, on balance the losses outweigh the gains. To migrate, people sold off livestock or property, increased their debt with banks, family or money-lenders or left a job. An asylum-seeker, returned from Germany, who lives again in the same village near Korça but under even more challenging circumstances than before, says that 'Migration was the worst mistake I ever made in my life and I'm bearing the consequences even now, six years later'. Many respondents do not have any faith in public institutions and have neither the networks nor the resources to improve their livelihood locally. This is reflected in their accounts of their post-return situation, as illustrated by this returned asylum-seeker from Sweden:

I guess you are aware of the fact that living conditions here are not good. You feel unsafe. (...) You will never receive support from the government and you will never find justice. Here the state is treating you as nothing. It's the mafia state that is taking away the breath of our people. If you go to them [public services, institutions] and ask for help, they look at you in a such way, ready to peel your skin off (...). Like the beast chasing the prey. This is our state. Wherever you go you see fake faces and broken promises.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has analysed the role of networks in migration and the potential for social mobility after return to Albania, considering the socio-economic stratification of society and corresponding network dynamics. The

findings contribute to larger debates on return migration and development by drawing attention to meso-level effects, mainly migrants' networks and their diverse and nuanced roles in mediating migration outcomes. They are also relevant in the context of recent politicised debates on increasing return rates, where any type of return has been presented as potentially conducive to the development of origin countries (van Houte *et al.* 2015).

Over 100 interviews with returned migrants to Albania were clustered according to the weight the respondents attributed mainly to economic factors in their decision to migrate – hardly any: intrinsically motivated; migration to solve (economic) problems: instrumentally motivated; migration to escape from overwhelming (economic) problems: survival-motivated. The analysis showed that the role of migrants' social networks differed between the three groups, both in the role they played for migration decision-making and in terms of the quality and quantity of support they had to offer. This, in turn, had a strong influence on the migrants' capability to utilise their migration for the acquisition of skills or resources.

For *intrinsically motivated migration*, social and transnational networks play a role in providing information and choosing the destination but are not required to organise or finance the migration and the migration is not required to extend support to family or network members. This group shows two contrasting patterns of resource accumulation during migration: international students gain the type of capital that can open doors and can (but does not always) facilitate reintegration independently of established network connections. Those who do not migrate for higher education are most likely to face social downward mobility during migration and usually do not gain tangible resources to an extent that would make a significant difference upon return but can rely on pre-migration networks for smooth reintegration. *Instrumentally motivated migrants* have the strongest network effects in terms of shaping their migration as, for them, the time and destination of migration and occupational opportunities upon arrival mostly depend on existing contacts in the destination countries. In terms of resource accumulation, network effects are ambivalent here: they play both a huge role in facilitating migration and also a limiting one, facilitating irregular rather than legal migration and offering certain types of jobs (mostly low-skilled and informal) but not others (cf. also Ahmad 2015). For this group of migrants, the migration is often successful in terms of supporting family members back home and maintaining a livelihood but less so in terms of unlocking opportunities for social mobility. A lot of the *survival-motivated migration* was also induced by networks but in an entirely different way: these people left based on information they received from local contacts in Albania and without having transnational connections in the destination countries or without relying much on their help. Due to inaccurate information about the conditions at destination and legal constraints, their opportunities for resource accumulation were limited from the start. They gained new contacts, language skills and information that improve their chances of re-migration rather than of reintegration but they also show the highest losses from ill-prepared migration and return. An exception are survival-motivated migrants who were able to stay abroad more permanently, such as in the context of the 1997 civil unrest in Albania. Even though they experienced social downward mobility through the migration, mainly professionally, the second generation benefitted from good education and dual citizenship. This points to one of the limitations of this analysis, which is that it looks mainly at intra- but not inter-generational social mobility. Across the three groups, migration led to a significant devaluation of human capital – an aspect that is not always taken into account when assessing migration outcomes. A high degree of flexibility and quick learning skills were more useful during migration than any specialisations gained beforehand. The only exceptions were the sub-group of educational migrants and international students as well as some second-generation returnees who gained human capital during their migration.

Going back to the initial question of how social and spatial mobility relate to each other, the findings indicate a very limited role of migration for social mobility after return. Social networks play a mediating role in this by shaping people's migration as well as reintegration trajectories in different ways, i.e. contributing more to continuity than to change. The data also show that networks are themselves a driving force of the high

migration levels in terms of a self-reinforcing dynamic of migration systems. The fact that networks increase aspirations to migrate means that they also contribute to a certain redundancy in migration endeavours, at least from the perspective of social mobility (Hagan and Wassink 2020). Thus, perhaps counter-intuitively, the strong support through translocal networks that instrumentally motivated migrants often receive does not support them in achieving social upward mobility upon return. Adapting a quote used by van Hear (2014: 101),⁴ one could conclude for network-based migration that ‘I went as far as my networks would take me’, in terms of both spatial and social mobility. Internal network dynamics and social norms are also important to consider: looking at whose migration is not facilitated by networks, not only socio-economic status but also gender and age play a role (also see Gold 2001 on these aspects). Women are significantly less likely to migrate on their own in the context of transnational networks. Female respondents in this sample either migrated with or to their husbands or independently of social networks, as students or professionals and sometimes to escape from their local networks (asylum migration). Finally, people who migrate in the context of networks tend to be of working age. The only cases of elderly people migrating that were found in the data were in the context of the asylum migration of entire families. Contrary to the assumption that network connections are by default something positive, they can also be restrictive, indifferent or even exploitative (cf. Portes 1998; Sha 2021). Also, networks differ in terms not only of support capacities but also of quality of information provided. Information spread through networks may be factually incorrect, for example by glorifying migrant life abroad (Sha 2021).

These findings should not be understood to overemphasise or attribute a deterministic role to migrants’ networks. They show that applying network theory and a focus on meso-level factors provide a useful lens to study dynamics of migration and migration outcomes but, importantly, both micro (such as personality) and macro factors (such as institutional structures) are equally important and network dynamics interact with both of them. In the context of Albania, labour-market conditions and clientelist structures, the rural–urban divide and legal uncertainties (among others) limit the transferability of resources gained through migration. The literature also mentions the influence of the institutional context, establishing that networks offer more effective support mechanisms in contexts where formal institutions are weak (see e.g. Barjaba 2018), which has not been discussed here. Also, the social context in destination countries needs to be considered. In the main destination countries in particular, Albanian migrants were faced with different forms of stereotyping and othering (cf. Zenelaga, Kerpaçi and Kseanela 2013), which can lead to assimilation or to increased reliance on existing migrant networks (cf. Sha 2021); for asylum-seekers the location and conditions of their accommodation had an impact on their ability to create new connections. Yet, it is important to move beyond the essentialising notions of (in Putnam’s 2000 terms) co-ethnic bonding vs otherwise bridging capital (cf. Ryan 2011). In all groups, there are instances of non-migrants becoming part of migrants’ personal networks, not only in the sense of ‘weak ties’ but also as employers, business partners, helpful neighbours, friends or spouses. All in all, transnational networks interact with and respond to both the structural context – such as immigration and economic policies – and the social dynamics in destination countries (Sha 2021; van Meeteren and Pereira 2018), which means that their support functions and capabilities are always context-specific (see also Hagan and Wassink 2019; King 2022; King *et al.* 2010).

The observations presented here are thus specific to the current Albanian context. Future research will have to establish whether the support capabilities of Albanian transnational network connections will change over time and in what ways.

Notes

1. Not all the respondents were actively involved in the decision-making for migration. Some migrated as young children or were born abroad. Others, especially women, report simply having followed the decision of their husbands. The following thus refers to those respondents who did make an active and conscious contribution to the migration decision and includes information that respondents were able to share about the decision-making of parents or spouses.
2. To an extent this finding relates to the fact that women moving abroad to live with their spouses are over-represented in this group and that the men – some of whom were well-established abroad – were not interviewed for this study. However, this bias explains only a part of the effect found here.
3. At this point, I include returning students who left Albania as children, for example in 1997. Even though their parents' emigration was motivated by prevailing insecurity, their return is completely voluntary and is often about re-discovering their roots and contributing something to society. Thus, from an intergenerational perspective, this may be seen as an example of social mobility.
4. The original quote is 'I went as far as my money would take me'.


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‘That’s so Sexist!’ How Highly Skilled Female Return Migrants Try to Shape Gender Norms in Kosovo

Janine Isabelle Pinkow-Läpple* 

Kosovo is a country profoundly shaped by migration. A growing body of literature pays tribute to this. However, up to now, it has barely focused on the implications of return. Female returnees – and especially highly skilled female returnees – are even less likely to be in the focus of research. Against this background, this paper investigates how highly skilled female Kosovars experience migration to North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. Within this setup, the focus is on the impact of migration on the participants’ gender norms and their attempts to shape those in Kosovo upon return. The results show that all participants experienced their sojourn abroad as empowering. The majority made use of this empowerment and actively fought for gender equality after return. However, resistance by the local population and reintegration issues impeded their engagement, prompting every second participant amongst those interviewed for this study to consider re-emigration. Despite this, two-thirds of the participants stayed and continued their engagement for gender equality but usually in an adapted manner. The paper concludes that highly skilled female return migrants have great – although fragile – potential to promote gender equality in Kosovo.

Keywords: Kosovo, return migration, gender, highly skilled migrants, social remittances, intangible remittances

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Introduction

For decades, Kosovo has been a country of mass emigration. In 2018, an estimated 854,198 Kosovar citizens lived abroad – around half of its resident population (Balkans Policy Research Group 2020). Hence, it is no exaggeration to say that the country is shaped by migration (Gollopeni 2016). This is reflected in a growing body of literature that exhibits blind spots, however, when it comes to return migration and, in particular, female return migration. As King and Lulle (2022) demonstrate in a very recent overview, this is part of a broader research gap that overlooks the stage of return migration when it comes to the research field of gender and migration. The sub-group of highly skilled female returnees is even less often the focus of the literature (Wong 2014).

Addressing these gaps, this paper deals with the question of how highly skilled female Kosovars experience migration to North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. In particular, it investigates the impact of migration on the participants' self-perception and gender norms and – based on this – their attempts to reconfigure gender norms in Kosovo upon return. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first paper that sheds light on this specific topic in the Kosovar context.

Drawing on detailed insights gained from 19 qualitative in-depth interviews, the findings illustrate that all participants experienced their stay abroad as empowering. Most of them were eager to fight conservative gender norms upon their return to Kosovo. They actively pushed for gender equality in their families and circles of friends, at work and through voluntary work. However, this enthusiasm was soon dampened by the local population's resistance and the interviewees' severe reintegration problems. As a consequence, every second participant considered re-emigration and around one third actually did so. The others continued their engagement for gender equality but usually in an adapted and slightly scaled back manner. Nonetheless it must be emphasised that the majority of the participants (at the time of writing this paper) had decided to stay and keep on promoting gender equality. The paper therefore concludes that highly skilled female return migrants in Kosovo have a distinct potential to be agents of gender equality, however fragile.

Theoretical background

In recent decades, gender has found its way into the mainstream academic migration debate. A critical outcome was acknowledging the mutual relationship between migration and gender: not only can gender inhibit or motivate migration but migration can profoundly change the gender norms of migrants and origin countries (Hugo 2000; King and Lulle 2022). In line with the focus of this paper, the second part of this relationship – the impact of migration on gender norms – will be at the centre of the following literature overview.

For the individual female migrant, migration can be an empowering experience.¹ The different ways through which migration may lead to empowerment can be subsumed under two channels: (1) the migration-induced experience of independence and (2) the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. With regards to the first channel, the mere experience of leaving the family household and living alone in a foreign country can open up a pathway to increased confidence for female migrants. Migration in this context gives women the chance to shape their lives according to their preferences instead of being oppressed by partners or restricted by family pressure for marriage, household or care work (Amazan 2013; Hugo 2000; UN DESA 2006). This may be accelerated by the experience of earning financial resources that can be invested in the women's education or income-generating activities (King and Lulle 2022; McKay 2007; UN DESA 2006). If the economic activities during their sojourn allow female migrants to contribute financially to the household income, this might also improve their position within the household, increase their participation in decision-making processes or gradually release them from family obligations (Boyd and Grieco 2003; McKay 2007; Zentgraf

2002). The experiences assigned to this channel of empowerment happen as a consequence of migration but are in principle unrelated to the destination country. They can happen anywhere – in Saudi Arabia or in Sweden – independent of the gender norms prevalent in the destination country.

The acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances – the second channel of empowerment – in contrast, is closely tied to the destination country. Adapted from Levitt's (1998) concept of social remittances, Pinkow-Läpple and Möllers (2022: 21) define intangible remittances as 'the knowledge, normative structures and practices migrants acquire at the migration destination and transfer to their migration origin. Intangible remittances reflect the (perceived) differences between the core characteristics of the migration destination and the migration origin or any of their segments'. These intangible remittances 'can carry economic, environmental, political, or socio-cultural content' (*ibidem*). In short, the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances embraces the acquisition of intangible assets, such as norms, which are characteristic of the destination country. In the context of gender, female migrants might be empowered by the adoption of the more progressive gender norms prevalent in their destination country (Hugo 2000; UN DESA 2006).²

However, migration is not always an empowering experience. If migration is undocumented and happens in the context of exploitation and abuse, empowerment is, of course, highly unlikely (Hugo 2000; Kuschminder 2013). The same is true if migration goes along with downward socio-economic mobility, as Zentgraf (2002) shows. Empowerment through intangible remittance acquisition can, moreover, only unfold if female migrants get in touch with the gender norms of the destination society. If they stay within ethnic enclaves, remain trapped within patriarchal families or only stay abroad for a very short time, empowerment is therefore also unlikely (Hugo 2000; King and Lulle 2022). If the diaspora they are part of is more conservative than the origin society, even disempowerment is possible (King and Lulle 2022).

Summarising, Hugo (2000) concludes that migration is most probably an empowering experience if women migrate legally and alone to urban areas – where more progressive gender norms are usually prevalent – engage in formal employment and stay abroad for an extended time. If empowerment did occur, this influences the next stage of the migration cycle, a possible return. However, the literature on female returnees is scarce. Studies show that women, in general, are more reluctant to return as they fear losing the freedom newly gained from living in their destination countries (Sondhi and King 2017; Vlase 2013a). If they return, their potential to make use of their empowerment is often limited as, typically, a gradual re-adjustment to the more patriarchal gender norms of the origin society takes place (King and Lulle 2022; Vlase 2013a). Studies that find female return migrants making use of their empowerment show that these are often subtle attempts that only concern the inner family circle. Vlase (2013b), for example, describes changes in the household organisation in families of return migrants relating to, for instance, female returnees' obligations towards their in-laws. Vlase (2013a) and Dahinden (2010) illustrate female returnees' efforts to empower their daughters.

Dannecker (2009), in contrast, observes the active attempts of female returnees on a wider scale to push the gender norms of their origin communities towards a more liberal end. She describes how Bangladeshi female returnees, empowered by their stay abroad, actively challenged the highly conservative gender norms in their home country by wearing 'Western' clothes, criticising their husbands and families or giving loans to other women to enable them to migrate as well. Descriptions of such active engagement of female returnees for gender equality in their origin communities are, however, rare. This is most probably due to the expectation of negative consequences. Dannecker (2009), for instance, reports that her participants' engagement was branded with the negative image of pursuing an untraditional lifestyle that was met not only with resistance but with acute hostility by the local population. Eventually, the women were punished by social exclusion. Referring to this kind of conflict, King and Lulle (2022) speak of a 'battle' that unfolds between the more liberal gender norms of female return migrants and the more conservative views that prevail in the countries of origin. Hence, even if female returnees try to shift gender roles in their countries of origin, this seems to be very difficult.

Literature that explicitly compares the migration and return experiences of different groups of women, such as highly skilled versus lower skilled or repatriated women versus women who returned voluntarily is unfortunately very scarce. The study of Kuschminder (2013) on female return migration to Ethiopia however indicates that highly educated women have a higher probability to experience their sojourn as empowering and in turn to engage as agents of change upon return.³

Methods and data

The study applies a qualitative approach that embraces in-depth interviews, participatory observation and qualitative text analysis. Focusing on a specific case and taking an explanatory approach is particularly relevant in answering the why and how questions at the core of this paper (Yin 2014). Kosovo was selected as a case study as it is a country that has a long-standing migration culture in which patriarchal structures persist. The female labour participation rate is one of the lowest in Europe, standing at a mere 20.8 per cent, compared to 56 per cent for men (KAS 2021), women continue to be subjected to stereotypes regarding family life, are widely disadvantaged concerning inheritance and gender-based violence is still widespread (Kosovo Women's Network 2018; LuxDev 2021; OSCE 2019). Against this background, the continuous migration to Western Europe and North America, where more progressive gender norms are prevalent, bears the potential to shift female migrants' gender norms. The qualitative approach, focusing on the participants' individual experiences, sheds light on how female Kosovar migrants experience their sojourn and return. It investigates women's changed self-perceptions and gender norms and their engagement with gender equality after return.

As female return migrants in Kosovo are a highly diverse group and heterogeneity can be a profound problem in small samples, the study focuses on one specific sub-group: highly educated women who migrated on their own for studies or work. This choice is based on the insights of the existing literature (Hugo 2000; Kuschminder 2013), which points out that this is the group for which migration is the most probably empowering. Through snowball sampling, 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 highly educated female returnees.⁴ The interviews took place during the period 2018–2021 and are part of a larger ongoing study that focuses on intangible remittance transfer through female return migrants in Kosovo and Romania. Key topics of the interviews included the interviewees' pre-migration life, their migration and return experiences, the changes they underwent during their sojourn as well as their engagement for gender equality in Kosovo upon return.

A wide array of different organisations who either work with the target group or where members of the target group were expected to be employed, were contacted. In this way, multiple different entry points to the target group were established in order to diversify the sample. The contacted organisations included universities, development aid agencies, NGOs working with returnees, West European and North American embassies as well as political foundations. Additionally, Facebook groups were used as platforms to recruit first contacts. To further minimise the risk of creating a biased sample, no more than two persons provided by one contact were included in the sample. In addition to the interviews, a participatory observation element was conducted. This included attending relevant events that were either led by the interviewees themselves or deemed important for their engagement in gender equality.

All interviews followed standard ethical procedures. Prior to the interviews, all participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and signed informed consents, providing detailed information about the interview process, the participant's role, and the envisaged usage of the data. It included an explanation of confidentiality and voluntariness and informed the participants that they could stop the interviews and withdraw their participation at any time. Before starting the record, all participants were asked if they had any questions regarding the interview process. Furthermore, all transcripts were fully anonymised.

The participants were aged between 23 and 37, childless and held a university degree at the time of the interview. Most participants came from comparatively progressive and average to high-income families. All but one lived in Kosovo's capital, Prishtina, before and after migration. All of them went abroad for the purpose of education, most of them to pursue a master's degree. Hence, at least initially, all participants conceived their sojourn as temporary. Most participants migrated to the USA and went abroad for a relatively short period (median duration: 24 months). All of them linked their overseas stay with very positive impressions and deemed the migration experience successful. Table 1 presents an overview of the participants' demographic and socio-economic backgrounds.⁵ To guarantee anonymity, pseudonyms are used.

Table 1. Participants' demographic and socio-economic characteristics

Name	Age	Migration motivation	Migration destination	Year of departure	Year of return	Education	Marital status	Children
Linda	26	Education	USA	2015	2016	Tertiary	Single	–
Arjeta	31	Education	USA	2010	2012	Tertiary	Single	–
Rozafa	26	Education	Sweden	2014	2016	Tertiary	Single	–
Emina	29	Education	USA	2006	2007	Tertiary	Single	–
				2011	2013			
Vera	25	Education	USA	2009	2010	Tertiary	Married	–
				2015	2017			
Ardita	33	Education	Netherlands	2009	2010	Tertiary	Single	–
Rita	34	Education	USA	1999	2000	Tertiary	Married	–
		Education	USA	2006	2008			
Lindita	24	Education	USA	2016	2017	Tertiary	Single	–
Jehona	27	Education	USA	2009	2014	Tertiary	Single	–
				2018	2020			
Florentina	28	Education	Sweden	2012	2013	Tertiary	Single	–
Agnesa	26	Education	USA	2015	2017	Tertiary	Single	–
Anita	27	Education	USA	2014	2016	Tertiary	Married	–
Loreta	37	Education	USA	2006	2009	Tertiary	Married	–
Majlinda	29	Education	USA	2016	2017	Tertiary	Married	–
Nora	25	Education	USA	2012	2013	Tertiary	Single	–
Vjosa	23	Education	USA	2014	2014	Tertiary	Single	–
				2016	2020			

Source: Author's compilation.

The stay abroad: an empowering experience

When asked how their life abroad differed from life in Kosovo, all participants acknowledged that it was very different. Nora, for instance, said it was 'insanely different' and Linda even explained that she 'cannot compare American society to Kosovar society or any society of the Balkans' because it would be 'like comparing salt to sugar'. For several respondents, these differences were so substantial that they reported having experienced a culture shock after arrival or perceived certain aspects of life in the migration country as shocking. In line

with the strength of these perceived differences, all participants indicated that the migration experience had influenced them, although to varying degrees. The changes were relatively subtle for three participants, whereas they were medium to strong for the others. Jehona, for instance, called her time abroad ‘a turning point’; for Nora, it was ‘the most transformative experience’ of her life and Majlinda said ‘it shattered all [her] beliefs and built them up again from the beginning’. This goes against the widespread assumption that migrants do not gain valuable experiences during short migration periods – i.e. less than two years (see, for example, Hugo 2000; King 1986). However, it is entirely in line with Kuschminder (2013) and Gëdeshi and King (2022), who find that even short periods of migration can be transformative within certain groups of migrants.

When asked *how* they had changed, the most frequently reported migration-induced change was empowerment, reflected in a general feeling of strengthened self-confidence and changed gender norms.⁶ When it comes to the causes of these changes, two main processes were identified that are in accordance with the literature summarised in the literature review section: (1) the migration-induced experience of independence and (2) the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances.

The primary channel for the participants’ empowerment was the migration-induced experience of independence – i.e. the experience of living and managing their lives alone while abroad. When asked how their lives abroad differed from their lives in Kosovo, the most frequent answer by a clear margin was ‘more freedom’. Many participants would agree with Agnesa, who said ‘one of the biggest changes was that it was a time only for me’. This is, of course, related to the participants’ life stage. The experience of living outside the parental household for the first time is key to everyone’s transition to adulthood. At the same time, the emphasis on personal freedom has to be understood in the context of Kosovar culture. The participants described the society of their home country as very collective, emphasising family ties. In the words of Majlinda: ‘In Kosovar families, it’s pretty normal that you are 23, 25 and still your family has a say in what you do’. Usually, it is expected that young people stay in the family household until they get married. Accordingly, almost all participants still lived with their families before migrating, regardless of their age. Although many stressed that their families gave them enough room for personal development and that they valued the close bonds with their families, these were to some extent also perceived as confining. Living alone and far away from their families and the related obligations was, therefore, an empowering experience. The participants enjoyed focusing on themselves and organising their time and activities according to their personal preferences, as Majlinda described:

It was the first time for me living alone without my family. It was very, very exciting. I can tell you that the first moment, the first morning in the US, so I had a very large room with big windows and just one inflatable bed and when I woke up the first morning there, because I arrived at night, it was the most beautiful morning of my life, till this day. I just felt free. (...) I could manage, arrange my schedule, my life and everything.

However, living alone also came with challenges. Many initially struggled with the unknown situation of being entirely on their own. They not only had to adapt to a completely new environment but were confronted with tasks they had never faced before, like finding an apartment or taking care of their bills. Often, they were also exposed to a high level of pressure at university, for which they felt unprepared by the Kosovar education system. The absence of their traditional ‘support system’ at first caused stress, as Emina recounted:

You’re on your own, and you have to figure things out, whatever that is. Because here we are very collective. We have family and friends for everything. Even for the basics (...) like if I can’t make dinner, I know that

somebody else will. Or if I can't do the laundry, I know that somebody else will. And like that sudden realisation that if you don't make dinner, you won't eat. As basic as that.

Overcoming these initial struggles empowered the participants. Arjeta, for example, described how, before migrating, she could never have imagined living alone, let alone in a foreign country. Nevertheless, after she realised during her migration experience that she was able to manage her life independently, she felt confident enough to even live abroad on a long-term basis. Taken together, the experience of independence and self-responsibility empowered the participants.

The second channel of empowerment was the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. This was mainly embodied by the acquisition of aspects of Western individualism which the participants experienced in their destination countries. Although many participants reflected quite critically upon individualism, as they, in principle, very much valued the close ties to their families and society, they positively acknowledged the greater emphasis on self-fulfilment and individual freedom in their destination countries. As Emina put it, in Kosovo, there exists a 'pre-set template of where you are supposed to be in your life'. The adherence to this 'template' is closely monitored by society: 'In Kosovo, they jump on you with questions (...). Your business is everybody's business' (Emina). In the destination countries, in contrast, the participants observed a much more diverse set of life concepts, that went hand in hand with a more pronounced sense of privacy. As a consequence, the participants felt less regulated. The perception of being freer abroad was hence also linked to experiencing a culture that puts more emphasis on the individual, something which also required the participants to openly communicate their needs, as Nora explained:

I was coming from a culture where it's not socially acceptable to say 'Yes' the first time a person asks if you want food or whatever they're offering. So, I was saying 'No' and then I was going to sleep hungry because I was not speaking up. Because nobody would offer me food again. Just as basic as this, I learned that I need to share and speak up about my needs, wants and whatever it is.

Greater freedom was also manifest in the destination countries' gender norms. These were experienced by many participants as much more liberal compared to those in Kosovo, where they felt a pressure from society to get married and have children, as Vjosa explained:

They want women to be educated in Kosovo, and they push them, you know, 'Go finish college!' But then once they finish college, they're like: 'OK, now it's time to marry'. It's like they have this trajectory ready for them, and they just have to follow it.

This stood in contrast to the experiences which the participants had in their destination countries, where women were less exposed to stereotyped role models in the different areas of life. This was experienced differently by the participants. For Nora, such simple things as sports were 'eye-opening': 'I remember, until I went to the US, I did not know that there could exist a women's soccer team. (...) I did not know that so many sports can be played by female teams as well as male teams'.

For others, such as Vjosa, the experience of seeing a whole range of 'untraditional' family models in the US, ranging from homosexual couples and unmarried couples to single parents or couples without children, was very influential: 'Women can just do what they want to do. They may not even get married at all and it's not that big a deal or get married and have no children'. This changed the participants' perspectives on family life, as Ardita and Vjosa respectively described it:

I gained a lot of confidence because we in Kosovo are raised (...) with the idea that you need a man in your life. (...) The Netherlands played a big role in forming this opinion that I can be an independent woman. I don't need a man in my life.

I never thought of someone [women] choosing not to have a family or choosing to be with someone for 30 years and never get married! (...) When I went there, I saw that you know, there is life without a child, there is life without marriage. And you can do with just a partner, (...) without marriage or marriage with no kids. All these different options changed my perspective.

Closely related to this was the aspect of sexual morals. Rozafa, for instance, mentioned how surprised she was that women and men were sharing apartments in her student dormitory in Sweden. According to her, this would have been unthinkable in Kosovo, where not only apartments but complete buildings were separated between women and men. She also described how women in Sweden were freer regarding their love life. They were not judged if, for instance, they frequently changed partners or enjoyed nightlife. In Kosovo, she said, such behaviour would inevitably lead to gossip. Jehona experienced this as follows:

My host sister was very free to do whatever. A lot more independent. Like here, for example, girls that age are not really allowed to stay out late. Especially (...) my mom was quite conservative in this regard. You know, like going out or sleepovers and stuff like that. Or like having a boyfriend at that age would be very unacceptable for Kosovo. And then I was, like, three years or four years older than my host sister and she already had a boyfriend.

These experiences influenced the respective participants' understanding of relationships. Jehona, who, however, came from an exceptionally traditional family background, explained that she had a very conservative understanding of relationships before migration and was convinced that women had to ask their partners if they wanted to do something or go somewhere. Since being abroad, her understanding of power dynamics had changed 'enormously'. She now felt much more independent and left partners no room to wield power over her.

Closely related to this, it was mainly the field of work which influenced the participants. Experiencing women in prestigious and influential positions but also in usually male-dominated areas was an eye-opener for many participants. Similarly, the different institutions established in the destination countries to support women's careers were positively recognised. Rozafa, for instance, had never heard of paternity leave before going to Sweden and was amazed to see a letter on her male professor's door stating that he was temporarily out of office to take care of his children. Other instances in this field were described as follows:

I saw that female is really equal to male. It's something you see even if you don't check the statistics or something like that. It's just in the way they work, in the way they talk – you could see confidence. They are never, like, less of a man (Ardita).

My first shock was women bus drivers. Because I had never seen a woman be a driver of a bigger vehicle (Nora).

The way that they respect women, the way that management positions are filled by women – it's empirical data or it's just evident because you see it. You have professors that are female, even the director of the school itself was a female. Very highly respected women! (Rozafa).

These experiences inspired the participants concerning their own career trajectories. Vjosa, for instance, said: ‘Seeing women there being independent kind of really inspired me to want to be like them’. Rozafa explained: ‘it has (...) increased my self-confidence that I can one day, or even now, I can do whatever a male colleague can do’. Nora similarly said ‘It really did shift my perspective of what can be done by a female in Kosovo or wherever, when I saw females in all of these different [professions]’.

Altogether, these experiences made many participants more critical of the situation of women in Kosovo and the world. Rozafa accordingly said that Sweden ‘was the country that told [her] what feminism is about’. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, whereas the more progressive gender roles profoundly influenced many participants, the impact was more subtle for others. In the latter case, they were raised in progressive families and took their own comparatively privileged situation for granted. Only when gender equality was debated more broadly and publicly during their time abroad did they become aware of the topic’s importance and experience how gender issues were handled in another country, as Linda said:

I come from a modern family where, as a woman, I was not discriminated against. (...) But we don’t talk about these things here [in Kosovo] much in terms of women’s rights. Going to America and hearing these things of equal pay and discrimination, sexual harassment and violence towards women makes you wonder if you’re living too comfortably in the surrounding of your family. After I came back, I started noticing how our society is discriminating towards women.

Besides the acquisition of gender norms, the acquisition of skills, knowledge and job perspectives (i.e. seeing what level you can reach within a particular profession) at prestigious universities was highly empowering for most participants. This included not only factual knowledge but also, for example, the basics of scientific working such as critical thinking, data analysis and working independently as compared to learning by heart. The acquisition of these skills, know-how and degrees gave the participants confidence and made them feel much better prepared for their future careers.

Return: trying to promote gender equality in Kosovo

In contrast to the general assumption that women are less eager to return to their countries of origin (Sondhi and King 2017; Vlase 2013a), the participants in this study predominantly returned voluntarily and even enthusiastically. Besides wanting to re-unite with their family and friends, the wish to engage in the bettering of Kosovo was among the main reasons that motivated their return.

Among the broad spectrum of topics in which the participants engaged after return, gender equality was central. Except for three participants, all actively and intensively advocated for more progressive gender roles in various ways but mainly in everyday discussions, through their work and through voluntary engagement. In everyday life, they pointed out sexist traditions, tried to raise awareness for gender equality or supported female friends. Jehona, for example, described a situation where her family was invited to a feast organised for the new-born son of a relative. The same relative already had a daughter for whom she had not prepared such festivities. This, according to Jehona, goes back to a Kosovar tradition of organising feasts only for new-born boys but not for girls. Jehona acknowledged that, before her stay abroad, she did not question this kind of tradition. However, after her migration experience, she realised their patriarchal nature and confronted her family by saying: ‘I said I’m not going. That’s so sexist! I’m not going to go. Why / How / ?! You know, I was arguing with my mum and my family’. In a similar vein, many participants reported that they successfully influenced their families to be more supportive of female family members. Rozafa, for instance, who got to know the concept of parental leave during her time in Sweden, convinced her brother-in-law to take some time

off to support his wife after she gave birth. Nora persuaded her uncle to let his daughter study abroad and, in general, to give his daughters more freedom – e.g. allowing them to go out at night. She also engaged with a male family member who wanted to study textiles and design by discussing it with his father, who fiercely opposed his son's wish as he thought it was a female-only profession.

Within the circle of friends and colleagues, engagement for gender equality was less pronounced, either because it was not necessary – as the participants' friends were very progressive themselves – or, on the contrary, because participants' engagement was actively discouraged, as I explain in more detail in the next section. Nonetheless, the participants got involved in this sphere as well. Ardita, for instance, described it as follows:

I'm still in touch with friends from childhood or from before. And I think I have influenced them a lot to change. I'm always talking about this open-mindedness and gender equality and little things like that. I think they have changed because of me.

Florentina, furthermore, reported supporting female friends with their career plans. Having struggled, herself, to overcome prejudices in her social environment for pursuing a career in the male-dominated field of technology and then becoming empowered by her migration experience, she now encouraged her female friends to consider taking up jobs in traditionally non-female professions. Finally, another example is that of Vjosa, who explained that she fought sexist stereotypes every day at work – for example when colleagues tried to convince her to put makeup on because, as a woman, she was supposed to do so or when they gossiped about how other colleagues were dressed.

Furthermore, the participants used their professions to influence gender norms after return. Many were employed in development cooperation projects, at ministries or NGOs that promoted gender equality. Rozafa, for instance, who had convinced her brother-in-law to go on private paternal leave, advised the government on gender-balanced adjustments to the law on parental leave as part of her job at an NGO. Loreta after return established an alternative feminist research institute. Others used their influence on projects or people under their direction to support women. This ranged from the targeted support of female students over the introduction of gender mainstreaming in projects they designed, to the constellation of their teams which they tried to set up as gender-balanced.

A final way in which the participants engaged in gender equality was voluntary work. Many participants were active in NGOs. Jehona, for instance, managed a Facebook group – with thousands of followers – which deals with feminism in the Western Balkans. Arjeta developed a project during which successful Kosovar businesswomen would go to schools and speak of their career trajectories to demonstrate to young women what they could achieve but also to sensitise boys to the fact that women 'have the right to opportunities'. Nora and Vjosa, furthermore, used their voluntary activities for school projects that introduced pupils to 'non-traditional' jobs for women and men to give them an impression of the different professions they could work in. Nora, for instance, described how she introduced 'shock factors' to the pupils, such as women working in science or neurology.

Exit or voice? Dealing with reintegration challenges and resistance

The participants' eagerness to change gender norms in Kosovo, as described in the last section, is, however, only one side of the coin. Reintegration problems and resistance often overshadowed the participants' engagement for gender equality. In fact, the return to Kosovo was initially highly challenging for most participants. Only three reported an easy and thoroughly positive return experience. The others, to varying

degrees, went through a reverse culture shock (Gaw 2000). These results support the findings of earlier studies which show that reintegration is often a highly challenging process involving the renegotiation of belonging and reference frames (Adeniyi and Onyeukwu 2021; Bree *et al.* 2010; Fakiolas and King 1996; Ruben *et al.* 2009). The reverse culture shock was aggravated by the fact that most participants did not expect such an experience. In contrast, they were looking forward to returning, as they assumed they were going back ‘home’ – i.e. to a familiar place and beloved people. However, due to their experiences and the changes they had gone through, ‘home’ and the ‘beloved people’, in many cases, no longer felt familiar. The participants had left their lives in Kosovo and went to places where their personal lives differed profoundly. They quickly became accustomed to these lives and changed, often without being aware of it. Having gone through such a transformative period, many, such as Nora, described the confrontation with their ‘old’ lives after return as an outright shock:

I experienced a reverse culture shock when I moved back, which was a huge shock to me because I don't think I was prepared. Like I was prepared to have a shock when I went to the US, but then when the programme was over, I was, like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm going home'.

In turn, the respective participants found it very hard to re-adapt. After their stay abroad, many reported that they had become much more critical of Kosovo. Minor annoyances – such as missing bus schedules or dysfunctional pavements to significant issues such as the discrimination of women or limited job opportunities in Kosovo – were felt much more strongly. In particular, the conservative Kosovar values and traditions clashed with the widely progressive ones which the participants now held dear. Many participants felt as if a time capsule had taken them back. Several participants, such as Rita, reported that ‘everything was bothering’ them. For many, this feeling was so strong that they could barely recognise their country of birth anymore:

When I came back, I was shocked by all the things that I had been living with but never noticed (Nora).

When I came back (...) the only question that was going through my mind was 'Was I part of the system before that I couldn't notice this kind of behaviour we have as a society, or did I change?' Did the people change after I came back? (Linda).

They were constantly comparing Kosovo to their migration country and often had a strong desire to share what they had experienced abroad compared to what they now noticed in Kosovo, as Nora explained: ‘I was constantly saying ‘But in the US, they do it like this. Why do we do it like this?’ However, she was met with rejection, as were many other participants: ‘Any time I would try to share with them, what I had experienced in the US, they were like, “Oh, here she goes again. The US, the US blah, blah, blah”. They were kind of annoyed about me talking about my experience all the time’. In turn, many participants found it hard to re-connect to their families and to friends they had known their entire lives. Emina, for example, explained that she remembers ‘not being able to understand my family anymore because I wasn't part of that mindset anymore’. Jehona described it as follows:

I changed so much, and they [friends from before migration] kind of stayed the same. I mean, at first, I met them, (...) [but] I realised that it's not going to work out because they have totally different concerns and lifestyles. You know most of them, for example, especially my girlfriends and now even guys are either married or have kids and they want to talk about these things and (...) you know, like, I'm more, like, concerned about social issues, my career.

Where participants not only wanted to share their experiences abroad but also to push for change, they were often met with resistance which, in many cases, turned into conflicts or the ‘battle of values’ (King and Lulle 2022). Nora, for instance, called her attempts to transfer what she had learned abroad ‘a never-ending battle’ and reported that she had ‘countless fights’ with her parents. Jehona similarly explained that she was ‘constantly clashing’ with her family about ‘anything you can think of [because] it’s too opposite for most things’.

In many cases, the participants’ social circles were not only refusing to adopt the participants’ ideas but were actively trying to demotivate them. Nora was told that ‘you are now in Kosovo, come to your senses!’ and Rozafa that she should ‘come back to earth, you’ve returned here. You have to, you know, start a life here, it’s not Sweden. It’s never going to be!’ Others similarly described how they were confronted with comments such as ‘You think that you are better than us’ (Emina) or ‘You’ve been abroad, now you’re smarter, you’re more civilised than us’ (Majlinda). These disputes evolved around a whole range of different topics such as political or environmental issues. Many, however, resulted from the women’s re-confrontation with traditional Kosovar gender norms, as the following participants illustrated:

Now I’m a big feminist and that doesn’t go down well in Kosovo (Jehona).

So, generally from everyday life, just chores around the house not being distributed evenly between me and my brother and me always fighting for myself in a sense, saying, ‘Why do I have to do this? Why can he not do this? He just ate a plate of pasta. He should be able to wash his own dish because it was the food he ate for himself. And my mom always being like, ‘Oh, but he’s a boy, you should help him out’ (Nora).

When we had conversations (...) about, let’s say, (...) the gender spectrum, and I would say that there’s more than two genders, they would look at me in such a weird way and be like: ‘You’re crazy. You’re joking, right? Hahaha’. And I’m, like, ‘Nope’. So, then there would be this weird ‘no one talking period’. No one knows what to say anymore. And then some other day, in some other conversation, if they started talking about someone or judging something and if I don’t say anything, then they remember what I had said earlier and would be like: ‘Yeah, let’s not talk about this in front of [Vjosa] because she has some strong opinions of her own that are against us’ (Vjosa).

The participants’ changed gender norms finally also led to a key conflict which almost all of them experienced: the re-entry into the family household. In fact, most participants moved back there after return, as was expected of them. However, as they had become used to living alone and managing their lives independently abroad, this was challenging for many. They had to readjust to having less personal space, which was experienced as a substantial loss of freedom. Vjosa explained the arguments with her family as follows: ‘Because Kosovo is more of a (...) collectivistic culture, in that sense, there’s more like us, us, us, and I got so used to me, me, me that there is, like, always culture clashes’. The participants struggled between the wish to lead a self-determined, independent life and their perceived obligations towards their families, as Linda stated:

You live with your family and you kind of understand them and don’t want to disobey, not disobey, but in terms of not being responsible towards your family but then also you are this modern woman who went to America, studied and came back, so you don’t quite fit with the family.

These different experiences generated a feeling of not fitting into society anymore. The participants felt isolated and misunderstood. For some, this feeling became so intense during the initial phase of return that

they seemed to go through an identity crisis, which caused them considerable hardship. As Emina explained, they were not able to point out where they belonged anymore: ‘I get that feeling of what’s wrong with me? What’s happening? I’m from here, how come I don’t fit anymore? I should fit here. This is my place. This is home, and if I can’t belong home (...)’. Participants reported feeling ‘alien’ (Emina) or like a ‘weirdo’ (Loreta).

Moreover, many developed a sense of frustration about their engagement. After coming back full of enthusiasm, the participants expected that they would be welcomed with open arms for the contributions they wanted to make. However, in most cases, this expectation received a blow after they realised that the changes they wanted to initiate were not always wanted, as Emina and Vjosa respectively explained:

I came back very high on ideals. I had all these ideas of things that I wanted to do and what bugged me most was when I would tell people, and they would (...) tell me how that wouldn’t work, and they went on, like, ‘Now you want to make Kosovo America’ and told me all the reasons why that won’t work.

I want to apply the best of America and Kosovo but I feel like I would be in such a middle that I would fall in the ocean because the ocean is in the middle of them [Kosovo and the USA].

The participants chose different ways to deal with these negative experiences. Linda summarised the participants’ options as follows: ‘You have to think (...) if you want to adapt yourself to the whole society and just be a Kosovar, if you want to fight against the system and just be a martyr or if you want to focus on your professional and personal development and just move on’. What she described closely resembles the three options which citizens, discontent with a political system, have according to the famous theory of Hirschman (2004): exit (‘focus on yourself’), voice (‘be a martyr’) and loyalty (‘adapt back’). Although this simple categorisation has been criticised in recent years, it works as a good way to broadly describe the participants’ strategies for dealing with their return experiences.

The option of loyalty, i.e. a complete re-adaptation, was not chosen by any of the participants. On the contrary, the option of exit was very prominent. Every second participant thought about re-emigration at one point of the return experience. For some, this seemed to be the only way to achieve an independent life. Lindita, for instance, developed the strong wish to move out of the parental home and rent her own apartment in Prishtina after her return. Her parents, however, fiercely rejected this. Reflecting on this, she concluded: ‘I don’t want to make them [her family] sad (...). And that’s bad because the only way out is going and living abroad again’. By April 2022, 5 out of 16 participants lived outside Kosovo again and hence had chosen to ‘exit’. A variant of this option was chosen by Linda: she decided to stay in Kosovo but concentrated on her own life and career instead of ‘fighting against the system’.

The remaining participants opted for ‘voice’ or, as Linda called it, ‘being a martyr’ and found ways to overcome their reverse culture shock. For a minority of participants, this meant continuing to fight for their aims against all the odds. Emigrating again on a long-term basis was not an option for them because contributing to Kosovo was their most important priority. As Jehona phrased it:

I know that if I would stay in the US, I would be successful and maybe I would be like way richer. But that’s not my mission in life. I cannot live peacefully there and make money and focus on myself, when I see how things are here and not doing my part to help.

The majority of those who stayed, however, chose a middle ground: they re-adapted to a certain degree, like Rozafa, who explained that ‘a part of me that I had come to know while I was in Sweden, I had to leave in Sweden because there was practically no room for it here’ and began to choose ‘their battles’ more selectively

as they realised that ‘you can’t fight the majority’ (Emina). Hence, around two-thirds of the participants decided to stay and continue their campaign for gender equality (and other issues). This highlights that the *potential* for highly skilled female return migrants to influence gender norms in Kosovo is, in principle, very high. However, as this section has shown, it is fragile and comes with a high price for the women concerned. What helped them to deal with the hardships they were facing was, besides work, a re-orientation towards new friends or towards those friends who had also been abroad. Jehona, for instance, changed her entire circle of friends after her return. For many, alumni networks also played an essential role as they gave the participants an outlet to share their experiences and emotions and to find companions in their engagement.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed how highly skilled women from Kosovo experienced their sojourn in North America or Western Europe and their subsequent return to Kosovo. Within this context, the particular focus was on the impact of migration on the participants’ self-perception and gender norms and their involvement with gender equality after their return to Kosovo. With this unique focus, the paper interlinked three barely researched topics: return migration to Kosovo, female return migration and the return migration of highly skilled women.

The study showed that all participants experienced their stay abroad as empowering. For some of them, the experience was so influential that they referred to it as a turning point in life. This could be traced back to two main reasons: the migration-induced experience of independence, i.e. living outside the family household for the first time, and the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances. The participants felt less regulated abroad and enjoyed the freedoms that life outside the traditional family household offered them. In combination with the need to organise their lives independently, this was perceived as highly empowering. This process was supported by the contact with more liberal gender norms. Seeing women holding influential positions or taking up usually male-dominated professions encouraged many participants to lead more independent lives themselves. Upon return, most of them actively promoted gender equality, for instance in everyday discussions, at work or through voluntary work. They pointed out sexist traditions in discussions with families, friends and colleagues, supported female friends and engaged in voluntary projects to raise awareness on the discrimination of women. However, almost all of them experienced a reverse culture shock upon return. Resistance by the local population and reintegration problems impeded their advocacy for gender equality. The clashes between conservative Kosovar values and traditions and the progressive ones of the participants initially alienated many from society. Besides this, especially the re-entry into the family household was challenging as it was perceived as highly confining. In turn, every second participant thought about re-emigration. Around one third left Kosovo again. Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that two-thirds of them stayed in Kosovo and continued to fight for gender equality. Highly skilled female return migrants, therefore, in principle, have a very high potential to act as agents of gender equality in Kosovo. However, the many challenges which they face on their return effectively lower their possibilities to initiate changes in practice. Whether or not they are eventually successful is subject to further investigation.

These results have very practical implications. Besides showing that the target group has a very high potential to promote gender equality in Kosovo, the study illustrated the many struggles which they faced after return. Support measures for this group could mitigate these hardships. Such measures are, however, rare as they are usually customised to deportees. The results show that unpreparedness for return and the feeling of isolation after return are key problems facing highly skilled female returnees. Targeted support measures for this group of return migrants could include, for instance, pre-return counselling and strengthened returnee networks. Against the background of their vast potential, more research on the unique needs of this group of returnees would offer essential insights into the development of future support measures.


Notes

1. Note that this section, in line with the focus of the paper, concentrates on migration from somewhat patriarchal origin countries to destination countries with more liberal gender norms. For other constellations, the outcomes may deviate from those described here (see, e.g., Kuschminder 2013).
2. Both channels are, of course, closely interlinked and often happen in parallel. Nonetheless, I argue that they should be separated analytically as they follow different patterns and are determined by different factors. Whereas the acquisition of (potential) intangible remittances depends somewhat heavily on the degree of interaction with the destination society, this is irrelevant for the experience of independence through earning one's own financial resources.
3. Note however, that Kuschminder (2013) does not specifically investigate female return migrants' engagement in gender equality but in the transfer of new ideas and practices in general.
4. Three participants were interviewed twice.
5. Note that only migration experiences that conform to the criteria of this study are included. Some participants also had other migration experiences – mainly war-related ones during early childhood – which are not of substantial interest to this paper.
6. Other changes included, for example, a strengthened awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, environmental issues or changed work ethics.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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— ARTICLES —

From Precarious Work to Precarious Social Citizenship: Polish Workers' Experiences with the Identification Number System in Norway

Mateus Schweyher* 

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the proliferation, rescaling and internalisation of borders. EU citizens who come to work in Norway are registered either with a Fødselsnummer – an identification number designating them as residents of Norway – or with a D-nummer, designating them as temporary migrants in Norway. To be registered with a Fødselsnummer, EU citizens must prove that they intend to live in Norway for at least 6 months, usually with an employment contract of at least 6 months' duration. EU citizens who are unable to secure long-term employment may not be able to register as residents and may sometimes live with a D-nummer for years. Based on qualitative research with Polish workers and NGOs offering legal advice in Oslo, this article investigates the consequences of being registered with a D-nummer. The article finds that EU citizens with a D-nummer face various, mostly informal, barriers to public healthcare and welfare benefits. Conceptualising the D-nummer as a welfare-bordering technology, the article argues that the identification number system in Norway creates a framework under which precarious work leads to precarious social citizenship. The article offers new insights into the mechanisms of welfare bordering and the stratification between the rights of precarious EU workers and those in secure forms of employment.

Keywords: identification numbers, welfare bordering, EU citizenship, precarity, temporary migration, Norway

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the proliferation, rescaling and internalisation of borders (Balibar 2002; Jones and Johnson 2016; Yuval-Davis, Wemyss and Cassidy 2019). In many European countries, the welfare state has been an important site of internal bordering (Guentner, Lukes, Stanton, Vollmer and Wilding 2016; Misje 2020). This article conceptualises the Norwegian identification number system as a potential welfare-bordering technology and explores whether, as currently practiced, it results in the exclusion of EU citizens in precarious employment from welfare provisioning.

European Union (EU) citizens who want to work in Norway are registered either as residents with a *Fødselsnummer*, an permanent identification number, or as temporary migrants with a *D-nummer*, a dummy identification number. To be registered as residents, EU citizens must provide evidence of their intention to stay in Norway for at least 6 months, usually with an employment contract guaranteeing them at least 6 months' future uninterrupted employment. This means that EU citizens on precarious contracts – including short-term, flexible or part-time employment – and those working through agencies without guaranteed hours, may be unable to register as residents and live with a *D-nummer* for years (Seilskjær 2023). The existence of EU citizens who are not registered as residents but who live long-term or permanently in Norway has, until recently, not been acknowledged. Furthermore, very little is known about the situation of EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer* in Norway. They are not part of official immigration statistics (Berge 2021; Løyland and Sjøstedt 2016; Thorsdalen 2016) and research often includes only those who are residents of Norway. Thus, there is a lack of knowledge about the socioeconomic situation, rights and access to welfare provisioning of EU citizens with a *D-nummer*.

This article draws attention to this gap and explores, through the lens of welfare bordering, the consequences of being registered with a *D-nummer* for EU citizens' access to public welfare provisioning. Taking as a focus EU citizens living long-term with a *D-nummer*, the article examines how, through bureaucratic procedures, precarious employment can translate into precarious social citizenship. The article also investigates how the Norwegian identification number system intersects with the EU's *freedom of movement* for workers and what consequences this has for EU citizenship in Norway.

This article is the result of a wider research project exploring why some EU citizens in Norway face difficulties accessing public welfare provisioning even after living and working in the country for years. It is based on qualitative explorative research – including observation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that offer legal and practical advice to EU citizens in Oslo – and on interviews with Polish and NGO workers. The importance of the identification number for access to welfare provisioning in Norway was not anticipated and was, instead, discovered during the research process. Therefore, the article should be considered as an initial exploration of the topic and that further research is required to fully understand the issue.

In the following section, the concepts of welfare bordering and precarious social citizenship are introduced. Then, the EU's framework of *freedom of movement* and Norway's identification number system are explained, followed by a description of the methods and design of this study. The findings are presented in two parts. First, Polish workers' difficulties in obtaining a *Fødselsnummer* when working in unstable employment are discussed – and thus how precarious work can lead to a temporary status. Second, barriers to public welfare provisioning for EU citizens with a *D-nummer* are explored – in other words, how a temporary status can lead to precarious social rights. The article concludes with a discussion of the *D-nummer* as a welfare-bordering technology that amplifies the conditionality and precariousness of EU citizenship for workers in precarious employment.

Theoretical lens: welfare bordering and precarious social citizenship

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the proliferation, rescaling and internalisation of borders (Balibar 2002; Burrell and Schweyher 2021; Burrige, Gill, Kocher and Martin 2017; Jones and Johnson 2016; Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2019). Researchers argue that, while previously taking place primarily at the geographical border between territories, border work and migration control are increasingly also conducted inside the territories of nation states, thus creating internal borders. In addition to controlling access to territories, governments have made efforts to exclude some migrant groups from access to various spheres of society, including legal employment, housing and welfare provisioning (Burrell and Schweyher 2021; Guentner *et al.* 2016; Humphris 2018; Tervonen and Enache 2017). In many Western European countries, the welfare state has been an important site of internal bordering. By demarcating categories of people and incorporating some and excluding others from public welfare provision, governments have drawn up exclusionary internal borders around public services and benefits (Guentner *et al.* 2016; Misje 2020). Guentner *et al.* (2016) note that welfare bordering can involve formally excluding particular groups from welfare provisioning by restricting their rights and through informal *de facto* exclusion from welfare provisioning. Thus, it is important to ‘examine not only formal rules of entitlement, but also the distributional mechanisms through which that entitlement is provided’ (MacAuslan and Sabates-Wheeler 2011: 61), as there can be discrepancies between migrants’ formal rights on paper and their ability to take advantage of them in practice. Formal policies can limit migrants’ rights to welfare provisioning, while physical, financial, relational and institutional constraints may hinder those who have rights to claim these in practice (MacAuslan and Sabates-Wheeler 2011: 63).

Welfare-bordering policies and practices have led to a proliferation of migration statuses with ‘ever more differentiated assemblages of rights and entitlements’ (Karlsen 2015: 41), creating ‘complex hierarchies of welfare rights’ (Misje 2020: 405). Furthermore, increasing numbers of local actors are tasked with assessing migration statuses and determining the rights of migrants, tasks in which they are rarely specifically trained and to which they bring their own judgements and prejudices (Burrell and Schweyher 2021; Yuval-Davis *et al.* 2019). Welfare bordering has thus led to the creation of ‘grey zones in which more and more immigrants live with diffuse rights’ (Synnes 2021: 173). They are physically present in a territory but do not qualify for certain rights or equal treatment, thus being ‘neither fully included, nor fully excluded, from a political community’ (Allen and Axelsson 2019: 116).

In this article, I explore the consequences of being registered with a *D-nummer* for EU citizens’ formal rights as specified in the legislation and their ability to successfully claim their rights in practice. Conceptualising the *D-nummer* as a potential welfare-bordering technology, I explore whether the Norwegian identification number system, as it is currently practiced, results in bordering EU citizens from welfare provisioning, particularly those in precarious employment. I argue that studying the functioning of the identification number system and its consequences for EU citizens in precarious employment in Norway offers insights into the mechanisms of welfare bordering more generally.

EU citizenship as precarious citizenship

EU citizens enjoy wide-ranging transnational rights when moving within the EU or European Economic Area, which are referred to as EU citizenship rights. At the core of EU citizenship is the principle of *non-discrimination by nationality*. Based on this principle, EU citizens have the right to move freely, take up employment and access public welfare provisioning in other member states on equal terms as the citizens of that member state. However, these rights are subject to various conditions and limitations. Thus, EU citizens must have a *right of residence* in another member state in order to stay beyond 3 months and have the right to public welfare

provisioning. The main path to a *right of residence* is through employment and *worker status*. EU citizens who lose their job or become unable to work due to sickness or injury *retain* their worker status and thus their right to welfare provision if the unemployment is involuntary. However, *worker status* expires after 6 months of absence from the labour market unless they have worked continuously for at least 1 year (Directive 2004/38/EC). Furthermore, to have a right to non-contributory benefits, such as social assistance, EU citizens must, in addition to having a *right of residence*, be *habitually resident*. *Habitual residence* is about people's *centre of interest*, where they spend most of their time and have most of their connections (European Commission 2013). After 5 years of continuous *right of residence*, for example as workers, EU citizens can apply for permanent residence which ends the conditionality of their social rights on having *right of residence* and *habitual residence* (Directive 2004/38/EC).

As much of the literature on EU citizenship highlights, its inherent conditionality creates a divide between economically active EU citizens – who have rights and access to social provisioning – and economically inactive EU citizens, who can be excluded from even the most basic support in other member states (Heindlmaier and Blauberger 2017; O'Brien 2017; Pennings and Seeleib-Kaiser 2018). Dwyer, Scullion, Jones and Stewart (2019: 135) have thus described EU citizenship as 'a highly stratified status built around an exclusive ideal of the citizen as a paid worker, which has led to the creation of inferior social rights for many mobile EU citizens outside the paid labour market'. However, researchers have also highlighted that 'not simply work, but particular types of work and worker histories' (Anderson, Shutes and Walker 2014: 46) are required to qualify for welfare provisioning and 'well-paid, secure work has become central to how EU citizenship is imagined, constructed and governed' (Schweyher, Odden and Burrell 2019: 103). EU citizens with low-paid, low-status jobs or punctuated labour-market histories have their rights constantly questioned or limited to particular types of support and are at risk of losing their entitlements after short periods of absence from the labour market, while those in stable, well-paid employment have easier access to support and face a lower risk of losing their rights (Anderson *et al.* 2014; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018; O'Brien 2017; Schweyher 2023). Due to its inherent conditionality, EU citizenship is thus a highly precarious form of citizenship. As rights are dependent on the ability to secure employment and can be lost after periods of unemployment, the content of EU social citizenship is highly unstable, unpredictable and insecure. The insecurity and risk of losing one's rights are severely heightened for those in precarious employment, as they are less likely to meet the criteria – such as 1 year of continuous employment or 5 years of continuous *right of residence* – and thus limit or end the conditionality of their rights (Schweyher 2023).

Identification numbers and temporary migration: the Norwegian context

Norway has been a member of the European Economic Area (EEA) since 1994 and, as a result, EU citizens' rights to free movement and equal treatment in Norway are comparable to those of EU citizens moving within the EU. Initially, accession to the EEA did not result in large-scale migration between Norway and the EU. However, after the 2004 and 2007 EU eastern enlargements, Norway experienced its largest immigration movement to date (Friberg 2016). The number of EU citizens from the new member states grew from approximately 18,000 in 2004 to around 190,000 in 2019, accounting for roughly 4 per cent of Norway's total population. Poles have been by far the largest national group among these new arrivals, accounting for about 99,000 – over half of all EU citizens from the region. Males represent 2 out of 3 EU citizens from the new member states and most have vocational training (Statistics Norway 2022a).

The Norwegian labour market is often characterised as being dominated by permanent employment, comprehensive worker protection, a compressed wage structure and high salaries (Andersen, Dølvik and Ibsen 2014). Nevertheless, many EU citizens from the new member states have not been able to secure the same

working conditions as Norwegian citizens. They became concentrated in a few industries, such as construction, shipyards and the fishing industry, hotels, transport, agriculture and cleaning, where many work in a relatively small spectrum of low-skilled, often physically demanding and less attractive jobs (Friberg 2016). This has led to a dualisation of the Norwegian labour market, with many EU citizens from the new member states working through agencies or in otherwise temporary and flexible employment, with their wages clustered around legal minimum rates, while most Norwegian citizens work in permanent employment with wages spread more evenly across different pay scales (Friberg and Midtbøen 2019; Official Norwegian Report 2022; Ødegård 2023).

Following the 2004 eastern enlargement, a large share of migration from the new member states consisted of temporary, circular and transnational commuter migration.¹ However, over the years, EU citizens increasingly brought their families over and settled in Norway (Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed 2014; Friberg 2012; Friberg 2016; Official Norwegian Report 2022). Statistics Norway distinguishes between long-term and short-term migration to Norway based on residency status. According to the Law on People Registration in Norway, persons who stay for at least 6 months should be registered as residents and assigned a *Fødselsnummer* (Lov om folkeregistrering § 4-2). Persons staying less than 6 months are assigned a *D-nummer*, designating them as non-residents who are assumed to have their residence in another country (Berge, Andreassen and Køber 2022; Løyland and Sjøstedt 2016; Thorsdalen 2016). Statistics Norway classifies EU citizens registered as residents as ‘immigrants’, while those registered with a *D-nummer* are referred to as ‘foreign commuters’, ‘short-term immigrants’ and ‘non-resident employees’ interchangeably (Berge *et al.* 2022). Thus, the statistics on immigration to Norway mentioned above include only EU citizens registered as residents in Norway. Statistics Norway does not publish specific statistics on temporary migration and very few official statistics include EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer*. As a result, most research on immigrants based on register data does not include them. Even other research based on surveys or qualitative data often only includes resident migrants or does not account for residence status. Thus, little is known about their demographics, socioeconomic situation or length of stay in Norway (Berge 2021; Løyland and Sjøstedt 2016; Seilskjær 2023; Thorsdalen 2016).

The main official source of information on temporary migration is the statistic on ‘employment among immigrants’ based on register data and includes a category called ‘wage earners not registered as resident’ (Statistics Norway 2022b). It shows that, in 2019, over 112,000 EU citizens from the new member states were working in Norway while not being registered as residents. More than 57,000 of them were from Poland. According to Berge *et al.* (2022), almost 80 per cent of workers not registered as residents are male and most of them work in construction and as agency workers. Furthermore, wage statistics show that EU citizens from the new member states who are not registered as residents have, on average, lower wages (Statistics Norway 2022c) and a higher probability of being a low-wage earner than those registered as residents (Jordfald, Svarstad and Nymoen 2021). While the data are patchy, researchers argue that EU citizens not registered as residents are the most vulnerable workers in Norway (Brunovskis and Ødegård 2022; Ødegård and Andersen 2021).

The statistics on wage earners not registered as residents do not include any information on the form of migration in which these migrants engage or their length of stay in Norway (Berge 2021). It is thus not possible to know whether a migrant is a cross-border commuter, seasonal migrant, on a one-off short-term stay or a person who is in fact living long-term or permanently in the country but is not able to register as a resident. No estimates exist on the number of persons who live in Norway long-term but are not registered as residents. By referring to EU citizens not registered as residents as ‘foreign commuters’, ‘short-term immigrants’ and ‘non-resident employees’, Statistics Norway implies that all persons who are not registered as residents are commuters or temporary migrants (Berge *et al.* 2022). However, as this article shows, registering as resident is not always possible, and EU citizens may therefore live for many years with a *D-nummer* in Norway. My aim is to draw attention to

this group, by showing that it exists, highlighting the reasons for its existence and exploring the consequences for those who find themselves in this situation.

Research methods and design

This article is based on qualitative research conducted between April and November 2019 with Polish workers and staff of NGOs that offer advice to EU citizens in Oslo. It is part of a wider research project that aims to understand the nexus between precarity and access to public welfare provisioning for EU citizens in Norway. The research was conducted at the facilities of five NGOs which provide emergency night shelters, sanitary facilities, free meals and advice services to migrants who have limited rights or difficulties accessing public welfare provisioning in Norway. Three NGOs offer appointments with trained staff or lawyers to discuss EU citizens' individual situations and provide legal advice or practical help with registrations, welfare applications, complaints or court cases. I attended 40 appointments between Polish workers and Polish-speaking NGO staff and lawyers. As a Polish speaker, I could attend these appointments without a translator. Furthermore, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 Polish workers seeking help from these NGOs and 13 NGO workers. I followed the development of the 12 Polish workers' cases over several months by attending follow-up appointments and having informal conversations with them. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews with a Polish worker and an NGO worker online in January 2022, after a preliminary analysis of the data.

The 12 Polish workers who were interviewed and followed over time were selected based on NGO workers' recommendations or after I met them during their appointments. The selected Polish workers had rich and complex experiences with the Norwegian welfare system and their cases illustrated many barriers to welfare provision. This kind of sampling is purposive and conceptually driven and has been called 'critical case sampling' (Miles and Huberman 1994; Yin 2009). Interviews were audio-recorded and took place in cafés, libraries, Polish workers' homes or the NGOs' facilities. The Polish workers were given detailed oral and written information about the research project before their individual appointments or interviews and signed a declaration of consent.² The interview recordings were transcribed and analysed manually. In the transcription process, the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Open and pattern coding were used to analyse the empirical material (Flick 2018).

The 12 Polish workers were male, the majority in their 40s and 50s and 2 were in their early 60s. The men had predominantly secondary or vocational education. Most were single or divorced; those who were married lived in Norway without their partners. The majority had lived in Norway for more than 5 years. Four spoke Norwegian and one spoke English. The most common form of employment was contracts for temporary assignments. While 2 mostly worked through agencies, 3 were self-employed and 2 had only worked informally.

During the fieldwork, I was initially unaware of the relevance of the type of identification number for access to welfare provision. It was discovered during the fieldwork and the type of identification number had not been a selection criterion. Thus, at the time, only 4 of the interviewed Polish workers were registered with a *D-nummer*. The article thus relies on a comparison of the experiences of the Polish workers registered with a *D-nummer* and those registered with a *Fødselsnummer* as well as the experiences of the 13 NGO workers in supporting EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer*. Most NGO interviews were conducted towards the end of the fieldwork, when I was more aware of the relevance of the form of registration.

The sample of Polish workers interviewed is not representative of EU citizens in Norway. Instead, due to the aims of the wider research project and the recruitment strategy among users of NGO-run humanitarian and advice services in Oslo, it represents one of the user groups of these services. These are EU citizens who have been economically active in Norway but who, due to their precarious employment, find it difficult to access

public welfare provision. They often do not have the economic means and social networks to bridge gaps in employment without welfare support or pay for commercial health services when they cannot access public ones and may therefore have various unmet health needs and be at risk of homelessness and destitution when they seek help from NGOs. Thus, the sample represents a very vulnerable section of EU citizens. Nevertheless, as discussed further in the final section, the findings of this study may also be relevant for EU citizens in less vulnerable socioeconomic situations.

Findings: Polish workers' experiences with the identification number system in Norway

The findings are presented in two parts. In Part 1, I explore how being in unstable employment can result in registration with a *D-nummer* – and thus how precarious work can lead to a temporary status for EU citizens in Norway. In Part 2, I examine the consequences of being registered with a *D-nummer* for EU citizens' access to public welfare provisioning – or in other words, whether a person's status as a temporary migrant can result in precarious social rights.

Part 1. From precarious work to temporary status: the challenges of getting registered with a Fødselsnummer

The Norwegian law on population registration only states that persons who move to Norway should be registered as residents if their stay is legal and they 'intend' to stay in the country for at least 6 months (Lov om folkeregistrering §4-1). Nevertheless, the tax administration, which is responsible for allocating identification numbers, requires EU citizens to provide 'documentation showing that (they are) going to live in Norway for at least 6 months' (Norwegian Tax Administration 2023), in order to be registered as a resident. On its website, the tax administration lists a number of ways to document an intention to stay long-term in Norway, including a confirmation of employment for at least 6 months, a house purchase contract or rental agreement, bank statements, an internet subscription or documentation of a move away from the previous country of residence (Norwegian Tax Administration 2023). However, according to the experience of the Polish and NGO workers participating in this research, without proof of at least 6 months of continuous future employment in Norway, it was not possible to obtain a *Fødselsnummer*. Four of the Polish workers had been registered with a *D-nummer*, because their first job in Norway was temporary employment or employment through a work agency. They were working in construction and cleaning, where short-term, assignment-based contracts or contracts without guaranteed hours were very common. None of them was initially aware of or informed about the difference between a *Fødselsnummer* and a *D-nummer* and their consequences for access to welfare provisioning in Norway. Two of those who *had* obtained a *Fødselsnummer* reported they had been given it only because someone had helped them to get the right contract. Marian obtained his *Fødselsnummer* because his brother-in-law, who owned a construction company in Norway, gave him a long-term contract, specifically to enable him to be registered as resident. Emil, a self-employed carpenter, was made aware of the importance of having a *Fødselsnummer* and was helped by a Norwegian friend to secure sufficient assignments to document that he has secured work for more than 6 months in Norway:

He told me like this: 'Go and start up a company! I will give you work; my dad and I will call around'. (...) He had many friends, and his father was a doctor. They had connections and they called a number of people and managed to get us work for more than half a year.

Three of the Polish workers initially registered with a *D-nummer* had later tried but not succeeded in securing long-term employment and therefore remained registered with a *D-nummer*. Jakub, who was also registered

with a *D-nummer*, reported that he had been actively discouraged by public authorities to change his *D-nummer* to a *Fødselsnummer* after securing long-term employment and had, therefore, not aware of the consequences, not insisted and not changed it when he had the opportunity:

I tried several times to obtain a Fødselsnummer but, every time, I was told that I don't really need it, that it is not necessary, because I have everything registered under my D-nummer. (...) I opened my bank account with a D-nummer. I opened my company with a D-nummer. So, they told me, if I change it, I have to change all of this, and it will be a lot of work – and that it is, anyway, one and the same thing.

Two NGO workers also reported that some of their clients, who were not aware of the consequences of registration with a *D-nummer* and had not insisted on being registered with a *Fødselsnummer*, had been registered with a *D-nummer* even though they were employed on a long-term contract. Several of the NGO workers highlighted a lack of knowledge and information about the importance of changing the identification number, as Paul explained:

I think there are people who never got oriented on how to register in Norway and what the proper steps are. (...) People don't understand the difference between having a D-nummer and (...) a Fødselsnummer. (...) We are now facing this challenge that more and more of our guests didn't change, even though they have been living in Norway for, like, 15 years. (...) When you get a D-nummer, there is nobody telling you, 'Man, listen, in the following months, it's good for you to change to a Fødselsnummer. For a Fødselsnummer, you need to do this, this, this, this and this'. (...) People are not informed.

According to the NGO and Polish workers, it is not possible to switch from a *D-nummer* to a *Fødselsnummer* by documenting that you have worked and lived in the country for the past 6 months. This means that EU citizens may miss opportunities to switch from one to the other, with consequences for their rights when they become unemployed. Nina elaborated:

It's a lack of knowledge about the rules. (...) I sometimes say jokingly, 'They should give people information about how they should do this already at the airport'. If you have the [required] contract, immediately take care of this Fødselsnummer. Because if you don't take care of it when you have the chance, it's too late and there is nothing you can do about it. (...) You cannot wait until you lose your job. (...) Then, it's too late. Many, many people fell into this trap.

The four participants who were registered with a *D-nummer* at the time of the fieldwork had lived in Norway for between 2 and 17 years. They had worked legally and full-time for most of that period. They were not commuting between Norway and Poland, did not have dependents in Poland and had not visited the country in years. None of them had accommodation in Poland or plans to return in the future. Nevertheless, because of the requirement for documentation guaranteeing 6 months' continuous future employment, none of them was able to register as a resident.

Overall, these experiences point to a discrepancy between the intended purpose of the *D-nummer* as an identification number for temporary migrants and the reality where some EU citizens who have lived with one for many years, even decades, are unable to register as residents in Norway. The participants' experiences suggest that the tax administration is using a restrictive approach to allocating the *Fødselsnummer*, making it difficult, sometimes impossible, for EU citizens in precarious employment to be registered as residents. The registration practice thus turned EU citizens in temporary employment into temporary migrants on paper, even

though, in practice, they intended to live and had lived in Norway for many years. The Polish workers registered with a *D-nummer* lacked any real connections to Poland. However, through a bureaucratic process, they were turned into persons who were assumed to be residents of Poland.

Part 2. The consequences of temporary status: limited, unstable and ambiguous access to public welfare provisioning

The consequences of being registered with a *D-nummer* for EU citizens' access to public welfare provisioning can be divided into five different types of barrier: (a) more limited formal rights compared to EU citizens registered with a *Fødselsnummer*, (b) additional status controls for EU citizens with a *D-nummer*, (c) barriers to infrastructures for claiming welfare benefits, (d) a more restrictive application of rules and (e) a lack of clarity regarding the role of the identification numbers.

(a) Limited formal rights

According to the Norwegian National Insurance Act, EU citizens who have a *right of residence* and are members of the National Insurance Scheme have the right to public healthcare in line with the country's own citizens. Thus, since persons employed in Norway are automatically members of the National Insurance Scheme, employed EU citizens should have equal access to public healthcare, whether registered as residents or not. Nevertheless, as experienced by the participants, EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer* in Norway do not have the right to sign on with a general practitioner (GP) in Norway – which would give a person the right to be prioritised over persons not registered with the GP (Regulations on GP arrangements in the municipalities). Thus, a person not registered with a GP can only get an appointment if no registered person needs one. In practice, none of the Polish workers with a *D-nummer* had been able to see a GP without being registered with them.

NGO worker Tanja explained that not being able to see a GP has severe and wide-ranging consequences for access to healthcare for EU citizens, since GPs are the main entry point to the public healthcare system and are responsible for the provision of basic healthcare, referrals to specialised health services, ensuring patient follow-up and continuity of treatment and writing sick notes and prescriptions. The Polish workers usually went to the emergency room (ER) when they had health issues. However, they were often turned away if their needs were not an emergency. They reported that they were given pain killers and told to see a GP to get further treatment. Tanja confirmed that ER staff often send EU citizens away if their health needs are not considered an emergency. Furthermore, EU citizens who go to the ER are given short-term sick notes and told that they have to make an appointment with a GP to get a long-term sick note. Thus, in practice, EU citizens with a *D-nummer* have to use commercial clinics to obtain healthcare for non-emergency health needs and long-term sick notes. According to Tanja, commercial clinics charge patients between 600 and 1,000 Norwegian kroner for an appointment to get a sick note. If patients do not speak Norwegian, they have to hire a translator, which often costs another 1,000 kroner. She explained that many of her clients with a *D-nummer* were not able to afford appointments at private clinics and had therefore not seen a doctor in a long time, despite various health needs – including mental health issues – and that some of them were self-medicating with alcohol, further worsening their overall health.

Even though, according to the Norwegian National Insurance Act, all EU citizens who work in Norway have a right to healthcare in line with the country's own citizens, the participants' experiences suggest that EU citizens without a *Fødselsnummer* are excluded from a significant part of the public healthcare system. The right to register with a GP is a formal right and not having it can have a significant impact on the ability of a person

to access public healthcare in Norway. Therefore, I suggest that excluding EU citizens with a *D-nummer* from this right is a case of formal welfare bordering (Guentner *et al.* 2016). However, it can be argued that, because EU citizens in employment have the formal right to healthcare in line with Norwegian citizens, not having the right to register with a GP is a question of access to rights in practice or informal bordering (Guentner *et al.* 2016). Those with a *D-nummer* are not formally banned from seeing a GP. However, without the right to register with one, it is very difficult to get an appointment and thus access general healthcare. Thus, they are excluded from using the mainstream avenue for accessing general healthcare and must either use commercial services or navigate complex alternatives, which are not universal, limited in their capacity and difficult to find. Therefore, their access to healthcare is precarious. Considering that a contract of 6 months' future employment is required to be registered with a *Fødselsnummer*, restricting the right to register with a GP for EU citizens with a *D-nummer* means that, in practice, EU citizens in precarious employment have limited rights and access to public healthcare.

(b) *Additional status controls*

Besides not being able to register with a GP, Polish workers registered with a *D-nummer* were sometimes denied free treatment by ERs. The Norwegian National Insurance Act states that membership in the National Insurance Scheme for persons who are not residents of Norway ends 1 month after their employment in Norway ends (National Insurance Act § 2-14). EU citizens who are not employed must *habitually reside* in Norway in order to remain members of the National Insurance Scheme after they become unemployed (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration 2022). *Habitual residence* is not the same as formal residence status but is about a person's 'connection to Norway' (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration 2023: 10). If an EU citizen is unemployed, an assessment must be made to ascertain whether or not the person is covered as a *habitual resident*. The participants' experiences suggest that EU citizens with a *D-nummer* are subject to more controls of their *habitual residence* status than those with a *Fødselsnummer*. On the one hand, none of the Polish workers with a *Fødselsnummer* had experienced situations where their right to receive public healthcare was questioned. NGO workers had also not heard of cases where EU citizens with a *Fødselsnummer* had been asked about their employment status, denied healthcare or asked to pay privately for treatment. On the other hand, Polish workers with a *D-nummer* were asked about their employment status before receiving healthcare. Two were told that they would have to pay privately for treatment when they sought healthcare at the ER while unemployed. Jakub's story was particularly stark. He had been living and working in Norway for 15 years when he developed a severe health condition. He went to the ER several times and received medication. However, his health continued to worsen quickly and he had to stop working. After several months, it was discovered that he had been misdiagnosed and his condition had reached a stage where he needed an operation. However, hospitals refused to perform the operation because he was unemployed and could not pay for it himself: 'The staff at two different hospitals told me, since I don't have money to pay for the treatment, (...) since I don't have a *Fødselsnummer* (...) they don't want [to treat] me, I should instead go to Poland'.

Tanja had asked the health directorate how hospitals determine the eligibility of a person with a *D-nummer*. She was told that when someone comes to the hospital and staff are not sure if the person is eligible, they can call an internal line to the health directorate and ask for an assessment of the status of the person in question.

These findings suggest that EU citizens with a *D-nummer* are subject to additional controls of *habitual residency* status by hospital staff, while EU citizens with a *Fødselsnummer* are assumed to be *habitual residents* due to their status as registered residents and are therefore not subjected to such controls when they attempt to make use of public healthcare. Those with a *D-nummer* are thus at risk of losing access to public

health care one month after becoming unemployed, while those with a *Fødselsnummer* are not. Considering the link between precarious employment and being registered with a *D-nummer*, the findings suggest that those who have been in precarious employment are at greater risk of losing access to free healthcare than those who have been able to secure long-term stable employment. I suggest that additional status controls are thus another form of welfare bordering experienced by Polish workers registered with a *D-nummer* (Guentner *et al.* 2016).

(c) Barriers to claiming rights

Another barrier to welfare provisioning experienced by those without a *Fødselsnummer* was that EU citizens not registered as residents cannot get *BankID*, Norway's main tool for a Level 4 – the highest security level – digital identity verification. Since the Norwegian e-government regulations came into force in 2014, most communication between public administration and residents happens online. For example, editing a tax report, applying for welfare benefits and accessing prescriptions and sick leave notes from a doctor are usually done through personal online accounts on public administration websites. *BankID* is the standard login for these online accounts. It is administered by Norwegian banks, is free of charge and is the most widely used digital ID in the country. However, according to the experience of both the Polish and the NGO workers, in order to obtain *BankID*, banks require applicants to be registered as residents with a *Fødselsnummer*. When Polish workers asked their bank for a *BankID*, they were told that because they had a *D-nummer*, they were not eligible.

According to the participants, applying for welfare benefits without *BankID* is complicated and prone to delays and failures. It is still possible to print out a welfare application on paper and send it via traditional mail but, according to the experience of NGO workers, paper applications have longer processing times, sometimes get lost and, most importantly, when benefit administrators require additional documentation to process an application or follow up on a client, they contact them through the online account, regardless. According to NGO worker Tanja, EU citizens without access to their public administration digital accounts never receive these requests for additional documentation and thus never reply to benefit administrators which, in turn, leads to benefits being cancelled or applications put on hold.

There is an alternative commercial digital ID with Level 4 security that can be used to log in to personal accounts on public administration websites. It is called *Buypass* and, at the time of the fieldwork, it cost a one-off fee of 900 kroner. However, according to NGO worker Tanja, many EU citizens do not know about this or cannot afford it when they are in a situation of need and want to apply for welfare support. The lack of access to *BankID* for persons with a *D-nummer* has led Tanja's NGO to buy *Buypass* for users who were in financial difficulties, to enable them to apply for public welfare benefits:

People would come to me and they were not able to log in to the website of the welfare administration – to any of these [public administration] pages. People were unable to apply for unemployment benefit or to send their sick notes. [...900 kroner] is a lot of money for people; we have paid it for quite a few people to help them. We ordered them Buypass.

Thus, even though EU citizens may have the right to welfare benefits such as sick pay or unemployment benefits, they may in practice not be able to claim their rights because they have a *D-nummer*. Again, here, EU citizens with a *D-nummer* are not formally denied the right to welfare benefits but the mainstream path to accessing those rights is blocked and they are forced to use costly commercial solutions or navigate complex, failure-prone alternative paths to claim their rights, which can in turn result in EU citizens not being able to claim their rights at all. Because long-term stable employment is so crucial for obtaining a *Fødselsnummer*,

ultimately this means that persons in precarious employment face barriers to claiming welfare benefits which persons in stable long-term employment do not face. I thus suggest that excluding EU citizens with a *D-nummer* from the use of *BankID* – and thus from digital infrastructures for applying for welfare support – is another form of informal welfare bordering of EU citizens in precarious employment (Guentner *et al.* 2016).

(d) Restrictive application of rules

Furthermore, the NGO workers had the impression that those registered with a *D-nummer* had more limited chances of getting social assistance than those with a *Fødselsnummer*. To be eligible, EU citizens must have the *right of residence* and *habitual residence* in Norway. As mentioned before, *habitual residence* is not the same as formal residence status and being registered as resident is neither sufficient nor an absolute requirement for being considered habitually resident in Norway (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration 2023). Nevertheless, several NGO workers had the impression that being registered with a *D-nummer* disqualified EU citizens from social assistance. Tanja explained: ‘I haven’t had a person yet who got social assistance when they had a *D-nummer*, (...) not a single person’. Similarly, Nina argued:

Unemployment benefit and sick pay are connected to your last employment, the work you have done [in Norway]. But when it comes to other support, like social assistance, which is the last safety net, some [EU citizens] don’t get it because they aren’t registered as (...) residents of this country.

NGO worker Paul spoke of a user for whom the welfare administration had granted temporary housing but was insisting that he needed a *Fødselsnummer* for social assistance:

We have a Polish homeless man who is getting a place to stay from the welfare administration. (...) He got a proper flat to live in and his welfare administrator is telling us that it’s difficult to help him on a long-term basis if he is not changing the D-nummer to a Fødselsnummer. But why? You already gave him a place to stay. You already took him into the system, which means he has been paying taxes, which means that he is entitled to get the help that he is getting right now. (...) What is the difference between (...) a D-nummer and a Fødselsnummer? I mean, it doesn’t make any sense.

The man was not able to change his *D-nummer* to a *Fødselsnummer* because he was unemployed and the tax administration required documentation of 6 months of future employment to be granted a *Fødselsnummer*.

Thus, even though registration as a resident is not an absolute requirement for eligibility for social assistance, the experiences of NGO workers suggests that, in practice, being registered with a *D-nummer* makes such support unlikely. Considering the requirement of 6 months’ future employment to be registered as a resident means that EU citizens in precarious employment have fewer chances of getting social assistance. I suggest that this restrictive application of rules for EU citizens with a *D-nummer* is another form of informal welfare bordering of EU citizens in precarious employment (Guentner *et al.* 2016).

(e) Lack of clarity

A final issue, that was brought up by many NGO workers was the lack of clarity regarding the rights of EU citizens with a *D-nummer*, which were perceived as intransparent and inconsistently applied. Three NGO workers had contacted different public administration offices and asked which role the type of identification

number played in their assessments of EU citizens' status and rights but had received only very vague replies and been told to contact someone else. Paul summarised his experience:

I'm wondering a lot: Is it really in terms of having rights in the system? Is there really such a big difference between a D-nummer and Fødselsnummer, as long as you've been paying taxes for so many years in Norway? And we cannot find an answer. We have been googling it; we have been sending emails to lots of institutions and we are just forwarded, 'No, you have to speak to them'. 'No, sorry, it's not us. Just speak to the other one'. 'Yeah, but I spoke to them, and they sent me to you'. 'Yeah, but sorry, it's not us; it's them'. You cannot get this information anywhere.

NGO workers also reported a perceived lack of knowledge and much confusion among frontline staff, including doctors, hospital social workers and benefit administrators, who seemed to not know the rights of EU citizens with a *D-nummer*. Tanja reported that many of her clients with a *D-nummer* had been asked by hospital social workers to register with a GP, even though this was not possible or by welfare administrators to get themselves a *Fødselsnummer* before applying for social assistance when they were unemployed and unable to register because of the lack of an employment contract. Jana, another NGO worker, observed:

It's very strange. It seems like they don't want to relate to all of this. So, they just make systems that fit the ones who have no problems and who are, like, really in these clear categories. And none of our guests are like that. And then there are always problems.

Several NGO workers suspected that the *D-nummer* was deliberately used to deny welfare support. For example, Paul suggested:

The bureaucrats are hanging themselves up on you having a D-nummer, not a Fødselsnummer. (...) My personal opinion is that it's just bureaucracy. That they have this as the last argument to deny people [support] and they are, of course, using it until the end.

Furthermore, both the Polish workers and the NGO workers had the impression that the information provided by the welfare administration and the processing of welfare applications from EU citizens with a *D-nummer* was inconsistent. Sometimes it was possible to get a benefit while registered with a *D-nummer*; at other times, it was impossible. Jakub, for example, was told that he could not get housing support due to his registration status but, when he went with an NGO worker, it was suddenly possible:

When I went to the welfare administration's office with the NGO worker, he was doing all the talking. He knew my case and he had all the papers. He asked the same questions that I had asked the welfare administration many times before. But they had ignored me. But they did not ignore him.

I suggest that a lack of clarity regarding the role of the *D-nummer* for access to welfare support represents another barrier to public welfare provisioning for EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer* and can be viewed as another form of informal welfare bordering associated with it (Guentner *et al.* 2016).

From precarious work to precarious social citizenship: a concluding discussion

The cases discussed in this article show important discrepancies between the intended purpose of the *D-nummer* as an identification number for temporary migrants and the experiences of EU citizens who have lived for many years, even decades, with this form of registration in Norway. EU citizens without long-term employment may not be able to register a move to Norway and get a *Fødselsnummer*, even if they intend to stay long-term or have lived and worked in the country for extended periods of time. Thus, EU citizens in precarious employment can be forced into a prolonged temporary status in Norway. This study shows that EU citizens with a *D-nummer* have limited formal rights on paper compared to those registered with a *Fødselsnummer* and that they face various barriers to accessing their rights in practice. Their rights are less stable, secure and predictable than those of EU citizens with a *Fødselsnummer*. Considering that precarious employment can lead to a temporary status and that a temporary status can lead to more-precarious rights, I suggest that EU citizens in precarious employment may be forced into a precarious legal status with limited access to social protection.

Furthermore, I suggest that the *D-nummer* functions as a welfare-bordering technology that creates internal borders around welfare services, limiting access to welfare support for EU citizens in precarious employment in Norway. Bordering connected to the identification-number system is a two-step process. In the first step, EU citizens are, based on their type of employment and sometimes regardless of their real intentions and actual length of stay in the country, assigned a status as temporary migrants. In the second step, their rights and possibilities to access welfare provisioning are limited based on their temporary status. My research shows that the internal bordering of those with a temporary status comes in many forms: limited formal rights, additional status controls, limited access to infrastructures for claiming welfare benefits, a more-restrictive interpretation of the rules and a lack of clarity on them. Thus, internal bordering occurs through a combination of restricted formal rights and through what has been called informal bordering (Guentner *et al.* 2016). While, on paper, EU citizens with a *Fødselsnummer* and those with a *D-nummer* may have the same right, in practice, the latter find the main path to accessing their right blocked and with no clearly defined and universally accessible alternatives available. I suggest that the identification number system creates additional configurations of entitlement leading to ‘ever more differentiated assemblages of rights’ (Karlsen 2015: 41), which are complex and ambiguously defined and thus difficult to implement transparently, fairly and equally (Allen and Axelsson 2019; Burrell and Schweyher 2021; Tervonen, Pellander and Yuval-Davis 2018). I argue that the internal borders around welfare provisioning created by the identification number system thus lead to what Synnes describes as ‘grey zones in which more and more immigrants live with diffuse rights’ (2021: 173) in Norway.

The article also reveals tensions between the Norwegian identification number system and the principles of EU citizenship. On the one hand, the system distinguishes between temporary migrants and residents and, according to the experiences of Polish and NGO workers, gives preferential treatment to residents. On the other hand, under the EU citizenship framework, social rights are connected to the *right of residence* and, in some cases, *habitual residence*. Neither are equal to formal residency. The combination of requiring 6 months’ continuous future employment to be registered as a resident and using formal residence as a criterion for access to social rights is particularly problematic, as it implies that those in long-term employment receive more comprehensive access to public welfare provisioning while the rights of those in precarious employment are limited.

While this article has focused on the experiences of EU citizens who have lived in Norway registered with a *D-nummer* for many years, the barriers to welfare provisioning described in this article may in part also apply to EU citizens registered with a *D-nummer* on a short-term stay. These latter may not be *habitual residents* in Norway and therefore not have a right to social assistance but they have rights to public health care and other welfare benefits if they have a *right of residence* and may experience difficulties claiming these rights due to having a *D-nummer*.

As discussed in the methods section, this article is based on the experiences of a very vulnerable section of EU citizens. As seen in the findings, EU citizens with social networks find it less difficult to secure the required type of employment and other documentation that will enable them to be registered with a *Fødselsnummer* and therefore do not face the barriers to welfare provisioning associated with a *D-nummer*. Furthermore, EU citizens with a *D-nummer* who have strong financial resources and social networks are better able to overcome the barriers to welfare provisioning connected to a *D-nummer* and the consequences for their welfare are thus less severe than for persons in vulnerable socioeconomic situations. This, I suggest, reveals how precarious and fragile EU citizenship in Norway has become. It offers very little protection against destitution for the most vulnerable and is thus unable to deliver basic principles of social justice (Schweyher 2023).

EU citizenship is a deeply stratified status, with different sets of rights for the long-term and permanently employed, the precariously employed and those outside the paid labour market (Anderson *et al.* 2014; Dwyer *et al.* 2019; O'Brien 2016; 2017; Schweyher 2023). I suggest that the Norwegian identification number system further deepens this stratification of rights for EU citizens in Norway. Limiting the rights and access to welfare provisioning for persons who are unable to secure stable long-term employment increases the insecurity of these precarious workers and widens the gap between them and those in secure forms of employment. Thus, the identification number system amplifies the conditionality of rights on particular types of work inherent in EU citizenship (Anderson *et al.* 2014; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018; O'Brien 2016; 2017; Schweyher 2023).

Finally, this article focuses on the experiences of EU citizens who have lived with a *D-nummer* in Norway for many years, a group that has been largely invisible in Norwegian research and policy discourse (Seilskjær 2023). My aim is to draw attention to this group, by showing that it exists, highlighting the reasons for its existence and exploring the consequences for those who find themselves in this situation. However, further research is needed to quantify the issue and understand its wider context – for example, the role and perspectives of employers, welfare administrators and policymakers.

Notes

1. Transnational commuter migration refers to EU citizens who commute to Norway on a daily basis – for example from Sweden – and EU citizens who work in Norway in shifts of several weeks but return regularly to their countries of origin between these shifts.
2. The article is based on data collected in a research project approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research with the reference number 652219.

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East–West Mobility Space – The Role of Different Types of Capitals in Moving or Staying Put

Maarja Saar* 

This article examines the mobility patterns in East–West movement within Europe and challenges the prevailing perception that migration is an act of agency while staying put is seen as having a lack of agency. It argues that staying put can also involve extensive strategies and should be recognised as an active choice. The article utilises Bourdieu’s three types of capital (economic, social and cultural) to understand the strategies employed in both staying put and successful migration. It suggests that individuals can compensate for the absence of one type of capital by leveraging another type; however, it also suggests that, in order to understand mobility space between CEE and Nordic countries, the presence of formalised welfare provision in Nordic countries is an important aspect. The focus of the article is on single mothers, who are considered to be one of the most vulnerable groups in Central and Eastern European societies. Based on 25 interviews with Estonian single mothers, the article suggests that migration often occurs due to a lack of alternative options.

Keywords: immobility, staying put, CEE, types of capital

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Introduction

Several articles in recent years have pointed out that migration literature focuses on movers (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Moving as a decision is problematised and considered to be a highly complex phenomenon whereas staying put is naturalised. This portrayal is fair because movers make up just 3 per cent of the global population (UN 2015). Nevertheless, there has been an increased focus on problematising staying by noting, among other things, the temporary aspect of such decisions (Coulter, van Ham and Feijten 2011). Most of the research on staying, however, focuses on rural communities and not on those who have decided not to move internationally (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Ye 2018). Rural communities are the stereotypical scene for massive outmigration – something which is difficult to imagine at country level. This article, however, focuses on a country – Estonia – which has experienced a significant emigration of the more precarious groups in society. It specifically examines the strategies used by Estonian single mothers who either choose to migrate to Nordic countries or to remain in Estonia. The article aims to explore the interconnectedness between moving and staying put as a migration phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe, using Bourdieu's notion of capitals (Bourdieu 1977) (economic, social and cultural) as an analytical framework. The Estonian countryside, together with the poorer urban populations, resembles the familiar scene of rural communities in many Western countries (Alanen 2017). This is a population that feels abandoned by politicians. Rural communities in Estonia have experienced a slow but persistent decay since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Nugin 2014). Unlike the rural-to-urban migration of Western European countries, many of Estonia's rural population decide not to move to Estonian cities but to go, instead, to neighbouring Finland. The migration corridor between Estonia and Finland has a high volume of traffic (Jakobson, Järvinen-Alenius, Pitkänen, Ruutsoo, Keski-Hirvelä and Kalev 2012). The typical family model in many Estonian rural communities is that of a husband working in Finland while his wife and children remain in Estonia (Telve 2018). This model of livelihood allows for one member of the family partnership to 'stay put' while the other migrates. However, what happens for families who do not have another partner to act as the migratory breadwinner?

This article focuses on Estonian single mothers, both those who have decided to move to one of the Nordic countries (Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden or Finland) and those who have decided to stay put. Single mothers, due to major issues with obtaining alimony in Estonian society, are one of the most precarious groups in the state. They thus have a considerable incentive to move to neighbouring richer Nordic countries; however, this study has shown that, instead, many choose to remain in Estonia. The reasons for staying occasionally resemble those claimed by the working class in decaying urban communities – including, *inter alia*, the need for a social safety net as a way of compensating for the insecurity of work and a private life (Preece 2018). The article draws on 25 interviews with migrant and non-migrant Estonian single mothers. The interviews were analysed using the grounded theory method, including an open coding process to freely uncover any emerging topics.

Immobility, mobility and class

Migration has traditionally attracted more attention by scholarly researchers than either non-migration or remaining; however, recently this trend is seeing a reversal. Although there are some quantitative studies that demonstrate the various factors which influence the probability of staying put, most of them still focus on immigrants, comparing their life satisfaction with that of stayers. For instance, Mulder and Malmberg (2014), in emphasising both the positive and the negative aspects of staying, contend that local ties such as work, the presence of family, social connections and lower educational attainment can be associated with less mobility. One of the main criticisms of mobility studies' research is the existence of a predominant mobility discourse

which recognises mobility and devalues staying (Hjälml 2014). This type of discourse is not only to be found at a scholarly level; Ní Laoire (2000) found that migrants often had condescending attitudes towards stayers. Staying therefore becomes a non-event, whereas moving is considered to be a dramatic life-changing decision. As Hjälml (2014) notes, this sort of bias has been constitutive in developing a paradigm where staying is an act of non-agency, while moving is an act of agency.

The view of staying as non-agentic has recently been challenged (Mata-Codesal 2015; Schewel 2019; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018; Stockdale, Theunissen and Haartsen 2018). Gray (2013) has a counter-argument, which suggests that staying also requires agency and might, in fact, be a conscious decision that an individual makes multiple times throughout his or her life. Schewel (2015) argues that, whereas the mobility turn has contributed greatly towards understanding movement, its presentation of immobility has been one-sided. She points out that each individual has a distinct relationship with either mobility or immobility: while, for some, it is an issue of free choice, others feel compelled to follow one option rather than another.

Indeed, there is pressure to see the versatility among stayers. Traditionally such variances have been described as comprising three classifications of immobility: involuntary, desired and acquiescent. While the former two classifications are self-explanatory, Schewel (2015) clarifies ‘acquiescent’ as describing people who have neither any aspiration or desire to migrate nor to stay. Furthermore, Ye (2018) notes that people who decide to stay put in rural communities in China, for example, often have complex life strategies such as holding down multiple jobs or having one family member migrate in order to enable others to stay. Overall, however, research has paid little attention to the strategies which stayers use in order to be able to remain – an omission which this article intends to address.

Another aspect on staying and moving needs to be raised. Donkersloot (2011) argues that there is little analytical value in using a binary categorisation of movers versus stayers when analysing mobility and suggests, instead, terms like ‘swings’ or ‘spells’ to draw attention to the non-permanence of both moving and staying. This aspect of the temporariness of moving is strongly confirmed by this article, which has at least two categories of people who either move with the intention of returning or are ambivalent about their decision to move or stay.

An important aspect in terms of immobility studies which has so far received little attention is its interlinkage with a variety of social categories. Some scholars have raised the issue with gender. Ye (2018), for instance, describes how prevailing gender norms in China make it more difficult for women to migrate. Class as a category seems to remain in the background in immobility studies, not the least through reference to agency vs structure. The models that describe staying mention the necessity of having both the aspiration and the ability to migrate (see Schewel 2019), thus turning our attention to the means needed for moving. Interestingly, studies in both immobility and migration seem confined to the notion that migration needs more resources than staying. However, this article raises some serious costs which some individuals who stay may incur. Therefore, in terms of decision-making I suggest that we should refer to the same categories no matter whether the topic is immobility, mobility or, indeed, both and acknowledge there may be individuals who aspire to stay put but are incapable of doing so – thus becoming involuntary movers.

This raises the issue of class in mobility and immobility. Van Hear (2014) criticises previous studies for their degree of class blindness in the context of researching migration: he notes that the impact of class on migration in the context just of migration outcomes is well documented but that the same impact on the whole process has not been well researched. He makes a valid point in terms of the relevance of the various kinds of capitals needed for moving, by insisting that economic capital might not always have been the most important issue, as the lack of it could be buffered by cultural or social capital. Or, *vice versa*, stayers may also require various forms of capital (Van Hear 2014). This point enables us to look at the strategies of the stayers from a more informed perspective. The lens of capital for staying has been already applied by Forsberg (2019) who

employs the term ‘spatial capital’ for describing the relevance of place-specific skills, education etc. in the decision-making of young rural Swedes.

Van Hear (2014) also refers to the precariat – a group defined by Standing (2011). The precariat is a merger of the words **precarious** with **proletariat** and refers to anyone who suffers from a permanent state of precarity, which implies an existence with neither predictability nor security. The precariat is thus unable to live and pursue a livelihood in a coherent and sustainable way. Van Hear (2014) notes that both would-be and actual migrants could be part of the global precariat. Migration has often been a way out of a precarious situation; however, Preece (2018) contests this idea by noting that, for many English working-class precarious workers, not migrating can be a safer option. She argues that, for many of her interviewees, social contacts provided a way to survive the instability of their livelihoods and working contracts; these social contacts formed an asset which would have been lost upon moving. Overall it is clear that we need more research on the interlinkages between class and mobility and immobility processes, just as Van Hear (2014) suggests. This article will offer insights not only into using migration as a strategy but also into the various strategies which people employ for staying put. It also illustrates the class aspect in those choices.

This article draws on Bourdieu (1977), who uses the terms economic, cultural and social to define the concept of capital: economic capital consists of various economic resources, cultural capital comprises knowledge, tastes, skills, education and other competences, while social capital includes vital social links and the size of the social networks which can be mobilised (Bourdieu 2011[1986]). However, Bourdieu also includes symbolic capital, which is not used in this article – and also notes that capitals can be converted into one another. Van Hear (2014) argues that the idea of converting one capital into another is of particular use in migration studies because it helps to understand how someone lacking economic capital can still be able to migrate – through, for instance, using their social networks. However, as I will show in this article, the idea of conversion can also be useful for understanding people’s immobility. Preece (2018), although not relying on the notion, alludes to the concept of capital when she concludes that, for the English working class, the instability of precarious jobs is compensated for by social networks. This article also notes how cultural capital, in terms of knowledge, can be used as a strategy for survival instead of economic capital. In relation to social capital, there is also a flourishing field which focuses on the relevance of social networks for migration (for the Estonian case, see Puura, Silm and Ahas 2018). So not only can social capital intermediate staying put but it can also help people to migrate.

Exit, voice or loyalty for Baltic workers

The title of this section has been borrowed from an article by Markku Sippola (2013), which explores the impact of neoliberal regimes and labour reforms over the course of the 1990s and 2000s on the workers in three Baltic nations. Hirschman (1970) distinguishes the three choices available to workers in precarious full-time jobs: (i) leave the enterprise, (ii) protest against unfair working conditions and (iii) remain loyal to the enterprise. Sippola (2013) applies this distinction to workers in the neoliberal Baltic states by analysing their mobility and immobility. According to Fröhlig, Saar and Runfors (2018), probably around 10 per cent of Estonians have migrated abroad since 2000. Sippola (2013) contends that the neoliberal labour reforms were the outcome of the rapid privatisation of state-owned enterprises during the 1990s and the strong austerity policy imposed during the financial crisis in 2008. Sippola (2013) argues that the labour reforms have resulted in the end of mandatory labour-union membership and in labour unions losing all relevance in the three countries as well as resulting in low taxation and low social benefits. Furthermore, Estonian labour law is very flexible from the point of view of the employer, granting him or her rights for the almost immediate dismissal of workers without warning and a minimal contribution after dismissal.

In terms of the permanency of migration, Veidemann (2010) found that, in 2010, about 38 per cent of Estonia's 1.4 million population considered migration, with 13 per cent thinking about a permanent move. Saar, Frohlig and Runfors (2017) record that about 25 per cent of Estonian migrants in Sweden can be considered to be permanent migrants. The results can be interpreted in multiple ways, one of which is that there is a large element of the population that is either reluctant to reveal their mobility decisions or has engaged in circular migration. The same applies to potential migrants. There is an active mobility space developing between Estonia and the Nordic countries, which includes all types of migration, *inter alia* commuting, circular migration and permanent migration (see also Saar, Frohlig and Runfors 2017). In terms of the reasons for migration, Sommers and Woolfson (2014) suggest the adoption of a new term for Baltic countries in particular – *austeriat* – which refers to the effect of strict **austerity** policies, combined with the resulting outmigration, on the *prolateriat*. Genelyte (2018), however, suggests that the roots of migration are somewhat more complicated and that, whereas the different policies during the economic crisis might have helped to lessen the high levels of migration, the effect of low salaries on migration should not be overlooked. Kõre (2011), however, also notes that apart, from the low level of wages, 40 per cent of working-age people in Estonia were afraid of dismissals and 49 per cent were dissatisfied with the promotional prospects at their work. Hence, the overall precarity seems to have taken a toll on Estonians and pushed them towards migration.

Despite this, Estonia is the only Central-Eastern European country where the educational level of outmigrants is lower than that of the population as a whole (Anniste, Tammaru, Pungas and Paas 2012). Furthermore, net migration has been positive for the last few years, with more people returning than leaving, suggesting that we look at loyalty. Sippola (2013) notes that, while the conditions for exit and protest are quite straightforward, the strategies for loyalty need further investigation and suggests that the Baltic states are not rewarding their citizens for loyalty by treating them as entrepreneurs. Somewhat contrary evidence is offered by Sojka and Saar (2020), who in a comparison of Poland and Estonia, conclude that Estonians' positive attitude towards outmigrants as well as the willingness to still consider them as Estonians even after they have migrated, might influence their potential return. Furthermore, the discursive influence which neoliberalism has had on people's way of thinking should not be underestimated. Fröhlig, Saar and Runfors (2019) demonstrate that Estonians in Sweden were reluctant to apply for social benefits because they considered it shameful to rely on the state's help.

Finally, a description of the particular group which this article examines – single mothers – is necessary. About 21–22 per cent of households in Estonia are managed by single mothers (Eurostat 2019). This is one of the highest single-mother household rates in Europe. Unlike other countries with high single-parent household rates, such as the Nordic countries, Estonia does not have a state organised collection of alimony. Hence, mothers need to apply for alimony directly from the child's father and the payment of funds is wholly dependent on the financial situation of her former spouse. However, because former spouses commonly use the informal economy to avoid paying alimony, many single mothers receive little or no alimony to support their children. There is also scarce social support, with the benefit for single parents being only €19 per month. In order to receive this benefit, parents need to go through extensive testing which includes proving that their former partner is unable to pay them any support. Consequently, very few of the group of Estonian single mothers whom I studied were receiving state-financed support. There is also a needs-based benefit, which is not particularly high in value and involves rigorous testing and the presentation of all household bills to the social authorities on a monthly basis. The single mothers I talked to all referred to the denigrating attitude of the authorities when applying for needs-based benefits.

Methodology

This article is based on 25 in-depth interviews with Estonian single mothers. The sample was diverse in terms of the respondents' socio-economic positions, as some struggled financially while others were able to maintain a comfortable lifestyle (a more precise table on the sample is in the Appendix). The sample contained both single mothers who had never migrated, those who had migrated to Nordic countries and returned and those who were currently residing in Nordic countries.

The interviewees were found through various methods – via the snowball strategy, through Facebook groups and through personal networks as well as blogs. The study was carried out between 2018 and 2019. The majority of the interviews were face-to-face, with some conducted using Skype. I met the interviewees either at their homes or in public spaces such as cafés. All the names of my participants are anonymised and consent forms were completed by them at the interview. I followed a quite open interview schedule and, using the grounded theory method, adjusted my questions as the study went along. The grounded theory method is an inductive way of researching which allows the researcher – who might have an initial hypothesis or expectation of the potential outcomes – to leave ample space for the interviewees, guiding them in the process (Charmaz 2011). In my case this resulted in developing an initial interest in how the interviewees managed the relationship with their former partner.

The grounded theory method was also the basis of the analysis of the interviews. The study recognised, from the outset, the characteristics of migration between Estonia and the Nordic countries. Research has revealed that Estonians migrating to Finland are more likely to be less educated than the general population of Estonia (Anniste *et al.* 2012), which suggests that the economic push to Finland is strong. However, I was surprised at how many of my interviewees had contact with Nordic countries either through their ex-partners who were living there or through having resided there themselves. The categories of migrants vs non-migrants were blurred. Surviving migration seemed to be dependent on multifaceted strategies involving both transnational movement as well as several localised strategies, which was apparent from the codes such as relying on family, migrating to earn money, help from transnational contacts etc. This encouraged the idea of 'the right to be immobile', as expressed by Forsberg (2019), as it appeared that some migrants used extensive strategies which would allow them to stay in Estonia even if this included having to temporarily migrate to Nordic countries. This article explores this concept in more depth.

Movers, temporary movers, stayers or ambivalents?

As mentioned earlier, the boundaries between moving and staying were blurred for Estonian single mothers; however, even moving could be used as a strategy which would allow a mother to stay put at a later date. In what follows, I have divided the interviewees into four categories, in terms of mobility patterns: movers, temporary movers, stayers and people who display ambivalence. I also explore the relevance of the various types of capital for these groups and will focus on the strategies that the stayers used.

Movers

Whereas not all the interviewees left Estonia due to economic difficulties, those who did were very vocal in their opinions of the Estonian state and their reasons for migrating. For instance, Anu says:

Like for many Estonians, my debts were growing, I could not handle things anymore. I was facing the possibility that I could lose everything. I needed to figure out how I could pay these debts. And then I figured

out that Finland is the best place because I could speak the language and they actually give money for working. In Estonia you do not get any money for working.

Anu was a 'victim' of the austerity policy imposed after the 2008 economic crisis. The likelihood of losing her home meant that migration seemed to be the only reasonable way out. Anu also strongly criticised the working conditions which she had in Estonia, revealing that many enterprises prefer to employ their workers on part-time contracts although the work might still be full-time. This is a successful business strategy in the countryside where the local populace struggles to find work. Anu also criticised the state for not providing sufficient social support for people who do struggle financially:

In Estonia I feel that the state helps only when you have really hit the bottom. I think it is wrong. Because then you have more people who are in a really bad situation. I think it is bad because then people will never recover from it.

Anu describes the state's help as insufficient by stating that, by the time the state is willing to help, many people have already 'sunk' beyond help. Anu did not have any other forms of capital which could help to buffer her lack of economic capital and allow her to stay in Estonia. However, she did benefit from the cultural capital of her skills in the Finnish language when moving to Finland.

As with Anu, Grete also escaped Estonia due to poverty.

In Estonia, something really positive is that one can stay at home with a child for three years.¹ But when I was still living there, there was nothing apart from child support. So how do you support yourself when you are at home? You need to have a husband who works and supports you. Especially if we look at what everything costs in Estonia. So, I had one acquaintance here in Sweden and she agreed to babysit my child so that I could work. And then I thought... I never wanted to move to Sweden but thought of it as a temporary solution. I needed to do something and then I moved. First, I was going to Sweden temporarily to make money and then go back to Estonia. And then later, [I] decided to move there.

Grete refers to the heteronormative policies in Estonia, which ignore a group as large as that of single mothers by stating that it was impossible for her to take advantage of those policies. Furthermore, she left Estonia before parental-leave benefit was introduced, meaning that the only support she had was child benefit which, today, is €60 per month but was significantly lower at the time she decided to leave. Grete's case illustrates how being in a relationship becomes a capital of sorts, offering both economic and social benefits. Grete used her social capital and entered Sweden with the help of a friend she had made in Estonia. So, although she lacked social capital in Estonia, she was able to benefit from her social network abroad.

Even though none of the mover interviewees initially intended to migrate permanently, their experiences with the strength of the welfare state as well as the somewhat more liberal societal norms in Nordic countries allowed them to acknowledge that they did not want to return to Estonia in the future. This was, for several interviewees, a still somewhat painful awareness to acknowledge, because they maintained strong connections with Estonia, regardless of the lack of either relatives or a strong social network there.

Temporary movers

Almost all my interviewees who resided abroad stated that their initial intentions were to earn some money in the host country in order to stabilise the precarity of their situation with their wish to eventually return to

Estonia. However, it was common for them to either reconsider their intentions after experiencing the social welfare regimes in the Nordic countries or to postpone their return until their children reached adulthood. However, there was also a small group of interviewees who moved with the clear intention of returning. Maile was one of them:

We went to Finland to earn money. We never really planned to stay there but my ex, he had this plan that he wanted to buy a house in Estonia. I never planned to stay in Finland, I like it in Estonia, it is my home.

Maile moved to Finland together with her ex-partner and separated from him while still living there. Her move to Finland had been motivated by the need to acquire some economic capital. After the breakup of her relationship, Maile decided to return to Estonia. On being asked if she had ever considered staying in Finland, she replied:

It is much safer here [in Estonia]. How would I have stayed with my child in Helsinki? I did not have acquaintances there. Well, some acquaintances but I did not have close friends. My dad had also left and I had no-one there. And then I thought it is much safer in Estonia with all my relatives. And my parents can help me as well.

Unlike the previous interviewees who felt safer in Finland or Sweden, Maile felt this way in Estonia. An important aspect of social networks comes into play considering that migrant mothers very often lacked a social safety net. They either had few living relatives or those whom they did have were insufficiently wealthy to be able to help. Thus, as Van Hear (2014) argues, the notion that migrating might depend on various capitals but does not necessarily demand the presence of economic capital can also be applied to remaining. When moving to Finland, Maile's priority was to acquire economic capital. However, having a child altered her priorities so that social capital became more relevant.

Maile can be distinguished from our first group of single mothers by her strong existing social network in Estonia. Her parents proved to be a great help when she moved back by providing her with both a place to live and financial help. Neither Grete nor Anu had such opportunities in Estonia and hence their move became permanent.

Stayers

As several authors have previously pointed out, the group of stayers is diverse (Clark and Lisowski 2017; Mata-Codesal 2015; Schewel 2019). The typical distinction has so far been made between voluntary and involuntary stayers; however, such a strong differentiation was not visible across my data. There was a clear socio-economic class distinction in terms of strategies employed, as noted by several interviewees, including Maria:

When you live with a second-hand contract in Tallinn, as many live who are not from Tallinn, the rent might not be much cheaper than over here [Stockholm]. So I am thinking that this single mum who is from the countryside and is moving to town with her child... it is highly likely she is not very well educated, she does not have a high salary and there is not much social support either, the rent is very high... so I am thinking for this group... living in Estonia is rather tight. So maybe then they think it is easier to come here and work as a cleaner... They earn more. But, of course, it is difficult to move with children.

Maria then notes that, for certain groups, moving is a more viable strategy than staying. She connects moving with social class, stating that – for poorer people – it is tougher to manage in Estonia, hence moving offers clearer benefits.

Another interviewee, Kersti, raises the same issue from a more reflexive point of view:

I have it really good in Estonia... It is a bit of a national pride thing... I really like living in Estonia. These are my people. They are a bit twisted but I think, somewhere else, there are others who are foreign. I don't have the drive [to befriend them]. But of course, I also don't fit the cliché of being a poor single mother. My ex-husband is paying alimony to all the children and we are managing fine.

In this way, Kersti raises the issue of agency and emphasises that, firstly, she feels a certain attachment to Estonia and to the kind of people who live there. She also, however, notes that she is able to choose to stay in Estonia – she can afford it, because she is not a poor single mother. She is aware of her 'privileged' position.

Social class issues also come out in a more subtle way, through the internalisation of certain attitudes, as Ann posits:

Sometimes you have these mothers who – they have given birth to a child alone and the child's father has already left and then they still add him to the birth certificate – and then afterwards they are sad that he is not visiting the child and asking 'How will I now manage or he is coming and taking the children away whenever he wants?' And then I say, 'You are to blame; why did you push to have him on the birth certificate?'

Ann can be perceived as having internalised the strong neoliberal norms prevalent in Estonia. She makes a judgement on women who register their former partner on the birth certificate of their child. The issue however is more complex because it is only through registration that these women can later apply for alimony from the father. Ann thus judges women who do not have the capacity to manage on their own and are therefore more or less dependent on their former partners. When I ask her to be more explicit about this judgement, she says:

Yeah, of course money was not important for me... I had a good job. I had a good income. Money was not primary. I also had good savings. Maybe if these financial issues had been important for me, I would have behaved differently.

Ann is not only aware of her privileged position but also acknowledges that her financial situation was healthy and that receiving alimony from her former partner was not a primary concern. Hence, she could choose whether or not she wanted to add him to the birth certificate.

However, there were those who were less well-off and for whom managing both financially and, to a degree, emotionally, was more challenging. The group of stayers, therefore, develop various strategies in order to 'stay' in Estonia, like Katre:

I have learned to live with my situation. It does not influence me that much anymore. I don't notice it on a daily basis but, when I look at my bank account, I do notice. But now that I have put my life together again, I don't have any money to pay back the old loans. They take all my money away and it is pretty bad because I don't want to stay in debt for the rest of my life and I am fighting against it. And then I receive a needs-based benefit and, since I owe alimony to my ex-partner, they took this away from my account.

They should not take my benefits away but they have and then you only have three days to dispute the decision. So now I have asked them to pay both salary and the needs-based benefit to my child's account so that they cannot take it away.

Katre is therefore engaging in semi-legal ways to make ends meet in Estonia. She has found that the authorities cannot locate the money she receives if she has it paid into her child's account and therefore is able to survive on a monthly basis. Katre's case shows how even single mothers in precarious positions can use cultural capital – in the form of knowledge – to survive. Here, cultural capital is translated rather liberally, through attributing it with qualities of 'know-how' in certain legal and cultural contexts. It is also useful to know that Katre, in fact, has a higher education qualification but has a part-time – 50 per cent – job in an underpaid field.

Elo has also found a semi-legal way to survive and says:

I have 50 per cent of sick leave signed by the doctors. But you can never earn enough of a living by only working 50 per cent, so that you can afford an apartment, food et cetera. And during the school year, I was working full-time and went to school as well, because my parents did not support me. But then, in the end, I could not finish high school and now it is the same. Then I was trying to find other jobs but I felt I had no choice. I had tried all kinds of things and I was so tired of barely scraping by. So, I decided to support myself by working as a prostitute.

Engaging in the informal economy is one of the alternative ways to make ends meet. Others involve arts and crafts activities such as making clothing and accoutrements (knitting, sewing, crocheting) and selling the products. Both Katre and Elo were from poor families and could not rely on the help of their relatives. However, using social networks in order to survive was probably the most common strategy, as stated by Eva:

When I was pregnant, I was looking for a living space in Tartu and then my mum offered to let me go and live with her. But I have already lived with her before – just the two of us – and I knew that I do not want to live with her. I simply cannot stand living with her. We are different in terms of what works for each of us. And then we looked at the possibilities but I could not get a loan with my salary and my mum could not get a loan because she still had a loan for this apartment. So, then my mother's partner suggested that she go to live with him – and I moved in here.

Eva thus received help from her mother in the context of living space. Although she was no longer in her early 20s and had been working for a while before her pregnancy, her salary was so low that she had to share an apartment in Tallinn. It should also be noted that, unlike Katre and Elo, Eva has a university education and was working in her specialist field. Financial struggles involve not only those individuals without higher education but also those working in underpaid sectors, mostly in education, cultural work and the like. Relatives, beyond the nuclear family, offering accommodation or other kinds of financial help was extremely common. The interesting part was that the help was more likely to have been offered through the birth family than through the father of the child. Most of the interviewees had either given up or struggled to receive alimony at the regulated rate.

Although Katre, Elo and Eva were all struggling, they do not want to leave for better economic prospects abroad, as Katre admitted:

I like it here in Estonia. I like speaking in Estonian. I don't like speaking in English. I can manage but I cannot express myself the way I wish to. I like it here, I have MY people here, MY friends. Somewhere else, it is still an unfamiliar and foreign environment.

Katre taps into the same topic which Maile earlier spoke of: Estonia with its informal social security but also, crucially, 'her people', offers her the 'safer' kind of feeling than another environment where she could potentially be more economically successful. This relates to the British working classes, whose social networks helped to buffer the insecurities of the labour market and who were therefore reluctant to move to the areas which were doing better economically (Preece 2018). Therefore, we can see how the presence of social capital becomes relevant in order to compensate for the lack of an economic one.

Ambivalents

Kris has lived in Sweden for close to a decade and has been engaged in a circular movement. She first moved to Stockholm as an au pair with the intention of learning the language and then of finding what she calls a 'proper job'. However, her job search was unsuccessful as her cultural capital (mostly an Estonian university degree) was not recognised in Sweden and she was forced to move back to Estonia. Some years later, Kris found a way to enter the Swedish labour market through her social contacts – thus, using her social capital instead – and started to slowly move upwards in her career. Despite her cultural capital having no value in the Swedish context, she managed to use her social capital to develop her career. Kris then became pregnant and moved back to Estonia during her pregnancy:

I decided to give birth in Estonia. I had a really emotionally difficult period and I had no support here [in Sweden] and then I was thinking, will I really go to the hospital and give birth alone? ... In Estonia, I do at least have my mother and supportive friends.

Even though Kris found her work in Sweden through her social networks, her experience illustrates the different levels and purposes of social capital. Kris felt that she was lacking in the emotional aspects of social capital as well as lacking recognition of her cultural capital; hence, she decided to move back during this difficult period of her pregnancy. She spent one year in Estonia, living with her mother.

After her parental leave ended, Kris was reluctant to move back to Sweden – she felt grounded in Estonia. However, financial issues came into play. Kris had to return to work for economic reasons but did not manage to find a kindergarten place in Estonia. Her subsequent return to Sweden was both economically motivated and also instigated by the lack of welfare services in Estonia in the form of childcare. Even though Kris had social capital in Estonia, she was unable to solve the problem of the purely practical side of child-rearing without an income. Kris also mentioned that many of her friends put their children into private childcare because of the absence of any state provision. However, paying for private childcare assumes the presence of two working parents in the family.

When asked today about her future, Kris says that she has no preference. She can stay in Sweden or she could move to Estonia. She is, however, reluctant to move again with her child and says that her life has become convenient in Sweden. Kris has the necessary cultural capital, which allows her to choose whether she wants to live in Sweden or Estonia. Financially, she admits that life would be better in Estonia but the aspect of the 'mobility costs' is decisive in her case.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has focused on the analysis of mobility and staying put in the context of Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Its main objective has been to use existing categories of immobility and mobility to examine the CEE mobility space. More specifically, the article has explored the experiences of single mothers who make up a particularly marginalised group and investigated how they utilise different types of capital to either remain in their home countries or migrate elsewhere.

One of the main arguments presented in the article is that previous research has often overlooked the strategies employed by individuals who choose to remain in CEE countries. By considering both movers and stayers, the article provides a more comprehensive understanding of migration from the region. It emphasises that individuals who stay put in CEE countries often employ various strategies to ensure their livelihood, an aspect which tends to be overshadowed in studies that solely focus on outmigration from the region. Examining the use of different types of capital allows for a more nuanced view of the entire mobility space in CEE countries, where people employ diverse strategies to sustain their livelihoods. Migration is just one of these strategies and the decision to migrate, as well as the duration of the mobility, is influenced by access to different forms of capital.

The article also highlights the importance of social class in understanding the mobility space in CEE countries. Previous studies have indicated that individuals with lower educational levels are more likely to outmigrate from these countries, with Estonia being an exception. However, the findings from this article suggest that focusing solely on educational level or professional status may be problematic, as decisions to stay or move are not solely determined by economic capital. It is true that financial status is one motivating factor for migration but the lack of financial resources can be compensated for by extensive social networks, support systems or access to cultural capital. The distinction between these forms of capital has often been overlooked in studies on CEE migration. Furthermore, the article highlights the importance of the formalised welfare provision in Nordic countries, which serves as a significant resource for individuals with limited financial means. Thus, economically struggling single mothers in Estonia had to rely on assistance from relatives, whereas their counterparts in Nordic countries could rely on state-provided support. This sense of independence provided by the welfare systems influenced the decision-making process for several individuals, prompting them to remain in Nordic countries.

Regarding the categories of movers and stayers, the article supports previous findings which reveal that these categories are often blurred. Migration can be a temporary decision and may even facilitate future efforts to stay in a particular location. Additionally, plans can easily change as migrants experience life in a different country, as demonstrated by the examples provided in this article. The different types of capital play a crucial role in such decision-making processes. In addition to the three previously recognised types of capital – economic, social and cultural – the article has introduced the concept of formal welfare capital, which refers to the state-provided formalised assistance that entered the decision-making process for Estonian single mothers who were considering whether to stay or to move.

Overall, this article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of mobility and staying put in CEE countries by considering the experiences of single mothers and their use of different forms of capital. It emphasises the need to go beyond the educational level and professional status when studying migration and highlights the significance of social class and welfare provisions in shaping mobility decisions.

Note

1. Estonia grants parental leave to those who have worked for 3 years, with the legal condition that they must be able to return to their work at the end of their period of leave.


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Appendix

Table of interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Place of residence	No. of children	Profession
Anu	33	Stockholm	1	Government official
Kaire	31	Tallinn (lived in Finland)	2	Library worker
Ele	41	Tallinn	2	Bookkeeper
Terje	44	Tallinn	2	NGO worker
Katre	33	Estonian small town	1	Unemployed
Signe	42	Estonian small town	1	Police officer
Marje	47	Tallinn	1	Janitor
Lili	33	Tallinn	3	Bookkeeper
Aune	31	Stockholm	1	Hotel worker
Emma	39	Swedish small town	2	Nurse
Aile	37	Tallinn (lived in Finland)	1	Kindergarten teacher
Linda	31	Tallinn (lived in Sweden)	2	Police officer
Ragne	46	Finish small town	2	Nurse
Elo	36	Stockholm	2	Administrator
Kaie	23	Tallinn	1	Prostitute
Sindi	36	Helsinki	2	Unemployed
Kaidi	24	Tallinn	2	Factory worker
Andra	23	Tallinn	2	Unemployed
Raili	36	Tartu	1	Bookkeeper
Maria	36	Tallinn	4	Administrator
Ellen	51	Tallinn	1	Unemployed
Indra	44	Tartu	2	Bookkeeper
Petra	24	Finish small town	1	Home helper
Karoli	23	Finish small town	1	Cleaner

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From Workers to Entrepreneurs: Central Asian Migrants in the Russian Business Market

Ekaterina Vorobeva* 

The current article contributes to the discussion on the trajectories of the economic integration of immigrants in adverse, informal contexts. Specifically, it explores the processes of the generation and application of business resources among Central Asian migrant entrepreneurs in Russia. This study highlights the crucial and multifaceted importance of former employment for migrant entrepreneurs. With restricted access to resources in Russia, Central Asian migrants deliberately used their workplaces to access business knowledge, networks and financial capital. By applying these resources, they replicated the successful business models of their former employers. This integration path appears to be shaped by the ambivalent forces of informality in the Russian economy.

Keywords: migrant entrepreneurship, employment, informality, capital, Central Asia, Russia

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Introduction

With the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022, the role of Russia in both regional and global migration processes has changed significantly. In less than a year, Russia turned into a major migrant-sending country; thousands of Russian citizens who disagreed with the government's domestic and foreign political course fled abroad (Vorobeva 2022). However, to date, it also remains a popular migration destination for millions of people from former socialist republics (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). More particularly, the majority of migrants in Russia originate from Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). The trajectories of their economic integration in Russia vary; along with pursuing professional careers, many seize business opportunities and establish their own enterprises. Despite the multiple barriers to the Russian business sector, entrepreneurship appears to be a good alternative to underpaid vulnerable employment. Although official statistics on the exact number of migrant businesspersons in the country are missing, according to available estimations, their number may far exceed 50,000 (Mukomel 2013).

Being more often necessity- rather than opportunity-driven, migrant entrepreneurs may suffer from a lack of valuable resources that are crucial to business success in a host state (Eroğlu 2018). Due to insufficient human, social and financial capital, migrant businesspersons have even been labelled 'under-resourced entrepreneurs' (Jones, Ram, Edwards, Kiselincev and Muchenje 2014). Acquiring the necessary capital and entering the Russian business sector appear to be especially challenging for them for a combination of reasons. First, the informality of the Russian economy limits the access of newcomers to crucial business knowledge, networks and funding; outsiders are often unacquainted with the unwritten rules of business conduct and the hidden opportunities in the Russian market (Ledeneva 2006). Second, migrants face xenophobia and multiple structural constraints on self-employment. As a rule, neither Russian nor home-state authorities assist immigrants in accessing or generating capital through support mechanisms, unlike in some Western states where startup accelerator programmes are fairly common. However, even under such drastic conditions, many migrants in Russia procure capital and engage in entrepreneurship. To date, little is known about how they generate and use business resources in such an unfavourable, informal context.

Therefore, the current study intends to shed light on the questions posed. How do migrant entrepreneurs generate resources in Russia? How do they apply the resources for business purposes? In this study, the mixed-methods approach is adopted and unique qualitative and quantitative data that were collected from Central Asian migrant entrepreneurs in Moscow and Saint Petersburg in Autumn 2021 are presented. The current research contributes to relevant debates by demonstrating how migrants referred to their places of employment as business incubators. The data show that they strategically used their workplaces to acquire business-related human, social and financial capital. The generation of capital was followed by the replication of a former employer's successful business model. To distinguish this unique phenomenon from other entrepreneurial practices, the concept of *offshoot migrant entrepreneurship* is proposed; the term may be used to describe migrants' transition from waged to self-employment through the replication of the business model of a former employer. In this process, the informality of the Russian economy proved to play an ambivalent role.

Theoretical background and study context

Resource-based perspective on migrant entrepreneurship

The intensified migration of the last few decades has drawn the attention of academics and policy-makers to the problem of the economic integration of newcomers (Basu and Pruthi 2021). In this regard, entrepreneurship has proved to be a popular choice among migrants; the number of migrant businesspersons exceeded the

number of self-employed natives in the US, the UK and many European member states (Basu and Pruthi 2021). Migrant entrepreneurship can be broadly defined as the commercial activities of foreign-born individuals in a host country (Vorobeva 2023). To better understand the integration trajectories of foreign-born populations, relevant studies have focused on these populations' motivations to engage in entrepreneurship (Dabic, Vlačić, Paul, Dana and Sahasranamam 2020). It was found that immigrants were often forced into self-employment due to their unsuitability for or discrimination in the labour market (Dabic *et al.* 2020; Volery 2007). According to the emerging disadvantage theory, migrants appear to be 'crucially disadvantaged even before business entry' (Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela 2017: 7). Specifically, this theory attributes the disadvantage to a lack of appropriate resources – cultural knowledge, networks and economic capital (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Dabic *et al.* 2020; Eroğlu 2018; Ram *et al.* 2017; Volery 2007). With limited available capital, migrants often have to opt for low-profit, labour-intensive, declining niche markets with low entry barriers (Ram *et al.* 2017; Verver, Passenier and Roessingh 2019).

Relatively new to the field of migration studies, the resource-based perspective on migrant entrepreneurship is still used to explore the issue of migrants' resources in depth (Eroğlu 2018). This perspective has proved to be highly relevant, as the amount and combinations of resources appear to predict the success of enterprises (Eroğlu 2018; Volery 2007; Stringfellow and Shaw 2008). This perspective stems from resource-based theory (RBT), which claims that resources are crucial for forming and preserving the competitive edge of enterprises (Barney, Ketchen and Wright 2011). Although this theory originally focused on corporate entrepreneurship, individual entrepreneurs (including migrants and transmigrants) have recently been included as important units of analysis (Barney *et al.* 2011). Indeed, 'The role of the entrepreneur is then viewed as determining, accessing and employing the appropriate resources' (Stringfellow and Shaw 2008: 139).

RBT broadly defines resources as 'bundles of tangible and intangible assets' (Barney *et al.* 2011: 1300). In migrant entrepreneurship research, these assets have been conceptualised as forms of capital, which includes both RBT and the capital theory of Bourdieu (1986). Bourdieu (1977: 178) refers to capital as 'all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation'. Following capital theory, social, human (or cultural) and economic forms of capital have been thoroughly researched in migrant entrepreneurship scholarship (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Ram, Theodorakopoulos and Jones 2008). To provide brief definitions, *human capital* predominantly refers to education, skills and work experience, *social capital* represents networks and social relationships and *economic capital* is embodied in cash and properties. However, the boundaries between the forms of capital are somewhat arbitrary; the forms are tightly interconnected and can be converted into one another (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019). The business-related forms of capital were united under the umbrella term 'entrepreneurial capital', which is used as synonymous to resources (Stringfellow and Shaw 2008). The latter is defined as 'various financial and non-financial resources necessary for the establishment, survival, sustainability and growth of small ventures' (Shaw, Marlow, Lam and Carter 2009: 26). The importance of forms of capital for migrant entrepreneurship lies in their ability to help newcomers overcome the structural disadvantages of a host state market (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019).

Concerned with access to rather than the generation of forms of capital, the relevant research has mostly focused on the elimination of barriers to existing resources for migrants (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019). In the structuralist view dominating the field, access to resources is guarded by local social and legal structures in the forms of, *inter alia*, migration policies, access to credit for non-citizens, ethnic or racial discrimination (Eroğlu 2018; Volery 2007). However, the recent, quite marginal focus on agency started exploring how individuals generate resources by taking strategic actions (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019). Indeed, the focus on agency can be insightful in detecting 'generative mechanisms' behind capital formation (Storti 2014: 524). In this respect, informal practices were mentioned as one of the strategies:

In order to stay ahead and remain competitive under such conditions, the temptation to apply informal practices with respect to taxes, labor regulations, minimum wages and employing children and immigrant workers without documents is quite large (Volery 2007: 31–32).

Nevertheless, the process of generating capital has barely been examined, with the exception of education and training (Dabic *et al.* 2020).

The available knowledge on the role of former workplaces in the generation of resources also remains scarce. Labour-market conditions were mostly discussed as motivations for self-employment. In a few available studies, former places of employment were linked to the generation of financial capital; former employment led to the accumulation of start-up capital in the form of savings (Basu and Pruthi 2021). It was also found that migrants appear to have better access to external funding if they were previously employed (Basu and Pruthi 2021). Finally, former employment was negatively correlated with entering ethnic niche markets (Ndofor and Priem 2011). However, the diverse role that a former workplace may play in the lives of migrant entrepreneurs remains largely unexamined; this gap is addressed in the current article.

Migrants in the Russian labour market and business sector

Although the war in Ukraine may substantially change migration flows, to date, Russia remains one of the largest migrant-receiving states globally. Created during tsarist and Soviet times, colonial links still define migration routes in the region (Abashin 2014; Schenk 2018). The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation reported that, by the end of 2021, approximately 6 million foreigners were residing in the country (Internet-portal SNG 2022). In addition, the presence of a large number of irregular migrants can be expected based on data from previous years (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). The largest share of migrants is constituted by citizens of Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2020). Central Asian labour migration to Russia was triggered by labour shortages and visa-free regimes on the one hand and fast-growing populations, unemployment and political instability in Central Asia on the other (Abashin 2014; Abdurakhimov 2018; Atabaeva 2018; Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018; Denisenko 2017; Zhanaltay 2018).

Predominantly, young low-skilled men from rural areas leave Central Asia for Russia; this phenomenon received the name ‘muscle drain’, which refers to the emigration of manual workers (Abashin 2014; Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018; Denisenko 2017; Mukomel 2013). Highly qualified migrants in Russia also join the ranks of manual labourers; suffering from downward occupational mobility, they usually have to switch from skilled to unskilled jobs after immigration (Mukomel 2017). Therefore, in Russia, Central Asian migrants are mainly employed in so-called 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, difficult), in wholesale and retail trade, construction, personal services, agriculture and manufacturing (Mukomel 2013; Zhanaltay 2018). These industries were found to have the highest proportion of informal employment, which is broadly defined as wage employment without a signed employment contract or respective social protection (Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov 2014; Lehmann and Zaiceva, 2013; Sangi, Freije-Rodriguez and Posarac 2019). Therefore, migrants are highly susceptible to informal employment, which makes them extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Lehmann and Zaiceva 2013; Mukomel 2013). According to some conservative estimates (Sangi *et al.* 2019), 26 per cent of migrants are employed in the informal sector in Russia compared to 16 per cent of natives; however, this number may be as high as 40 per cent (Mukomel 2017) and continues to grow (Sangi *et al.* 2019). What scholars agree on is that the working conditions of migrants are terrible; many work and ‘live in conditions close to slavery’ (Ryazantsev and Korneev 2013: 11). Numerous concerns about the

human trafficking of Central Asian migrants have been raised (Ryazantsev and Korneev 2013). Finally, in case of rights violations, migrants have no responsible authority to which they can refer to seek protection.

Despite their extreme vulnerability, some Central Asian citizens manage to acquire the necessary capital and start their own enterprises in Russia. However, studies on migrants in the Russian business sector are extremely scarce, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Kashnitsky and Demintseva 2018; Mukomel 2013). The majority of entrepreneurs seem to engage in wage employment for several years prior to launching their own businesses (Vorobeva 2023). The most popular industries for migrant entrepreneurship proved to be food and accommodation, trade, construction and personal services (Vorobeva 2023). The businesses are, as a rule, either micro- or small-sized and heavily rely on personal networks (Turaeva 2013). Central Asian migrants also engage in transnational entrepreneurship by taking advantage of their ties to suppliers, clients and partners in their countries of origin (Vorobeva 2023).

Central Asian migrants face numerous constraints in access to entrepreneurial resources in Russia (Urinboyev 2018). Russia is regarded as a state with a high level of informality; it is described as a non-transparent ‘economy in which the rules of the game are not easily recognized or understood’ (Ledeneva 2006: 10). However, formality and informality, which are closely intertwined, represent a continuum rather than a dichotomy in the Russian economy; the formal sector may employ informal practices, while the informal sector may comply with the relevant legislation (Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov 2014). Moreover, informality can be seen as a transitional state on the path to formalisation – Slonimczyk and Gimpelson (2015: 301) found that, for individuals, ‘the chances of transitioning into a formal job are improved if the origin state is the informal sector rather than non-employment’. However, the main drawback of informality appears to be the under-utilisation of human capital and the consequent impediment to economic growth (Gimpelson and Kapeliushnikov 2014).

Informality encompasses a wide array of practices that represent ‘extensions, elaborations and qualifications of rules that “solve” innumerable exchange problems not completely covered by formal rules’ (North 1997: 4). In other words, it can be called a situational interpretation of formal rules that ‘enables competent players to manage and manipulate the system to their own advantage’ (Ledeneva 2006: 1). Informality is proven to benefit insiders at the expense of outsiders, therefore migrants often lack crucial ‘navigational skills’ and remain unaware of ‘how to get things done’ (Ledeneva 2006). However, the ‘paradoxical role’ of informality was previously acknowledged; it may serve as both a constraining and an enabling factor in the Russian economy (Ledeneva 2006). For instance, on the one hand, informal employment makes a migrant more susceptible to exploitation and underpayment but, on the other, it may free a person from the legal responsibilities of misusing an employer’s trade secrets. Moving away from the gaze of the state and turning to the perspective of actors engaged with them, informal practices can also be seen as a manifestation of personal agency and resistance toward the inefficiencies or injustices of the state (Polese 2023).

In addition, migrants in Russia suffer from structural discrimination and xenophobia, which increases their mistrust of the Russian authorities and popularises informal practices. First, many migrants arrive with work permits that forbid them from engaging in entrepreneurship. The inability to register their own enterprise pushes migrants to stay in the shadow economy and to be involved in bribery (Urinboyev 2018). Second, due to the lack of collateral and credit history in Russia, migrants have enormous difficulty in accessing loans. Third, they face hostility from both governmental authorities and the general population. In the official narrative and mass media, migrants are often linked to the spread of infectious diseases, terrorism, crimes and promiscuous behaviour (Bahovadinova and Scarborough 2018; Bashirov 2018). In sum, these conditions negatively affect the resources that are available to migrants for business purposes.

Methodology and data

Sample

The current article is a part of a larger research project devoted to Central Asian migrant entrepreneurship in Russia. For the project, primary qualitative (36 in-depth semi-structured biographical interviews) and quantitative (162 questionnaires) data with Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz migrant entrepreneurs in Moscow and St Petersburg in September–November 2021 were collected. Some of these data were used for the purposes of the current study. Out of 36 interviewees, 18 mentioned an explicit connection between wage employment and self-employment; the interviews with them were then further analysed in depth. Out of 162 questionnaires, 126 contained sufficient information on both past employment and current business operations and were selected for further analysis. As the majority of Central Asian immigrants reside in urban areas, with one-third concentrated in Moscow and its region (Ryazantsev, Bogdanov, Dobrokhleb and Lukyanets 2017), Moscow and Saint Petersburg – two main Russian business centres – were chosen as data-collection sites. The actual data collection was preceded by 15 pilot surveys and 2 pilot interviews in order to fine-tune the survey and interview questions.

Nijkamp, Sahin and Baycan-Levent (2010: 372) mentioned that studying migrant entrepreneurs is ‘not easy, as it is very difficult to obtain trust, cooperation and proper information from migrant entrepreneurs’. Therefore, ‘snowball sampling’ was applied; this was helpful for accessing the hard-to-reach social groups and building interpersonal trust (Agadjanina and Zotova 2012). Five research assistants from the respective ethnic communities were involved in this project to recruit research participants. The assistants served as mediators between respondents and me. They reached out to prospective participants through their personal networks and informed them about the project’s aims and their rights, often in their native languages. Research participants were recruited according to the following criteria: 1) First-generation migrants (foreign-born individuals); 2) Uzbek, Kyrgyz or Tajik nationality (the same as ethnicity here); 3) Ownership of a micro-, small- or medium-sized enterprise; and 4) Running a company in Moscow or Saint Petersburg. As the study has an explorative character, diversity in gender, age and industries of operation was embraced, as it provides access to the various experiences of foreign-born businesspersons in Russia.

On average, 30–40-minute interviews were conducted in the Russian language, audio-recorded and then transcribed. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, some interviews were conducted online with the help of phone or social media tools. During the interviews, questions were asked about the motivations and circumstances of the interviewee’s immigration, employment history in Russia and process of starting and developing his or her own business. For the quantitative data, a questionnaire with 50 closed- and open-ended questions was used and typically took 10 to 20 minutes to complete. A questionnaire consisted of 17 background questions (gender, age, native language(s), year and motivations for immigration, etc.) and 33 questions regarding processes of establishment and development of a person’s own enterprise (motivations, assistance, a source of start-up capital, etc.).

All interviewees were also asked to complete the questionnaire and therefore represent an integral and representative part of the sample of survey respondents. Of the respondents, 70 per cent were male and 30 per cent female. The overwhelming majority were in the 30–49-year age group. Some 24 per cent had lived in Russia for fewer than 10 years, 49 per cent for 10–19 years and 27 per cent for 20 years or more. About 47 per cent had Russian citizenship at the time of the survey; however, this figure would probably have been lower at the time of starting the business. The average age at the time of immigration to Russia was 23 years, suggesting that their professional development took place primarily in Russia. Every third respondent had higher education; however, the majority of the educated respondents suffered from downward occupational

mobility and had to engage in manual labour as salespeople, cleaning staff and construction workers upon arrival in Russia. Therefore, the data suggest that neither higher education nor work experience in their home countries might have had a decisive and direct impact on their entrepreneurial activities in Russia. Almost all Central Asian migrants run micro- and small businesses. Almost all (90 per cent) financed the creation and development of their businesses with their own savings from previous employment.

The research received the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. All research participants were informed about the goals and objectives of the current study. Information sheets were provided prior to the start of a survey or an interview. All informants granted their written or oral consent. Collected interviews and questionnaires were processed and stored in line with the University of Bremen and GDPR regulations. Specifically, the original data are stored on a server that is not connected to the internet. Within the scope of the data processing, copies were made in which all information that could lead to the identification of respondents (e.g., names) and other references were changed, abstracted or removed from the transcripts. Only these fully anonymised versions were used for the analysis.

Methods of data analysis

A mixed-methods approach, which has the potential to reveal both the scale and the ‘deeper meaning’ of a studied phenomenon, was applied in this study (Guion, Diehl and McDonald 2011). The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was implemented; the collection of exploratory qualitative data was initiated first and later carried out simultaneously with a survey. Hence, the interviews 1) served as a starting point for snowball sampling and 2) guided the survey and helped to identify relevant questions and potential hypotheses to test. The goal of the survey was to generalise the results of the qualitative study.

To code and analyse the collected qualitative data, NVivo software was used. A mix of theory- and data-driven narrative analysis was conducted. Narrative analysis assists in linking different events in someone’s life in a meaningful way, as ‘people structure their experiences through stories’ (Sparkes 2005: 191). The interviews were coded according to the theory of capital – with three main nodes of human, social and financial capital. Later, these nodes were divided into 9 subnodes partially suggested by the mentioned theory and partially by the data themselves. Therefore, human capital (entitled ‘business knowledge’) was represented by business ideas, industry knowledge, business practices and managerial skills. Social capital included links to clients, employees, suppliers and mentors. Finally, financial capital (known as ‘startup capital’) had only one subgroup – ‘savings’ (money collected from wages during former employment). The results as well as the background information of the interviewees are summarised in Tables 1 and 2 in the next section.

The informants mentioned that they used the acquired resources to replicate the business models of their former employers. In other words, they moved from waged to self-employment within the same industry. This finding suggested that its relevance be tested for the wider population being studied. Therefore, the following quantitative hypotheses were formulated:

H0: An industry of former employment has no effect on the choice of an industry of current business operation.

H1: There is a positive relationship between an industry of former employment and an industry of current business operation.

As the survey identified, the respondents had extensive work experience; they may have held down several jobs previously and managed several companies currently. The professions and types of the migrants’ businesses were coded according to the Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European

Community, Rev. 2 (2008) (Eurostat, n.d.). In this paper, a type of economic activity is called an industry, a branch of the economy that produces similar products and services. Subsequently, 2 binary variables were created for each industry: 1 for wage employment and 1 for self-employment. The respondents mentioned 12 industries of former employment and 13 of current business operation. The most popular industries for both waged and self-employment proved to be wholesale and retail trades, accommodation and food-service activities, construction, transportation, storage and manufacturing – which is in line with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Zhanaltay 2018).

To analyse the data and test hypotheses 0 and 1, a Sankey diagram and the ‘N-1’ chi-squared test were produced with the help of SPSS software. The chi-squared test is considered to be a ‘powerful statistic that enables researchers to test hypotheses about variables measured at the nominal level’ (McHugh 2013: 149). The test is a sufficient option in the case of categorical data (in this study, cross-sectional binary data) when parametric tests cannot be applied (McHugh 2013). Moreover, while working with a small sample of binary data, one particular type of chi-square test – the ‘N-1’ chi-squared test – is believed to provide more accurate p values than K. Pearson’s chi-squared test or Fisher’s exact test (Busing, Weaver and Dubois 2016). Finally, while the chi-squared test demonstrates whether there is any relationship between two binary variables, the phi-coefficient determines the strength of this relationship (McHugh 2013). As this test allows expected counts of 1.00 and higher (Campbell 2007), this requirement defines the choice of industries for further analysis. In the end, 6 pairs of industries (one for former employment and one for current business operations in the same industry) – wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food service, construction, transportation and storage, manufacturing and other services (hairdressers’ services, handyman services, etc.) – proved to be sufficient to perform the ‘N-1’ chi-squared test. The results of the quantitative analysis are presented in Figure 1 and Table 3.

Results

Employment and entrepreneurial resources

The data demonstrated that Central Asian migrants referred to their workplaces as business incubators and sources of diverse capital. They obtained a business education, learned practical skills, established networks and raised funding while working as doctors, waiters, hairdressers, salesmen and construction workers. Table 1 provides background information on the interviewees and a summary of the forms of capital they acquired during wage employment – business knowledge and social and startup capital. More particularly, all interviewees received business ideas as well as gained industry knowledge during their employment. In addition, 6 learned useful business practices and 3 acquired managerial skills. Referring to social capital, 10 interviewees left their former workplaces with client bases, 5 recruited employees among their former colleagues, 3 met their suppliers and 1 found a business mentor. Finally, the overwhelming majority started collecting start-up capital by saving money from wages during their former employment.

Table 1. Interviewees' background, industry of previous employment and current business and forms of capital acquired at a former workplace

N	Sex	Age	Nationality	City	Industry	Business knowledge	Social capital	Startup capital
1	m	40	Uzbek	St Petersburg	Construction	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	–
2	m	37	Tajik	St Petersburg	Construction	Business idea Industry knowledge Managerial skills	–	Savings
3	m	46	Kyrgyz	St Petersburg	Construction	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	Savings
4	f	40	Kyrgyz	St Petersburg	Other services	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	Savings
5	m	31	Kyrgyz	St Petersburg	Health care	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices	Clients	Savings
6	f	29	Kyrgyz	St Petersburg	Other services	Business idea Industry knowledge	Employees	Savings
7	m	43	Kyrgyz	St Petersburg	Accommodation and food	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices Managerial skills	Employees	Savings
8	m	35	Tajik	St Petersburg	Construction	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices	Clients Employees	–
9	m	35	Tajik	St Petersburg	Accommodation and food	Business idea Industry knowledge	Suppliers	Savings
10	m	35	Kyrgyz	Moscow	Accommodation and food	Business idea Industry knowledge Managerial skills	Employees	–

Table 1. Interviewees' background, industry of previous employment and current business and forms of capital acquired at a former workplace (cont.)

N	Sex	Age	Nationality	City	Industry	Business knowledge	Social capital	Startup capital
11	m	38	Tajik	Moscow	Professional services	Business idea Industry knowledge	Employees	Savings
12	f	51	Uzbek	Moscow	Health care	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	Savings
13	m	29	Tajik	Moscow	Accommodation and food	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices	–	Savings
14	m	30	Uzbek	Moscow	Professional services	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	–
15	f	43	Uzbek	Moscow	Trade	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices	Clients Suppliers Mentors	Savings
16	m	38	Kyrgyz	Moscow	Sport	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients	Savings
17	m	38	Uzbek	Moscow	Accommodation and food	Business idea Industry knowledge Business practices	–	Savings
18	f	35	Uzbek	Moscow	Trade	Business idea Industry knowledge	Clients Suppliers	–

Table 2 provides more details about how the abovementioned forms of capital were acquired. It presents the most illustrative quotations from the interviews; altogether, 18 interview fragments have been chosen to offer a deeper insight into the circumstances of capital generation. Observing business operations at their workplaces, the migrants became acquainted with the industry specifics, learned appropriate business practices, and developed business ideas for their own companies. Some interviewees climbed the career ladder and served as directors of other companies, thus acquiring necessary confidence and managerial skills (see Table 2, Section 1.4). Male Interviewee 17, who currently runs a cafe in Moscow, replied to the question about the origins of his business idea as follows (more in Table 2, Section 1.1): ‘Idea? Well, how to say, I came to work, first I was working for one person, and then I was looking [at how he was doing it], and understood, that one can do everything by himself’.

Table 2. Forms of capital acquired at a former workplace; illustrative quotes from the interviews

Form of capital	Details/ types	N*	Quotes from interviews
1. Business knowledge	1.1 Business idea	18	<p><i>Int. 17:</i> Idea? Well, how shall I say, I came to work, first I was working for one person and then I was looking [at how he was doing it] and I understood that one can do everything by oneself.</p> <p><i>Int. 13:</i> One of my good friends worked as a cook; he invited me to be his assistant. I worked with him for about a month and learned how to do what he taught me. And then I thought: ‘Why don’t I save up some money and work for myself?’</p>
	1.2 Industry knowledge	18	<p><i>Int. 9:</i> Then, slowly, I started working in the Shaverma. I slowly learned this work, studied it in depth. I opened my own business. I collected money and opened it slowly. Yes, of course, I already know this sphere too well. Too good. I’ve never worked at a construction site, I was only in this system.</p> <p><i>Int. 13:</i> To be honest, the first years that I worked, I just worked as a Shaverma cook, I didn’t understand a lot, I even swore and fought with them [abusive costumers]. And then gradually, gradually, I realised that I don’t have to fight here, I have to treat them well here. A person has come to you, you don’t have to speak rudely. Gradually I realised this. I started working and then I started to understand already.</p>
	1.3 Business practices	6	<p><i>Int. 5:</i> This LLC existed but taxes were not paid anyway. He [a former employer] just told me then: ‘You work, if someone comes in, I will solve all the problems. I’m doing it’. Now I understand that it was illegal anyway. There is no other way.</p> <p><i>Int. 15:</i> Usually they transfer money through the bazaar, from there [Uzbekistan] they carry our fruits here. Money was transferred through them, private transfers, you can say, private transfers were transferred. They [former employers] said, ‘Here are our Uzbeks, we transport money through them and you will send it with this train or with this KAMAZ, you will pack our order like this’. No, I’m sending it via KAMAZ or by plane, there are guys there, they work a little bit in chunks, not so big [volumes]. It is good with KAMAZ trucks now, to Kazakhstan, to Kyrgyzstan, no problems. And there, yes, people meet those who work with the border, illegally. So they pass tons by there, everything is there, even dishes, sweets, all kinds of things, they pass tons by, illegally.</p>
	1.4 Managerial skills	3	<p><i>Int. 2:</i> Well, I worked for a construction company myself. I went there as a worker and in a month and a half I became a foreman. Then I rose to a construction supervisor, then I rose to a deputy director and there our interests did not coincide with the previous director of the company, who was in place. I decided to leave them and open my own company.</p> <p><i>Int. 10:</i> Well, I moved to Moscow, I studied, I studied, then I went to work. It turns out that I rose to a director, then the employees offered me to head the company, open a new one, the same.</p>

Table 2. Forms of capital acquired at a former workplace; illustrative quotes from the interviews (cont.)

2. Social capital	2.1 Clients	10 <i>Int. 3:</i> It was already through the organisation, I had already got a job in the organisation, so it gave us jobs. And then your own clientele is being developed and they [clients] are already calling without an organisation. <i>Int. 4:</i> That is, I came first, got a job in one salon, worked there for a while. Then, after that, I went to another salon. And slowly my client base seemed to expand. And basically it got developed by, like, word of mouth, yes. I mean, everyone comes by recommendation. I do not exhibit my work anywhere, I have not placed any ads. Well, just purely recommendation. After that, I kind of had the idea to work for myself.
	2.2 Employees	5 <i>Int. 7:</i> How did I look for employees? Initially mainly with whom I used to work, somewhere we did something together, I called them. ‘Hey, come work for me’. Of course, I will give a little more salary. There will be a little less work. <i>Int. 11:</i> And how did you look for employees? Also looked among acquaintances, among some former colleagues. Some of the guys, well, as they were recommended. Also posts via Facebook worked. I mean, word of mouth. Well, we tried through Headhunter but somehow it didn’t work out yet.
	2.3 Suppliers	3 <i>Int. 9:</i> Well, there is a firm, yes, a halal firm, which is serious, they provide almost 70 per cent of the city with halal meat. This company has already proved that the meat is excellent, good, fresh. There is a certificate. When I worked somewhere in another place, I worked with them. I’ve known them for a long time. I kept their phone number for myself. I thought: ‘As soon as I open my own Shavarma place, I will definitely order their meat’. <i>Int. 18:</i> I was engaged in the sale of elite sewing machines and everything that is connected with this. And in 2017, I left that company and opened my own company. I mean I have already gained experience in this field, I left with my client base and with manufacturers with whom I worked and I was just expanding my assortment.
	2.4 Mentors	2 <i>Int. 6:</i> I see she [an employee] does her job well. The clients are already returning to her. Sometime they [employees] may also have their own salons, maybe they will talk about me. <i>Int. 15:</i> Through these first teachers of mine [former employers], clients took my contacts through them. That’s how the business started.
3. Start-up capital	3.1 Savings	13 <i>Int. 2:</i> Well, even to do trade, funding is needed everywhere, everywhere. The most minimal [requires little financial investment] is the construction, from where you can start earning. When a person is alone, he takes a part-time job, he earned this money, the customer pays for the materials, for everything. They just pay you money, you take this money, put it aside and you start like this, about the same here. From scratch it went up. At first I worked alone, then I took one more person, then 2 people, then 3. <i>Int. 9:</i> I’ve been working for a long time. I’ve been collecting money for a long time. How many times I wanted to open, there were always problems. I ‘had to send money’ home... The money I collected, I sent home and, well, it didn’t work out to open it right away.

Note: * N = number of interviewees who mentioned acquiring this form of capital at a former workplace.

Moreover, the workplace proved to be an ideal place for business networking. In other words, during employment, many interviewees built essential business links with clients, suppliers, employees and mentors, which formed a strong foundation for their own companies. For example, female Interviewee 18, who currently runs a cultural project that grew out of a trade company, stated that she obtained not only industry knowledge and a business idea but also a client base and suppliers at her previous workplace (see Table 2, Sections 2.1 and 2.3):

I was engaged in the sale of elite sewing machines and everything that is connected with this. And in 2017, I left that company and opened my own company. I mean I have already gained experience in this field, I left with my client base and with manufacturers with whom I worked, and I was just expanding my assortment.

Furthermore, male Interviewees 7 and 11 mentioned that they recruited employees for their companies from among former colleagues. In this process, they used their knowledge about the necessary qualifications, working conditions and pay levels in the industry to make an offer that their former colleagues could not refuse (see Table 2, Section 2.2). In addition, a person may meet a business mentor at a workplace. As the data suggest, employers might be willing to serve as mentors to their workers by providing business advice and guidance. This was the case for female Interviewee 15, who was taught how to conduct cross-border trade of medicaments by her former employers (see Table 2, Section 2.4, Int. 15). Female Interviewee 6, who has a beauty salon, mentioned that she hoped her employees would also start their own salons one day with her assistance (see Table 2, Section 2.4, Int 6).

Finally, former workplaces will have provided migrants with a better understanding of the financial side of business management. This understanding is supported by the fact that the majority of the interviewees began collecting start-up capital during their employment. Therefore, they would have known how much start-up capital would be sufficient and how large any business expenditure and possible revenue could be. For example, male Interviewee 13, who currently manages a shaverma café in Moscow, mentioned that the moment he got the idea to replicate his former employer's business model, he started saving money (see Table 2, Section 1.1, Int 13). Another male, Interviewee 9, who also has a shaverma kiosk but in Saint Petersburg, described how he was saving money while working as a shaverma salesman (see Table 2, Section 3.1):

I've been working for a long time. I've been collecting money for a long time. How many times I wanted to open, there were always problems. I 'had to send money' home... The money I collected, I sent home and, well, it didn't work out to open it right away.

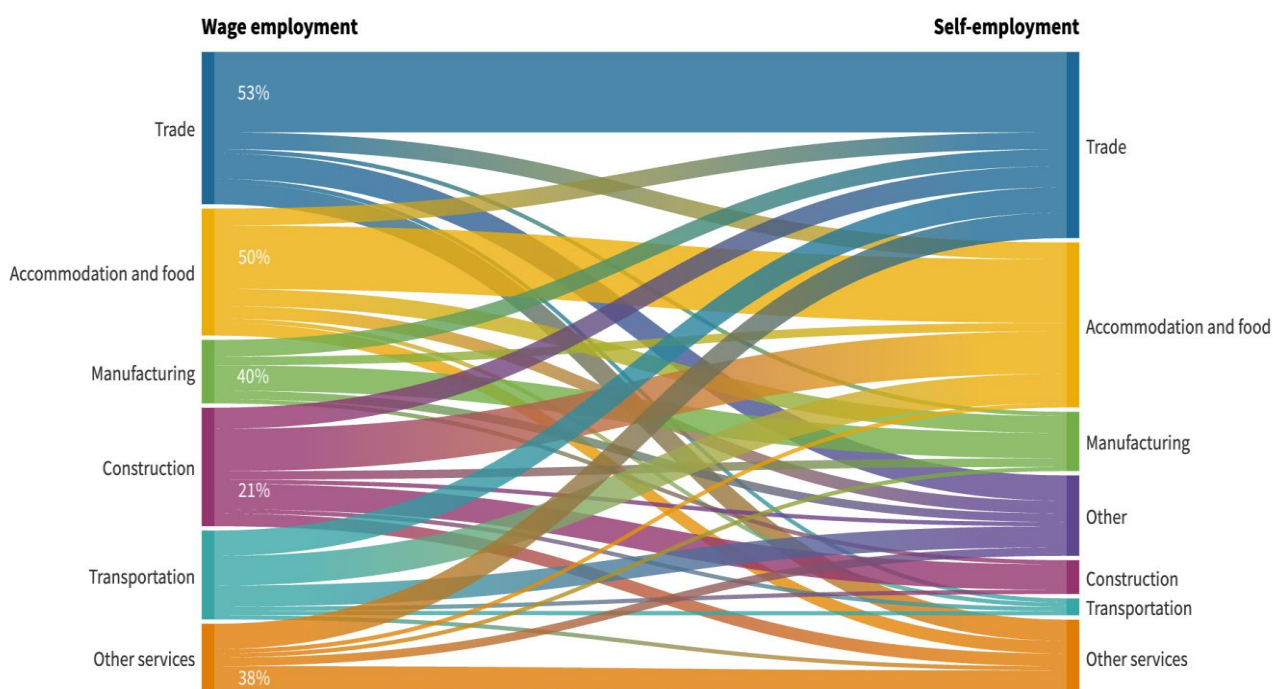
Entrepreneurial resources and their application

As the interviews demonstrated, the migrant entrepreneurs acquired valuable human, social and financial capital at their former workplaces. All 18 interviewees developed business ideas during their former employment; they aspired to move from waged to self-employment within the same industry. Therefore, the acquired resources were applied to replicate the successful business models of migrants' former employers. The process of replication is mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. For example, as shown in Table 2, Interviewee 18 (Section 2.3), Interviewee 17 (Section 1.1), Interviewee 9 (Section 1.2) and others stated that employment was the period of learning a business model for its further replication. Interviewee 13 described it thus:

And one of my good friends worked as a cook, he invited me to be his assistant. I worked with him for about a month and learned how to do what he taught me. And then I thought: ‘Why don’t I save up some money and work for myself?’

The popularity of this strategy of moving from waged to self-employment within the same industry was examined with the help of quantitative data we collected. On average, slightly more than half – 52 per cent – of respondents (66 out of 126) had work experience in the industry where their current business operated. Figure 1 visualises the intra- and inter-industrial movement of respondents from waged to self-employment. Moreover, the figure reveals the shares of those respondents who moved from waged to self-employment within the same industry – as it demonstrates, for wholesale and retail trade and accommodation and food services, 53 per cent and 50 per cent, respectively, became self-employed and did not leave the industry in which they worked. The lowest share is for transportation and storage, where only 1 respondent out of 21 started a company after having driven a taxi for a living.

Figure 1. The intra- and inter-industrial movement of Central Asian migrants in Russia from waged to self-employment; share of respondents who started a business in an industry of former employment*



* For serial entrepreneurs, a business in an industry of former employment was preferred; if no such business existed, the first business listed was preferred.

** Other industries (in which respondents operate their businesses) include professional services, administrative services, health care, arts and entertainment, educational services, agriculture and real estate.

Although Figure 1 points to a positive relationship between an industry of former employment and an industry of current business operation, the ‘N-1’ chi-squared test and the phi-coefficient were produced to examine the statistical significance and strength of this relationship. As shown in Table 3, all coefficients are greater than

the critical value of 3.84 for Degree of freedom 1, with the only exception being transportation and storage. It suggests enough evidence to reject Hypothesis 0; the two variables are not independent of each other. Moreover, high statistical significance was obtained for all 5 industries except for transportation and storage.

To identify the strength of this relationship, we can refer to the phi-coefficient. There are some differences that can be observed in the strength of the relationship depending on the industry. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 3, the phi-coefficients for 5 industries demonstrate a very strong positive relationship (according to the interpretation of the coefficients proposed by Akoglu (2018)). For the transportation industry, no statistically significant relationship was found.

Table 3. Results of the ‘N-1’ chi-squared test and the phi-coefficients

	‘N-1’ chi-squared coefficient	df	Sig.	Phi-coefficient*	Sig.
Trade	9.329	1	.002	.273	.002
Accommodation and food	12.480	1	<.001	.316	<.001
Construction	17.150	1	<.001	.370	<.001
Manufacturing	20.729	1	<.001	.407	<.001
Other services	10.088	1	.001	.284	.001
Transportation and storage	.106	1	.745	-.029	.744
Number of valid cases	126				

* 0–+.005 weak positive relationship; >+.10 moderate positive relationship; >+.15 strong positive relationship; >+.25 very strong positive relationship (Akoglu 2018).

Therefore, based on the analysis, Hypothesis 0 can be rejected for the 5 studied industries; an industry of former employment does have an effect on the choice of an industry of current business operation. Moreover, confirmation for Hypothesis 1 was found in the data for the same 5 industries: there is, indeed, a very strong positive relationship between an industry of former employment and an industry of current business operation. Although the general tendency points to the strong connection between an industry of former employment and one of current business operation, some industry-specific differences can be observed, as demonstrated in the case of transportation and storage. Although the data do not provide an immediate explanation, the latter can be partially attributed to the fact that, for many interviewees, driving a taxi was a side job and never a primary place of employment where effective learning of the business model could occur.

The role of informality

It takes time and experience to transform oneself from an outsider to a ‘competitive player’ in the informal relations of the Russian economy (Ledeneva 2006). After several years of living and working in Russia, Central Asian migrants seem to gradually acquire the knowledge of how to deal with – and even benefit from – this informality. However, the first encounters with it in Russia were disadvantageous for many migrants, who may have experienced abuse and exploitation in their first jobs. The unprotected nature of employment has hindered their professional development and the accumulation of financial capital. For example, Interviewee 3, the owner of a construction company, recalled his time as a construction worker: ‘Our employers were more

unscrupulous. And it turned out that, even for the work done, we did not receive money. Like, you work and again you earn nothing'. Informality also affects the working conditions of migrants in Russia: employment can be characterised by unregulated working hours and vaguely defined work roles. For example, female Interviewee 15 was initially hired as a packer but, over time, her responsibilities included financial operations, delivery and communication with suppliers and clients. This work involved long, irregular hours; sometimes, the interviewee had to sleep on public transport as she moved from one responsibility to another. She described her multiple duties (see also Table 2, Section 1.3, Int. 15):

They [former employers] needed packers to pack everything. And I went to work there. And the woman, she liked my work, I do everything carefully and they showed me where to get money. They [former employers] said 'Here are our Uzbeks, we transport money through them and you will send with this train or with this KAMAZ, you will pack our order like this'. And they introduced me to everyone in the pharmaceutical company. 'We make an order by phone, they will prepare it for you and you will take the money, pay, take the goods, pack and send them'.

However, this seemingly labour-intensive and disorganised work actually allowed for the diverse and effective learning of business operations and the generation of vital business resources. It also allowed migrants to connect with different actors in the industry and to expand their business connections. Interviewee 15 concluded that her intensive previous employment was the point at which she learned about the business industry and moved on to start her own business.

Migrants' former workplaces also seem to serve as training centres for informal practices. For example, Interviewee 17, a café owner in Moscow, learned important informal practices related to business registration during his employment. He had a work permit that did not allow him to engage in entrepreneurship according to Russian legislation. However, it was a common practice among migrant entrepreneurs to register a business under someone else's name, to which he referred when starting his own café. Female Interviewee 15, who now runs an unregistered business in the transnational trade of medication, locates her informal entrepreneurship in the broader context of the Russian business market: 'Now I can see that 99 per cent of businesses in Moscow are illegal'.

On average, the respondents worked in Russia for 7 years before starting their own businesses. With the necessary resources acquired, they were used to replicate the successful business models of the migrants' former employers. Should this not have led to fierce legal disputes between employers and their former employees? In the Western context, replication would violate the non-solicitation clause of the standard employment contract. However, since many migrants worked informally, they were free from any legal responsibility. Moreover, even if employment contracts were signed, their enforcement in the case of conflict would be extremely problematic due to the weak legal institutions in Russia. Interviewee 13, a shaverma café owner, stated that formal agreements have limited power in Russia: 'The contract doesn't matter here [in Moscow]. I say from the bottom of my heart: the contract does not matter here. Although you do it, well, in principle, it is necessary – do it'. Finally, 2 out of every 5 businesses surveyed operated informally and thus remained outside the legal sphere. Therefore, informal practices in the labour and business market, as well as the limited enforcement of agreements, allow migrants to acquire critical capital (e.g., a customer base) and to copy others' business models without facing legal action.

Moreover, moving from employment to self-employment within the same industry seems to be a proven strategy for successful business creation in Russia's non-transparent economic environment. Conversely, starting a business outside the industry of one's previous employment was discussed as a recipe for failure. For example, Interviewee 1 was employed as a construction worker before opening his own construction company. When his construction business generated high revenues, he tried to explore business opportunities

in other industries by opening a grocery store, a café and a restaurant. Unfortunately, none of them were successful. However, his construction business continued to grow and remain profitable. This led him to believe that the only way to be successful in business was to stay within the known industry of his former employment. He even recommended this effective strategy to prospective migrant entrepreneurs:

Everyone has their own direction. If someone is destined to be a doctor, he will try to become a cook, he will not succeed anyway. Therefore, one needs to find one's own sphere and go further in this direction. If you are a cook, then open a restaurant; a doctor means open a clinic if you want to earn a lot. The driver, then make your own park.

Discussion and conclusions

The current study contributes to the debates on the trajectories of economic integration of immigrants in adverse, informal environments. Specifically, it explores how Central Asian migrants generate and apply business resources in Russia. Central Asian citizens proved to adopt a pro-active approach to economic integration in Russia; they took strategic actions to improve their well-being (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019). More particularly, they referred to their workplaces as business incubators and sources of capital where they obtained business knowledge, built networks and raised funding. This finding extends the importance of former employment for migrant entrepreneurship far beyond any financial benefits, which complements and advances previous studies (e.g., Basu and Pruthi 2021). In sum, the present research points to waged employment as a 'generative mechanism' of business capital formation (Storti 2014: 524).

In the process of resource generation, the migrants learned from and leveraged the informality of the Russian economy. In other words, during employment, many migrants turned from being outsiders into being 'competitive players' who know how 'to manipulate the system to their own advantage' (Ledeneva 2006: 1). However, informality proved to be both constraining and enabling, in line with the previous studies of, for example, Ledeneva (2006) and Polese (2023). On the one hand, it limited the methods and slowed down the processes of resource generation. Exploitation and underpayment, to which migrants are susceptible, may have resulted in them postponing their engagement in entrepreneurship (Interviewee 3). On the other hand, nonetheless, informality enabled migrants to comprehensively learn the business models of former employers as well as to appropriate resources such as client bases (Interviewee 18) and labour forces (Interviewee 7). Extending the idea of Polese (2023) of informal practices as forms of resistance, the current research suggests that informality may serve as an access gate to resources that are otherwise denied to migrants by the Russian state and society.

The acquired resources helped migrants to overcome some structural barriers to entrepreneurship, such as an insufficient legal status (Interviewee 17) (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Volery 2007). However, they appear to demonstrate a limited capacity to fight structural impediments; for example, the resources may be unable to free migrants from the labour-intensive, low-profit industries to which they are condemned due to labour-migration regulations and xenophobia (Mukomel 2013; Zhanaltay 2018). As this study has demonstrated, migrants tend to move from waged to self-employment within the same industry. Migrants' entrapment in those industries can be partially attributed to informality; each industry has its own informal practices and requires specific networks that are often unavailable to outsiders (Ledeneva 2006). Having learned the peculiarities of one business model in one industry via their employment, migrants refer to its replication as a low-risk strategy for launching a business in this non-transparent environment. Doing business outside of an industry of former employment was discussed as a probable way to fail (Interviewee 1). Therefore, the ambivalent nature of informality is reconfirmed; while it limits the choice of industries for business activities, it nevertheless provides new strategies of market adaptation and risk reduction.

The described strategy appears to be fairly common among Central Asian migrants in Russia; half of the survey respondents and half of the interviewees replicated the business models of their former employers. Therefore, to distinguish this phenomenon from other entrepreneurial practices of migrants, the current paper has proposed the use of the tentative concept of *offshoot migrant entrepreneurship*. It is closely related to terms such as spin-off and offshoot in economics; briefly defined, an offshoot is a new company created by a parent firm. However, the proposed concept of *offshoot migrant entrepreneurship* aims to focus on the initiative of an emergent migrant entrepreneur and his or her agency in the creation of a new firm. It suggests that a newly formed business offshoots from a prior enterprise by borrowing its business model, practices, resources and essential links to other parts of the business ecosystem. Therefore, based on the current research, offshoot migrant entrepreneurship can be defined as migrants' transition from waged to self-employment through the replication of a business model of a former employer. As resources have been proved to preserve the competitive edge of enterprises (Eroğlu 2018; Stringfellow and Shaw 2008; Volery 2007), effective replication is possible only when similar resources are available to those who aim for it. Due to their former roles as employees and the informality of the Russian economy, the migrants had an opportunity to generate similar resources and proceed with this replication. This concept represents the first attempt to describe the phenomenon; it requires further elaboration and welcomes contributions by other relevant studies. Is offshoot entrepreneurship inherent in informal, less-regulated markets? Is it practiced solely by migrants?

The current research also suggests several implications for practice. The study points to the need to examine the entrepreneurial activities of migrants in the broader context of their economic life in a host state. In other words, future research may pay more attention to the connections between the various stages of migrants' economic integration – for instance, employment and entrepreneurship, unemployment and entrepreneurship and maternal leave and entrepreneurship. This approach might not only help to better map trajectories of migrants' economic integration but may also facilitate more effective interventions by policy-makers. As this study suggests, to understand the business practices of migrants, one may have to refer to practices employed at their former workplaces. The spread of potentially undesirable practices may be hard to prevent unless they are eliminated in places of employment. Moreover, to free migrants from low-profit, labour-intensive niche industries and unleash their innovative business potential, the barriers to employment in innovative, high-income industries should be removed. These measures might contribute to the creation of a more-inclusive business environment in post-Soviet states and beyond.


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The Meaning of Education in Migrants' Experiences: The Case of High-Skilled Migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland

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Education is a meritocratic determinant which is perceived as a means to go ahead: the higher one's education is, the higher one's social status and income is (or should be). The literature in the field is limited in viewing education abroad as a way of accumulating human capital and valorising on the host labour market to gain an international career. However, education (abroad) can also entail life experiences and travel and a 'second chance' at success, where a decision about education abroad is not solely made for the sake of education but is also influenced by other social and political factors. This article sheds light on the different meanings and use of education (abroad) by high-skilled Azerbaijanis who migrate to Poland. Preliminary findings from biographical narrative interviews demonstrate that the meanings of education are more complex, with no single narrative. Pre-migration education is highly emphasised by both the internal and the external environment. Yet, within the migratory trajectory, education is utilised for different purposes, including as a motive for an 'escape from' troubles and conflicts in Azerbaijan. This takes place against the backdrop of the specifics of the Polish labour market accompanied by economic growth and facilitating policies, as well as the efforts of migrants to maintain their social class, while trying to outsmart institutional mechanisms in Poland.

Keywords: education abroad; escape from motive; biographical narrative interviews; migration from Azerbaijan to Poland

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Introduction

There is a lot of emphasis on education as one of the primary means of access to the labour market and eventually a road to success and higher social status. As such, getting an education is one of the ways of accumulating capital to raise the bar of one's employability and, hopefully, a successful career (Themelis 2017). An education abroad is strongly encouraged in this regard, especially with an emphasis on gaining internationally recognised qualifications, which will be expected to lead to international careers for many migrants on the host labour market. In fact, several studies have focused on the ways applied by migrants to accumulate cultural capital in the host country (Erel 2010; Erel and Ryan 2019). Nevertheless, migration for an education abroad is not a decision made solely to gain qualifications because it is also influenced by other social, political and cultural factors which can also entail travel and life experiences, as well as a 'second chance' at success (Brooks and Waters 2009). Additionally, it is not a choice that is made simply by the agents of migration for the sake of education and thus knowledge itself (Findlay 2011).

This paper explores the meaning behind education (abroad) as the driving factor for migration from a biographical perspective. It attempts to explain how meanings of education (abroad) shift in pre- and post-migration biographies and why. Although there is evidence of different views and uses of education (abroad), discussions heavily reflect the actual use of education for different purposes, leaving it at the instrumental level. Such a focus, however, neglects other potential views on education as well as the shifts in its meaning in biographies when it concerns migration. Thus, the multiple meanings of education are discussed in this paper, drawing on the cases of high-skilled migrants in Poland who come from middle-class families in Azerbaijan. I refer to the high-skilled as those having completed a tertiary education, including professionals such as tech professionals, managers, accountants, engineers, social workers and teachers, based on the OECD and World Bank definitions (Docquier and Marfouk 2006). The interviewees come from middle-class families and much of the literature discusses their migration as a means to preserve their status against the odds of the political and economic challenges faced in the home country (Limpongong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012). This is a particularly widely studied case for migration of the highly qualified, who also – as the evidence shows – opt for accumulating more capital, including an education in the host country, in order to prevent deskilling and to cope with the different challenges posed by career advancement (Al Ariss 2010; Zikic, Bonache and Cerdin 2010).

The case of Azerbaijanis within this context is also interesting to explore. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union (SU), with its economic and political challenges, education abroad was somewhat of a luxury, available only for the elite with their political capital and ties to the former SU, including the Russian Federation and some Western (European) countries to a limited degree (Rumyantsev 2013). However, the establishment of *Turkish lyceums* in the 1990s made education abroad more accessible, although primarily for middle class families, who viewed this as the road to education abroad, including in Turkey. Some of my interviewees, in fact, are graduates of these lyceums. Later, with the launch of government scholarships, education abroad became accessible on a meritocratic basis in Azerbaijan. The first round of scholarships was launched between 2007 and 2015, followed by the second launch which started in 2019 and has continued throughout 2023 (Musayev 2021).

That said, despite the high emphasis on education abroad – both as part of a political agenda and encouraged by the internal environment (family etc.) – as the means to gain knowledge and accumulate capital, I argue that for high-skilled Azerbaijani migrants in Poland, education (abroad) carries multiple meanings. It becomes, in fact, a secondary motive for the purpose of migration, which becomes a solution to 'escape from' troubles they have experienced in Azerbaijan and a way to maintain their middle-class background. Furthermore,

facilitating policies allowing access to the labour market for the full-time students in Poland provide a fruitful ground for Azerbaijanis to manoeuvre and utilise education (abroad) for such purposes.

In what follows, I first discuss the different motives behind education (abroad). I then examine migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland for the purpose of education and the literature on the economic growth of Poland. Lastly, I provide evidence of my findings from biographical narrative interviews conducted with high-skilled Azerbaijani migrants with a middle-class background in Poland. I also discuss these findings in accordance with the specificities of certain policies that provide easy access to the Polish labour market for migrants at a time of economic growth, as well as the fact that an education in Poland is more accessible for Azerbaijanis through the help of intermediaries in Azerbaijan.

Different motives behind education (abroad)

Education has long been discussed as one of the merits defining the future of an individual with the expectation of return in rewards; as such, it was associated with the idea of ‘learning leading to earning’ (Becker 1993). On the one hand, various studies documented individuals’ perceptions about education as meritocratic and a means to advance professionally (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012; Kunovich and Slomczynski 2007); on the other, education is also viewed as contributing to inequalities, leaving behind those who cannot keep up with the competition for places at higher-education institutions (Goldthorpe 2003; Sandel 2020). There is no doubt that education, as referred by Bourdieu (1986), is a cultural capital which is best leveraged and converted to acquire economic capital – particularly in its institutionalised form, it is supposed to guarantee the outcome. The strategies applied by migrants to accumulate and utilise their capital are highly significant, ‘as temporal and geographic trajectories and dimensions of constituting and mobilising capital are key to understanding how migrants make use of them’ (Erel 2010: 647).

Education abroad as cultural capital is studied both in terms of institutionalised capital and knowledge as such and of social capital for the connections and networks gained as a result of studying (Dustmann and Glitz 2011; Waters and Brooks 2011). It is also viewed as the pathway to the host-country labour market and, subsequently, an international career and higher social mobility and status (Robertson, Hoare and Harwood 2011). The two views on education abroad are not mutually exclusive. Studies on the perceptions of education abroad by different migrants, including those from the UK, India and Georgia, reveal that the majority are keen to access it because they believe in its rewards – such as international careers, a better life and higher qualifications (Findlay, Prazere, McCollum and Packwood 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018). Moreover, the decisions are not only made by the agents themselves but also by the influence of their families. In this regard, the expectations of family members are a guarantee of the journey for education abroad being made by their children, be it through qualifications gained or careers undertaken. In some cases, parents play a significant role in directing their children towards certain educational paths by choosing relevant schools (Keskiner 2015).

Yet, the background and class ascription of individuals in search of an education abroad reflect different motives and unequal experiences, which are also dependent on the background of the specifics of the country of origin. These characteristics lead individuals to opt for an education abroad as a life strategy (Marcu 2015). For those coming from a less-advantageous economic background, an education abroad is viewed as a solution to the instability whereby they are expected to remain in host countries. Those originating from the middle classes tend to perceive migration for education abroad as a life experience and an excuse for travel; this is also the case for those who have some family members overseas, who encourage and push for such mobility, particularly those from leading Western countries (Brooks and Waters 2009; Findlay *et al.* 2017). Education abroad is also viewed as the ‘second chance’ in success. This particular category mainly concerns the

individuals who, after having failed succeeding in admission to prestigious local high education institutions, decide to try their chances abroad (Brooks and Waters 2009). Additionally, an education abroad is also a means for employers to compete for global talent, whose agents are viewed as potential labour migrants (Li and Lowe 2016). Labour-market policies in Poland, with the country's recent economic growth and the availability of foreign employers, both provide a beneficial environment for such purposes.

While there is an extensive emphasis on the different motives behind an education abroad based on the evidence and its actual utilisation in the host country for different purposes, the question arises as to whether an education abroad can, in fact, serve merely as a means to get away from home rather than acquiring knowledge? What if its use can only be reflected in the documentation process and, in fact, may lose its significance for learning once there is migration involved? What if this becomes a strategy for migrants to have legal access to the Polish labour market and nothing more? To be able to reflect on these questions, there is a need for some insight into the context of both the Polish labour market and migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland, as discussed below.

Polish economic growth and labour-market specificity

In countries with relatively high emigration rates and, consequently, labour-market demands for a foreign workforce, policies allowing easier access to the labour market become useful. This concerns not only post-education employment but also – and more importantly – employment during the period of study. In this regard, Poland is an interesting case, as individuals enrolled in Polish higher-education institutions on a full-time basis are automatically granted access to employment on the Polish labour market. Moreover, work permits are not mandatory for them. Such facilitating political instruments might be for several reasons, such as Poland's recent economic growth and the labour market demands for an additional workforce in the face of demographic changes in the country.

Poland has seen steady economic growth in the last 10 years, becoming one of the fastest-growing EU member states. This was due to a stable annual growth in GDP of 3.6 per cent between 2004 and 2016, unlike overall EU growth, which was 1.5 per cent – achieved through expanding domestic consumption and foreign investments (Kaczmarczyk 2018). Consequently, in 2017, *circa* 122,000 workplaces could not be filled, in particular in agriculture, machinery and trade (Babakova 2018). In addition, the fruitful environment for business, lower labour costs and taxes, as well as a relatively good life attracted a number of transnational companies to Poland, which raised the bar for demands for a foreign workforce primarily in skilled work and provided the grounds for facilitating policies incentivising migration to the country and access to its labour market. Thus, it is not surprising that there have been several amendments to the existing laws that aimed to relatively stabilise employment and which were initially considered on a temporary basis. The changes were reflected in a stricter control of the conditions of civil-law contracts which are mostly characterised by unstable and insecure jobs as well as in the extension of the period of employment without a work permit from 6 months to up to 2 years within the framework of the so-called policy tool of *declaration to entrust a job to a foreigner* (Gajdos, Arendt, Balcerzak and Pietrzak 2020). It is worth noting that the employment opportunities in Poland through the above-mentioned declaration are addressed to the citizens of 5 countries – Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In fact, many employers tend to benefit from such facilitating policies due to the economies to be made in both time and finances for the recruitment procedure, with no obligation for applicants to apply for work permits and the lower salaries offered both during and after their graduate studies. Such a vision might be tempting for both migrants coming to Poland for education purposes and for employers. As a result, an education abroad can become instrumentally used by individuals as a means to *migrate* to Poland or to easily

deal with documentation in the recruitment process. In support of this, it is worth mentioning that the decision about migration for education is not solely made for the purpose of education and the commodification of any acquired knowledge in the future. It can, in fact, be made within different social, political and cultural contexts where personal factors and perceptions might also play a role (Findlay 2011; Li and Bray 2007; Li and Lowe 2016). In fact, labour-market policies in Poland provide fruitful grounds for migrants opting for earning rather than learning, even those who initially migrate for educational reasons, with current institutional mechanisms easy to manoeuvre.

Recent migration flows from Azerbaijan to Poland

Immigration from Azerbaijan to Poland is a more recent trend compared to that of its neighbouring countries in the South Caucasus. Compared to migrants from Georgia and Armenia, the number of migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland is relatively lower, although increasing flows are observed. Starting from 2016, Poland was one of the first 5 EU countries to host the majority of Azerbaijanis with valid permits, together with France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Czechia. Poland soon became the EU country hosting the second-greatest number of Azerbaijanis with valid permits in 2017 (2,105), 2018 (3,080) and 2019 (1,958) outnumbered only by France, having granted the valid permits of 3,454 for 2017, 3,560 for 2018 and 3,671 for 2019 (Eurostat 2021).

Poland and Azerbaijan have visa regulations and the primary channels through which Azerbaijani nationals arrive in Poland are education and, recently and more often, employment for both low- and high-qualified individuals. Concerning the former, students from Azerbaijan were in the top 5 numbers of foreign students from Asia in Poland for 2019 (Statistics Poland 2020b). Moreover, between 2018 and 2021, the number of students from Azerbaijan in Poland increased threefold. While, in 2020, there were only 479 students, in 2021 this number rose to 1,416 students (Statistics Poland, n.d.). There are at least 2 reasons for such an increase: firstly, education in Poland is more accessible to students from Azerbaijan – it also promises a period spent in the EU and a diploma from an EU-based educational institution for relatively cheap tuition fees compared to other EU states; and, secondly, being enrolled in a Polish higher-education institution allows migrants direct access to the labour market both during and after their studies – seen as a great opportunity to gain work experience in the EU. The latter is the reason why many migrants from Azerbaijan, after arriving in Poland, are in fact prone to resigning from the university after being granted an employment contract. On the other hand, employers recruit students more easily when the latter are automatically granted access to the labour market, requiring less time spent on recruitment while benefitting from paying relatively lower salaries to students. Additionally, there are a number of intermediaries, such as private companies in Azerbaijan which organise education abroad and which provide help and advice in application process for interested students through their partner universities. Some of the interviewees were also familiar with these agencies and a few had even had consultations with them. Moreover, connections in Poland also play a great role in attracting the interest of Azerbaijanis to apply for an education in Poland.

That said, education seems to be one of the easiest ways of dealing with the documentation procedure for Azerbaijani nationals, given the visa regulations between the countries, which might explain why there are comparatively fewer students from neighbouring Georgia than from Azerbaijan in Poland – for 2019 and 2020, there were nearly 3 times fewer Georgian students in Poland compared to Azerbaijanis, with only 270 and 469 students respectively (Statistics Poland 2019, 2020a). This might be due to other options open to Georgians who migrate to Poland, such as the short-term non-visa regulations between Poland and Georgia and other facilitating policies – such as the *declaration to entrust a job to a foreigner*, as mentioned earlier – that allow for the official employment of Georgians without a work permit.

The data already demonstrate some tendencies of Azerbaijanis to migrate to Poland which might be more peculiar compared to other nationals. At first sight, education might be the reason for migration; however, it is, indeed, more complex according to the literature on the different motives behind education abroad. Although it might be expected that high-skilled migrants might highly value an education abroad as one of the merits in later seeking employment there – and, in fact, they do try to accumulate more capital in this regard – this paper questions these intentions by exploring how an education abroad is reflected in the biographies of highly qualified middle-class migrants, the multiple meanings for it and why.

Data method and sampling

The data for this article come from 11 biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983) conducted with migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland from October 2021 to April 2022. Biographical interviews are composed of life stories that are narrated where the different phases of life carry certain meanings for the interviewees which are examined through their connection to their overall biographies. Studying certain phenomena such as education within the context of a person's biography reveals the meanings that individuals attach to them, including how they explain their choices and interpret their experiences, both from an internal perspective and also through the various conditions that shaped those experiences (Rosenthal 2004). Education is central in a person's life, where it has certain meanings and emphasis in a biography and how the individual evaluates it. I used the narrative interviews for them to tell me their life stories, starting either from their childhood or from their migration to Poland. In the latter case, I later asked them to narrate more about their earlier years spent in Azerbaijan. In both cases, the interviewees provided detailed information about their educational paths, both pre- and post-migration, as well as about the role of education as they saw it and the meanings which they and their family members put on it both in Azerbaijan and abroad. Because biographies were central to the interviews, I explored the meanings of education in the biographies of high-skilled migrants from Azerbaijan, which made it possible for me to study the emphasis put on education and the expectations from it, from childhood to the present time. I explored the narratives about the role of *formal* education in their biographies.

Biographical narrative interviews were conducted with 7 men and 4 women living and working in Poland at the time of the interview, where the average duration of their residence in the country was about 5 years, with the minimum 2 years and the maximum 8 years. The shortest interview lasted for 2 hours and 5 minutes, while the longest took 3 hours and 23 minutes. Ten interviews were recorded in Azerbaijani and 1 in Russian, with the signed consent of the interviewees before the interviews took place. The interviews were transcribed in their respective languages accordingly and anonymised, including the interviewees' names.

The youngest interviewee was 25 years old and the oldest 41. While 5 of them had a Master's degree, 4 had a Bachelor's degree and 2 were finalising their Master's degree at the time of the interview. 5 of them received their master's degree in Poland. At the time of the interview, 9 of them were employed in education, finance, information and technology, while 2 were unemployed – with one searching for a job and another about to start work in a tech company. They were the residents of big cities, such as Warsaw, Krakow and Wroclaw. The interviewees were mainly recruited through acquaintances living in Poland. Thus far, the experience with recruitment reveals that migrants from Azerbaijan showed more trust and were more open when information about recruitment to my study was shared through their acquaintances and friends. The interviews analysed in this article, in fact, constitute a portion of the sample of my overall PhD project where I look at different mechanisms, including the (non-)meritocratic determinants, shaping Azerbaijani and Georgian migrants' careers on the labour market in Poland. The overall criteria of sample selection were age, gender, employment in both low- and high-skill occupations and education level. For this article, I analysed the pilot interviews in

which I noticed multiple meanings around the role of education – as a merit – explicitly shared in their narratives.

I analysed the data by applying a grounded theory method; I first coded certain segments of the texts, grouping them into categories, identifying their relationships and comparing them with each other (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Findings

Education (abroad) as a collective decision in pre-migration biographies

The interviewees were born and raised in middle-class families by parents who were highly skilled professionals such as teachers, doctors, engineers and economists. Since their childhood, they have received a lot of advice concerning the importance of education as a way to continue the family legacy and succeed in life. Their families held expectations about them pursuing a higher-education path and subsequently leading a successful life. Thus, the influence of the family on them receiving a formal education was central to their overall narratives about their educational paths. The main reason for this was that education was expected to bring rewards and to overcome poverty, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Yet education was also described as the ‘known road’ for the interviewees – one that they followed without questioning.

Almost all of Sattar’s family members were involved in science and he gives it as the reason for his own interest in science and for him ending up taking a similar educational path. He completed his Bachelor’s degree in Azerbaijan influenced by his family’s choice to pursue an education in environmental sciences. At the time of the interview, he was finalising his first Master’s degree in Poland and starting on his second one. He admitted: ‘All my family is about scientists. There would always be a saying in my family that science is first, whatever you do, you have to study, get education...’.

This was also due to the narrative of an *intellectual* family during the Soviet Union. The parents, having been educated in the Soviet Union, were aware of the importance of education and encouraged their children to study well at all costs. Interestingly, the narratives did not focus only around the expectations of the children of *intellectual* families by their parents but also by society. In this regard, Taleh’s interpretation of his biography as an *intellectual* child is intriguing.

Now they say intellectual children, like they are saying something like ‘Look at the father, look at the son’, there are such things... It was like this, this is both the effect and the result of that intellectual family, I think that I have been following that road, I am following it even now, it is normal... I was someone who grew up in such an environment. I would not even attempt to do something unusual; I would not even think of it... And this is what success is for most people, to have a good education, choose the right profession according to society, for ex: a lawyer, a great profession, it can work in any country. I wanted to say that I am exactly like, ‘Okay, you must get education, must study, must choose a good profession’.

Here Taleh refers to his *intellectual* family and relates it to his parents holding higher-education degrees in the Soviet Union, where they both worked as engineers and thus encouraged their children to pursue an education by creating such an environment. He thus implicitly differentiates them from those performing simple physical work, who were mostly uneducated during the Soviet regime. In fact, education was highly valued during the Soviet Union and the statement below, by Khrushchev (as cited in Zajda 1980: 5), gives an idea of the narrative

about the value of education in families where its failure is associated with the type of employment one will have to perform:

If a boy or girl does not study well, the parents and the people around them frighten the child by saying that, if he does not study well, failing to get a gold or silver medal (for academic excellence), he will not be able to get into university and will have to work in a factory as a common labourer.

It seems that the meaning given to formal education under the Soviet Union was quite high, despite the fact that the Soviet education system was, in fact, corrupt, taking the form of nepotism and bribes and where the family background and social connections – including their affiliation to the communist party – was seen as significant (Osipian 2009; Titma, Tuma and Roosma 2003). However, individuals' perceptions might not be compatible with the reality concerning their education during the Soviet Union. Azerbaijani engineers who received their education during the Soviet regime did not seem to perceive such cases as important (Ergun and Sayfutdinova 2021). Thus, it may come as no surprise that the value of education during the Soviet regime was significantly widespread among families as the road to success and social mobility. Later, with the collapse of the Soviet Union having led to the economic crisis and downward mobility of a number of individuals, education was viewed as a solution. In line with this, Araz narrates how his family, including his father, insisted on and controlled him being a straight 'A' student from his earlier days at school. His family would check his grades and punish him when he failed to get an 'A'. Araz justifies his family's views and actions in the following way:

They were afraid, they were afraid – my father, my aunt – my grandma was afraid that if you do not get admitted to the university, that's it, you will live in poverty and be wasted... As if you needed to study to be able to get admitted to university to reach the peaks in your life, to be intelligent and to have a good salary. This is the kind of fear people from the Soviet Union had... They were especially afraid because everything collapsed in the 1990s and everyone lived in poverty and people's status decreased; my father was at the Academy of Sciences and others were professors, or engineers at the plants and everything collapsed and people were selling tomatoes in bazaars.

Such a strong emphasis on formal education after the collapse of the Soviet regime might also be due to its transformation to a market economy. In fact, the Soviet regime was also characterised by the government benefits assigned to individuals for different purposes (Flanagan, Campbell, Botcheva, Bowes, Csapo, Macek and Sheblanova 2003). After the collapse of the regime, individuals started to rely on themselves once the realities associated with the market economy – and, thus, the role of qualities such as education – became central in the family narratives. Education was highly valued by the internal environment – such as the interviewee's family members who witnessed the Soviet and post-Soviet period – whereas education abroad was encouraged by the external environment such as educational institutions and in competition with peers.

Education abroad was also highly valued in Azerbaijan during the Soviet regime; a number of individuals received their education outside the country, mostly in Moscow and St Petersburg, given the colonial ties and the accessibility. A post-Soviet education abroad was initially more accessible to the children of political elites, which meant not only better employment but, more importantly, contributing to the *modernisation* of Azerbaijan (Rumyantsev 2013). In later periods, the establishment of *Turkish lyceums* created a pathway to higher education in Turkey, which was almost a guarantee since the curriculum was based on the programme applied in Turkey. With a limited number of scholarships available, studying at such lyceums was primarily on a paid basis, which made it largely accessible to the middle classes. In fact, between 2000 and 2022, Turkey

hosted the greatest number of Azerbaijanis studying on government scholarships, even more than the Russian Federation or other CIS countries (State Statistics Committee of Azerbaijan, n.d.).

Recently, however, education abroad has also been promoted in Azerbaijan as a political agenda. In fact, the government programme of 2007–2015, during which time 3,558 scholarships were awarded, was the first of its kind to allow an education abroad for citizens of Azerbaijan on a scholarship basis (Musayev 2021). In 2019, the second edition of the scholarship programme was launched and is expected to finalise in 2023. Moreover, the existence of different external scholarship programmes, including those of the UK, the US and the Visegrád countries, for the citizens of Azerbaijan made education abroad more accessible on a meritocratic basis. Thus, it was not surprising to see a strong emphasis on the importance of education abroad in the narratives of the interviewees. Education abroad was incentivised collectively in different ways: as a form of competition with one's peers – demonstrating one's abilities – and by the institutional environment. When Emma saw that her fellow students – whom she identified as 'rich and those who failed four times at exams which I passed' – were going to study abroad, she took it as a challenge and decided that 'If they go, I will also go. They go with money; I will go with a scholarship'. Her inner motive for studying abroad is also rooted in the meritocratic image of her success although, in fact, she faced some objections from her family, who did not at first support her idea of moving to another country.

Furthermore, an education abroad was related to 'finalising' one's qualifications – in particular in terms of receiving a Master's degree – which also took place in the context of disappointment with the education received in Azerbaijan and with the intention of getting a 'real education' and better employment. In both cases, an education abroad was encouraged by the internal and the external environment. Thus Ayla reflects on how she internalised the importance of an education abroad after having received a BA during her studies:

...when we were studying, that thing was kind of instilled in our minds that to study abroad is better, as if studying abroad is one way to get ahead. Today you studied; the next step is for you to study abroad, so that you could move forward and grow, going ahead. I was feeling deficiency because we were told at university that a BA is an undergraduate qualification, and that a graduate one is at least a Master's degree. But I felt that gap, that, no...

Education abroad, in particular with the intention of gaining a Master's degree, seems to be strongly correlated with the idea of making progress. The perception that an education abroad leads to growth and getting ahead was also documented in other studies (Findlay *et al.* 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018); however, in the case of Azerbaijanis, it mostly occurs through frustration with undergraduate studies followed in the country. Individuals felt the need to 'satisfy their thirst' by migrating for educational purposes, as Sattar describes in his narrative: 'All my life I was dreaming of science, but what science in Azerbaijan?! Ahhh yeah, I decided that I will apply for the university [in Poland]'. He later describes how he was 'craving' for science once he migrated to Poland and therefore decided to study for his second Master's degree there. Brooks and Waters (2009) describe the meaning of an education abroad for British students as a 'second chance' at success following their failure to get into the most highly rated UK universities – especially when they find equally good options elsewhere, such as in the US or Australia. The case of Azerbaijanis can also be labelled as a 'second chance' with the exception of the interviewees' frustration with education in Azerbaijan, especially in the post-Soviet era, which is characterised by poor quality, corruption and a lack of adequate resources. Thus, with the Azerbaijani education system having failed them, they begin to search for other alternatives for a successful education. Moreover, the frustration with education in Azerbaijan also concerns the discrepancies between the study programmes and the demands of the labour market, which also results in the unemployment of many young graduates (Amirova and Valiyev 2021).

Similarly, Bilal describes how his ‘dreams fell into the water’ following his BA studies in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. Later, he decided to migrate to Poland for further education after an exchange of information with his former fellow students who were both studying and working there at the time. Employment opportunities both during and after one’s education became an incentive for Bilal to migrate to Poland. This also happened, as he recalls, once he failed to get a higher IELTS score enabling him to study in ‘better’ universities in the UK or Germany and, in particular, after having failed to receive a student visa for his studies in Italy. As such, almost all the interviewees ended up in Poland – even though it was not their priority country. Poland thus became a ‘second chance’ at success for them, having failed with other universities/countries; the context of lower tuition fees relative to other EU states was also to their selection of Poland.

Education abroad as an ‘escape from’ motive

The narratives of my interviewees demonstrate that there are numerous perspectives on the decision made for the purpose of education abroad. This becomes more explicit when an education abroad or, more explicitly, enrolment at an educational institution, becomes a secondary motive for migration. Sattar migrated to Poland with his wife on a visa in order to attend a language course and ended up working in precarious jobs since his visa did not grant him access to the labour market. Similarly, Mahir used education as a means to migrate to Poland for employment purposes. He was admitted to one of the smaller universities in the south of Poland and, once arrived, started working as a taxi driver. Interestingly, in the interviewees’ biographies, education carries significant meaning. Some of them changed secondary schools at the initiative of their families – aiming at getting a better education – and continued their studies at Turkish lyciums.

By further exploring their biographies, it becomes evident that, in fact, an education abroad for my interviewees is not only a means to migrate but, consequently, also an ‘escape from’ motive rooted in their biographical trajectories of some kind of suffering in Azerbaijan and a solution to their desire to escape (Kazmierska, Piotrowski and Waniek 2011; Waniek 2019). An ‘escape from’ motive can refer to the somewhat dire conditions seen in a person’s biography – with such push factors as being in serious trouble and suffering from distress and affliction; it can also refer to other conditions, including economic challenges and other biographical conditions, as documented by Kazmierska *et al.* (2011: 149). Although my informants did not seem to have suffered too deeply, the experiences they had before migration to Poland shaped their idea of Azerbaijan being a solution to their situation, given that they had conflicts with different institutions – authoritative and educational institutions, as well as previous employers – and disagreements with their families. Kamila saw migration as a solution to her mental stress back in Azerbaijan following a conflictual situation with her employer and a friend, whereas Bilal was determined to leave the country after being in trouble with the local authorities: ‘I told myself that, even they pay me one million USD to stay or tell me to come, I do not need that and that was it. I applied to Italy, it did not work out so I came to Poland’.

Araz had numerous conflicts with his previous employers back in Azerbaijan regarding payments and unfair treatment, whereas Taleh saw no further perspectives with his qualifications and therefore migration to Poland was a solution, especially with the labour demand there in the field of IT. The ‘escape from’ motive in this context is also supported by the intention of the highly skilled to preserve their social status through migration, especially after various challenges in home country. Several studies discussed the migration of the highly qualified individuals as a way for them to maintain their middle-class status instead of fighting against the politically and economically driven issues that might have threatened their status in the home country (Limpongong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012). Moreover, as Azevedo, Atamanov and Rajabov (2014: 11) point out, ‘the growing middle class... is the most unstable group and the people who comprise it have non-

negligible chances of moving to the vulnerable or poor groups'. While opting for migration, with an education mostly incentivised as a secondary motive, Azerbaijanis were also, in fact, making efforts to maintain their social status by 'escaping from' the situations that made them vulnerable; and they saw no other way than migration, which came at a relatively lower cost and with a beneficial labour-market environment in Poland.

Education abroad as a way of outsmarting institutional mechanisms

Although some of my informants arrived in Poland for educational purposes and were enrolled at universities, they ended up working without completing their education. This was possible because a full-time student status automatically grants access to the labour market in Poland and a person does not need to obtain a work permit. Demand for an additional workforce, easier recruitment procedures as well as personal connections were of great importance in their employment while being a student. Employers, in fact, are more interested in hiring students due to lower wages to be paid, easier access through universities as well as less time spent on the overall recruitment process (Evans, Pucik and Barsoux 2002; Peltokorpi and Froese 2009). Due to an easily accessible Polish labour market that does not necessarily demand that the applicants have locally acquired qualifications, learning was not a priority for some of the interviewees. Furthermore, having a student status becomes some kind of 'migration tactic', as formulated by one of the interviewees – Bilal – whereby it is possible to outsmart institutional mechanisms related to education and recruitment.

I am still thinking huh, I would give 2,500PLN to X [names the university], for one semester, I will be a student of that university and I will change company, these are the tactics of migration, I am sharing with you... I get a student status, I change company, I give the document for HR to take all the needed information and details and then, if I leave university, then I leave, so what?!

Even though Bilal seemed satisfied with his studies in Poland and just had to work on his dissertation to complete his education, he withheld paying his tuition fees and 'froze' his education. During the second year of his studies, he started to work in finance and later also launched his own business in Poland. At the time of the interview, his business needed some financial commitment and he preferred to invest in his business, rather than pay the tuition fees to continue his studies. Moreover, in her narrative, Kamila spoke of how she used her enrolment at a higher-education institution in Poland for visa purposes, which would allow her to migrate to Poland with her husband and later decided to withdraw due to challenges with commuting.

The easiest way to come here / coming as a married couple, the processes are more difficult. The easiest way is to apply for a visa as a student and get accepted. Actually, I just came here, I didn't study at the university, because our university was in the city of X [names the city]. And my husband got a job in X [names the city], they are about 5 hours apart, so it was impossible to go back and forth, so I had to leave the university.

It is evident that, from the beginning, Kamila's intention was not to get education but, rather, to settle legally in Poland through a visa based on her enrolment at the university, which ensures and facilitates her arrival in Poland. Thus, she also outsmarts the justification of her visa to arrive in Poland with her husband.

Outsmarting certain systems becomes a solution and a strategy to leverage the available options to one's benefit, as was the case of the uber drivers in Poland (Polkowska and Mika 2022). In so doing, the uber drivers went beyond what was permissible based on the regulations and navigated the systems to get as much earnings as possible. Although the interviewees did not, in any way, violate the rules, they manoeuvred the existing

institutional mechanisms in light of gaps available to benefit from the labour market in Poland. The typical scenario of outsmarting an institutional mechanism in Poland is as follows: enrolment at a university > applying for a job > recruitment > leaving the university. When changing employers, migrants would sometimes again opt to enroll at a university in order to gain a student status, as Kamila did when she received another job offer.

As such, it seems that, within the context of the Polish labour market, earning becomes more of a priority than learning. This is particularly crucial when referring to the earlier evidence on the middle classes' efforts to maintain their social status to which migration is also a central factor. Nevertheless, earning is also a priority due to the financial challenges faced in the post-migration period. Although Emma's education in Poland was related to cultural studies, she ended up working in finance because there was a demand in that field for workers and she knew she would have good benefits. Emma, in fact, received a scholarship in cultural studies to enable her to migrate to Poland, whereas education was not a priority for her, as she repeatedly touched on in her narrative:

I did not take my Master's degree seriously, just treated it as something in order to stay here, to have a visa and be able to work, not to study, no, not study; and the field was an unrelated field and I am saying again, in fact this was the only field that suited me to come here and I applied – and I came.

Although Emma completed her degree in Poland, she did not study for the purpose of acquiring knowledge. Despite the fact that she had a good job back in Azerbaijan where she was also offered a promotion, she preferred to migrate because she felt exhausted both physically and mentally. She saw education abroad as the 'escape from' her burdens, hoping in the meantime to preserve her status and continue to succeed, as she had back in her home country.

Conclusion

Mobility for educational purposes is separate from other types of mobility in many studies, mainly because the research limits itself to exploring education abroad, primarily from the 2 perspectives of accumulating human capital and acquiring an international career, as demonstrated in several studies (Findlay *et al.* 2017; Gorgoshidze 2010; King and Sondhi 2018). However, the motives behind education abroad also depend on the migrant's social class; in fact, for those coming from a less-economically advantageous background, education abroad is a kind of life strategy and a solution to their economic instability in the country of origin while, for the middle classes, it is also the reason for or a kind of strategy of at least preserving their social status by migrating (Brooks and Waters 2009; Findlay *et al.* 2017; Marcu 2015; Waters 2005).

This study has tried to demonstrate that the motives behind an education (abroad) are, in fact, more complex and there is no single narrative based on the evidence of the biographical narrative interviews conducted with high-skilled migrants from Azerbaijan in Poland. When comparing pre- and post-migration periods, the biographical exposure allowed me to explore more in-depth meanings to education (abroad), shaped since the early years of the interviewee's lives, as well as how and why the meaning of education and its actual utilisation changes. As such, formal education seems to have an important meaning in the earlier stages of their lives, heavily influenced by the family and the social environment, given that they come from a middle-class background where their parents also held highly qualified positions. Such an importance accorded to education is rooted in the expectation of education in return for rewards and as a solution to economic challenges, particularly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This, in addition to the realities of the capitalist regime – unlike communism, where an individual learns to rely on him- or herself and having fewer expectations from

the government. This was also accompanied by the political and economic instability whereby education was viewed as the solution to eventually having some sort of economic resilience against the environment.

Additionally, education abroad serves as ‘a second chance’ at success against the backdrop of frustration and dissatisfaction with the education system in Azerbaijan. It becomes highly available due to intermediaries in Azerbaijan – primarily private companies that facilitate the admission process to higher-education institutions in Poland and lower tuition fees compared to other EU countries; having connections in Poland facilitates its selection as a host country for those with a middle-class background who wish to migrate for educational purposes.


After further exploring the biographies of the interviewees, it becomes evident that education abroad serves as an ‘escape from’ motive – as a strategy to migrate from Azerbaijan and the conflicts and troublesome situations they have experienced with employers, families and local authorities. In fact, the ‘escape from’ motive is central to their overall decision to migrate – in which they use the most accessible means to do so – an education abroad. Indeed, it becomes a secondary motive for migration purposes, where it is also utilised instrumentally as an easier way to arrive in Poland, as well as to access the labour market while outsmarting some institutional mechanisms – thus earning becomes more important than learning. This all represents a life strategy to maintain their social class through migration, as is the case for the middle classes (Limpongong 2013; Mapril 2014; Torresan 2012; Waters 2005).

As such, contrary to the evidence on the highly skilled migrants’ accumulation of cultural capital enabling them to continue to advance in their career in the host labour market (Al Ariss 2010; Zikic *et al.* 2010), this article has brought new perspectives into the discussions. In fact, it has gone beyond the existing scope of education (abroad) as being merely meritocratic – cultural capital is expected to bring in rewards – such as a better career and future and economic stability, as documented in the studies by Gorgoshidze (2010), King and Sondhi (2018), Marcu (2015) and Findlay *et al.* (2017). Unlike the previous research mentioned above, this article has demonstrated how education (abroad) can have meaning, rather than simply being endorsed as a merit or capital leading to an international career. It has shown that education (abroad) bears a rather complex character utilised for different purposes within the migration trajectory and, in this particular case, migration from Azerbaijan to Poland. What is more, sometimes its function ceases simply on enrollment at a university as a result of certain policies, when earning prevails over learning. Consequently, education (abroad) becomes an instrument to facilitate existing institutional mechanisms, while migrants continue to apply different strategies in relation to migration and employment in the host country. Although this study is limited, focusing only on those highly skilled migrants coming from middle-class families in Azerbaijan, the complex meanings on education (abroad) grounded in their experiences provide a valuable insight into the state-of-the-art, especially given the biographical context.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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(Non-)Moderating the Migration and Mobility of EU Citizens: A Literature Review

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This article presents a systematic literature review of 84 English-language publications which analysed findings concerning how institutions addressed and moderated different patterns and challenges of migration and mobility within the European right of free movement zone. The synopsis of the publications shows the ignorance of many institutions towards migrating and mobile EU citizens, due to conflicts of interest and the dismissal of responsibilities. The lack of coordination between political levels and the missing implementation of equal rights have exclusionary effects for vulnerable groups and show ambivalences of the European integration process.

Keywords: intra-EU migration, freedom of movement, institutional action, multi-level governance, European integration, labour mobility, social inclusion

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Introduction

The right of free movement is a ‘by-product’ of the European integration process (Johns 2014: 17). It had already been enshrined in the 1957 Treaty of Rome as part of the common internal market and is, today, one of the core components of a consolidated European Union. The elaboration and implementation of free movement indicate the current state of European integration (Roos and Westerveen 2020), also because the intra-EU movements of citizens provoke and open up institutional action that differs from other forms of migration – such as visa-controlled labour migration or refuge due to war. Despite a few restrictions, an EU citizen decides on his/her own if he/she wants to stay in another country, for example, as an employee, a student, self-employed, a family member or for retirement. The freedom induced diverse short-term, long-term and circular patterns of migration and mobility within Europe. In 2019, 17.9 million EU28 citizens lived in another EU member state (Fries-Tersch, Jones and Siöland 2021).¹ According to European law, they have equal rights as nationals. However, their position as an (EU) citizen and migrant challenges the multi-level European institutional setting.

From the local to the European level, a complex landscape of institutions is involved and interwoven to develop policies and strategies as responses to the freedom of movement. Their actions shape the conditions under which EU citizens work in another member state, how they arrive – for example, in terms of (good) housing – how they access support systems and social services and how they return or settle in another member state. The scope ranges from supporting intra-EU migrants in emergencies to motivating young citizens to gain experience abroad.

However, different institutions at diverse levels have varying goals and challenges. Stakeholders at the local level can make use of new opportunities and have to deal with the consequences that result from freedom of movement (Scholten 2018; van Ostaijen and Scholten 2018). In German cities, for example, there is discussion of how governmental actors can react to precarious living conditions of intra-EU migrants (e.g. Bruzelius 2020). In Romania, the debate considers local networks to ensure the welfare of children whose parents work abroad (e.g. Balaban and Huțuleac 2021). At the same time, companies and agencies have recruitment strategies for skilled workers for care and crafts, which may be lacking in their home country (e.g. Bermudez and Brey 2017). European institutions support migration and mobility by funding schemes like Erasmus+ and by cooperation through, *inter alia*, the EURES network (e.g. Heimann 2021). Moreover, within European multi-level governance, challenges exist due to the different legislative competencies and national institutional path dependencies – examples of which are the different welfare systems in Germany and Denmark (Martinsen and Werner 2019).

Against the backdrop of the European integration process, this article sets out to gather together discussions on this complex landscape of institutions and their interactions across levels and policies. Here, institutions are understood in the narrow sense as organisations (Hodgson 2006). These include formal social actors – such as authorities, courts and schools – and actors whose organisational form contributes significantly to social life, such as companies and associations. Taking historical and discursive institutionalist perspectives, these institutions’ actions result from specific contextual conditions within and outside of the institutions (Thelen 1999) and are reasoned by a set of ideas as policies, programmes and philosophies (Schmidt 2008). Context and ideas (re-)produce and are (re)produced in communicative and coordinative discourses and, thus, induce specific institutional logics leading to certain policy outcomes. While the communicative discourse concerns the necessity and appropriateness of policies (see, e.g., Roos and Westerveen 2020; van Ostaijen 2017), ‘the coordinative discourse consists of the individuals and groups at the center of policy construction who are involved in the creation, elaboration, and justification of policy and programmatic ideas’ (Schmidt 2008: 310).

The article puts the coordinative discourse at centre stage and presents key findings from the scientific literature regarding the logics of institutional action in different policy fields. The aim is to better understand current policies existing at the intersection of migration, social inclusion, the labour market and regional

development provoked by the EU right of free movement and to deduce implications for the European integration process. For the methodological approach, a systematic literature review was used to map the state of knowledge on institutional action. Various academic disciplines studied the institutional arrangements across levels and policies in different thematic areas. This review contributes to an interdisciplinary discussion and does not pay special attention to particular disciplinary debates such as European citizenship, minority studies or labour relations.

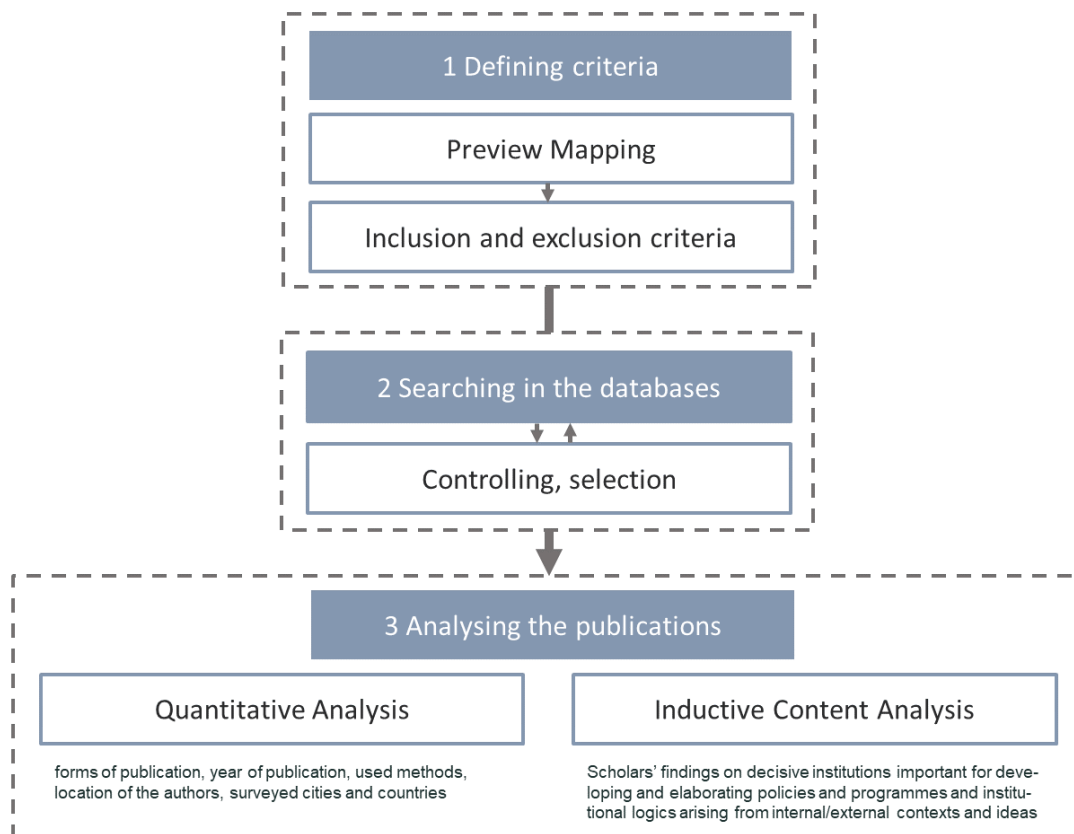
Analysis of the scientific publications identified organisations decisively shaping policies in the context of intra-EU migration and mobility and revealed what is discussed about the institutional logics that induce current policy outcomes. Thus, this article's institutionalist (and interdisciplinary) approach shows crucial ambivalences within the European integration process. Different institutional logics in the coordinative discourse surrounding the intra-EU migration and mobility enable the rejection of responsibility, enhance the neoliberal migration and integration paradigm, put vulnerable groups at risk and hinder the development of policies for the benefit of *all* EU citizens.

The following section explains the methodological approach of the systematic literature review. The results are then presented from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The article closes with a discussion of the results.

Methodological approach

The literature review was carried out according to the guidelines provided by Xiao and Watson (2019), aiming primarily at a description of the research field (narrative review, Xiao and Watson 2019: 95). The study was conducted in 3 steps: *Defining the criteria*; *Searching in the databases* and *Analysing the publications* (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic procedure of the literature review



Defining the criteria

The first step was to determine the thematic scope of the field. The mapping of relevant terms in scientific databases revealed a broad field of national and international publications concerned with various types of migration and mobility (e.g. high-skilled workers, student mobility, seasonal workers, poverty migration, transnational and lifestyle migrants) and different territorial levels (local, national, European) deemed helpful to the discussion. However, a systematic literature review on intra-European migration and mobility *and* their institutional negotiation was not found.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sample were defined. The review includes scientific literature from journals, monographs, edited volumes and reports published from 1997 onwards.² It excludes newspaper articles, contributions with purely informational content, political position papers and the like. It also excludes academic publications that generally focus on migration (in Europe) or institutional practices. As a result of the preview mapping, it should be noted that many aspects of intra-EU migration and mobility are described in practice-oriented publications and the journalistic field.

Searching in the databases

For the search, combinations of the following search terms were used: ‘intra-eu*’, ‘EU citizen’, ‘European citizen’, ‘euro*’, ‘in the EU’, ‘mobility’, ‘migration’, ‘freedom of movement’, ‘EU’, ‘institution*’, ‘integration’ and ‘local’ (for example the combination: ‘intra-eu*’ AND ‘mobility’ OR ‘migration’ AND ‘institution*’). The search was conducted mainly in April and May 2021 (databases: Web of Science, Google Scholar) and supplemented in July 2023 (database: Web of Science) covering publications until the end of June 2023. The publications’ titles and abstracts were reviewed regarding the defined criteria and their relevance to the research question. In this process, many publications were excluded. In particular, many contributions were not considered because no explicit reference to the actions of specific institutions was discernible (for example, ethnographical studies on the arrival processes from the perspectives of migrants) or because intra-EU migration/mobility played no or only a subordinate role (for example, publications about general considerations of institutional negotiation processes at the European level). Challenging, here, was the different use of the term *institution*, as some scholars used a broad term – for example, the legal system as an institution. The boundary could not be clearly drawn due to the lack of definitions in the publications. Publications about the role of intra-EU migration (and the changed framework) when the UK left the EU were also not considered for this review since the case is particular in Europe. Eighteen contributions could not be included due to a lack of availability.³ Bibliographies of single sources were scanned for publications that fit the review but were missing and this backward search added 15 publications to the study. Finally, this study includes 84 highly relevant publications.

Analysing the publications

The quantitative analysis refers to the forms of publication, the publication year, the author’s location, and the European cities and countries surveyed. This gives an overview of the scope of the publications considered. The qualitative analysis followed the principles of inductive content analysis. The first step was grouping according to the topics discussed. Secondly, against the background of the institutionalist perspective described in the introduction, the following questions guided the interpretation: What institutions are described? What findings do scholars present about how these institutions develop and elaborate on policies and programmes? What institutional logics arising from internal and external contexts and/or ideas are discussed in the

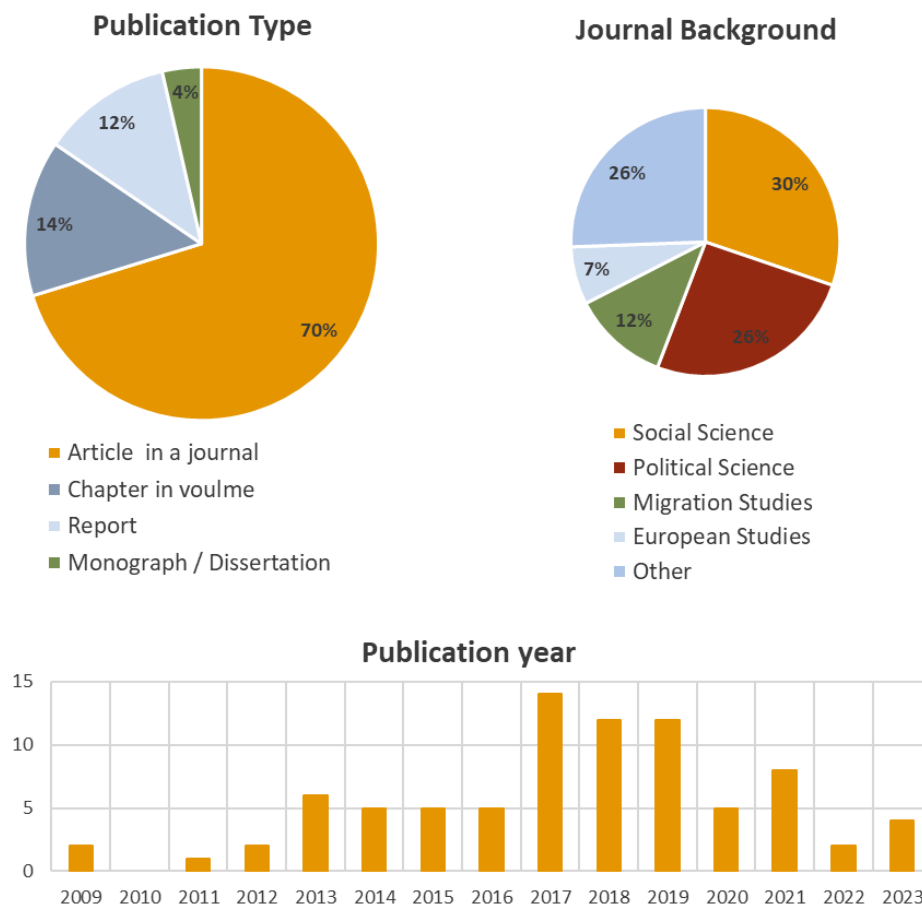
publications as being important for developing and elaborating on policies and programmes? Thirdly, this study intertwined the central results within the topics and concluded indications for the European integration process.

Quantitative analysis

Of the publications included, more than two-thirds are articles published in one of 43 different journals (see Figure 2). Most journals have a social and political science background. It should be noted that many journals have an interdisciplinary understanding, especially in migration research. Assignment to social and political science is primarily based on information provided by publishers but often invokes interdisciplinarity. The review included 12 chapters of 4 edited volumes. The most important volumes in the field of research were Lafleur and Stanek (2017a), Magazzini and Piemontese (2019), and Scholten and van Ostaijen (2018). Furthermore, the study comprises 10 research reports and 3 dissertations as monographs.

The overview of publication periods (Figure 2) shows that the number of publications on the research question increased from 2013 onwards. Most of the publications appeared between 2017 and 2019, including the volumes mentioned.

Figure 2. A quantitative overview: Type of publication, background of the journals and year of publication

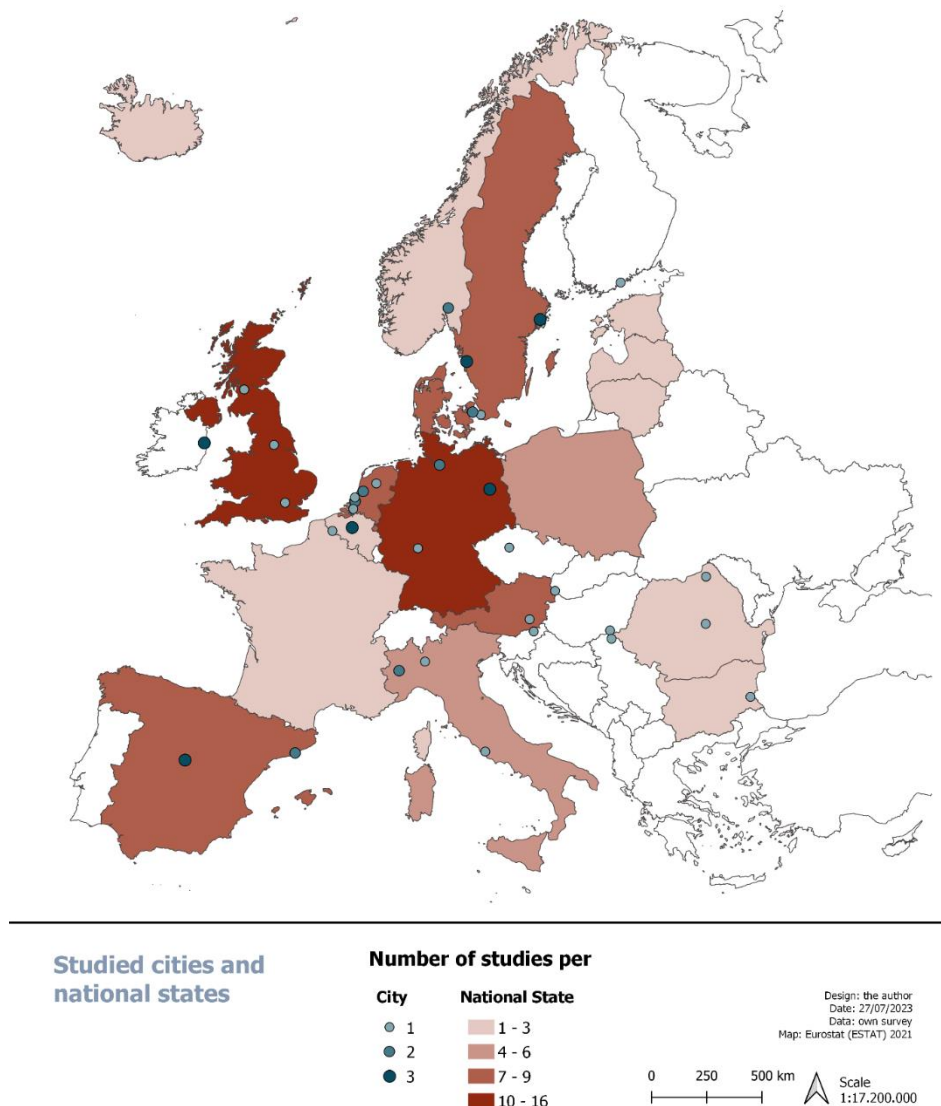


The authors were employed in 17 (exclusively European) countries at the time of publication, mainly in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Six authors, each with more than 3 publications included, worked on an EU-funded project and, in addition to an edited volume (Scholten and van Ostaijen 2018), also published several articles and reports on the topic under consideration here. At least 9 publications in the sample result from this research cooperation.

Researchers primarily examined local (n=33) and national (n=49) institutions or institutional arrangements as levels of practice. Eighteen publications looked at the European level, 21 analysed cooperation and interaction across various levels (multi-level governance, MLG), and 26 analysed more than one level.

The map shows the locatable case studies identified in 68 publications (Figure 3). More than half the research activities worked comparatively.³ Thirty-four different cities were examined. Berlin, Brussels, Dublin, Gothenburg, Madrid and Stockholm are the most frequent subjects of analysis, with 3 studies each. The Western and Northern European countries also stand out: Germany (n=16), the UK (n=11), Sweden and Denmark (n=9 each), Austria, Spain and the Netherlands (n=8 each). Only 13 publications looked at Eastern and South-Eastern European countries.

Figure 3. Cities and national states studied by the included publications



To sum up, the research on the interface of freedom of movement within Europe and institutional action is anchored in the broad migration and policy studies field. Scholars from various academic disciplines participate, especially in social and political sciences. Researchers from economics, geography, ethnology and law were less concerned with analysing institutional action. Research has increased significantly, especially since the mid-2010s, which coincides with an increasing number of mobile and migrating Europeans and highlights a growing academic interest in the subject. The research focused on cities and countries of arrival, with researchers mainly working in large cities and institutional action in rural areas and smaller towns mostly ignored. Researchers were primarily employed in Western and Northern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Southern Europe. To date, the ways in which institutions in sending countries adjust to or support intra-European migration and mobility movements has been poorly covered in the English-language literature. The high number of different journals is a consequence of the diverse angles from which this subject is addressed. However, except for a few project consortia and volumes, there is no recognisable interdisciplinary collaboration among authors working on the topic based on the information available in the literature.

Qualitative analysis

The wide range of migration and mobility patterns within the EU is reflected by the broad spectrum of topics examined in the academic community. The majority of publications discussed aspects of social inclusion. This includes the debate on social policy at the European level, welcoming policies at the local level, access to social services, support for those facing precarious housing and homelessness, enforcement of labour and social rights and policies for the Roma minority. Concerning labour migration, the authors analysed the recruiting practices, working conditions and role of unions. A small portion of the sample addressed questions on migration regarding (higher) education, emigration and remigration policies and the political representation of intra-EU migrants. Horizontal and vertical governance patterns as forms and problems of cooperation and coordination between and within action levels are cross-sectional topics.

The following sections present key results regarding the 3 topics: social inclusion, labour migration and governance patterns. The results consider actors, policies and guiding principles for action (of different actors) as discussed in the publications. The number of publications concerned with higher education (e.g. Teichler 2009, 2019), representation and emigration (e.g. Ciornei 2016), retirement migration (e.g. Calzada, Páez, Martínez-Cassinello and Hervás 2023) and remigration policies (e.g. Kirch 2018) is too small to provide a meaningful overview. Single findings are highlighted in the social inclusion and labour migration sections.

Social inclusion

Two starting points for the academic discussion on social inclusion (mainly of foreign EU citizens) can be identified. Firstly, between 2013 and 2015, 4 research reports on the order of European institutions described policies for the socio-economic inclusion of intra-EU migrants (Cancedda, Curtarelli, Hoorens, Vierelhauzen and Hofman 2015; Eurofound 2015; EY 2014; Piemontese, Plainer, Bianconi, Stefanova and Förschner 2013). The reports encouraged further political science research in migration studies (e.g. Bousiou, Bucken-Knapp and Spehar 2016; van Ostaijen 2017), which focused on vertical and horizontal governance and their roles in moderating intra-EU migration and mobility, which will be discussed below. The contributions also discussed the crucial role of specific national and European actors in framing policies for social inclusion. The main actors depicted are the European Court of Justice (ECJ) (e.g. Blauberger and Schmidt 2014; Thym 2015a) and the national institutions responsible for the implementation of the welfare system (e.g. Mullan 2017).

Secondly, researchers – mainly with backgrounds in social sciences, social work and anthropology – critically discussed local institutional practices concerned with highly vulnerable EU citizens – above all, migrated Roma and homeless people (e.g. Minas and Enroth 2015; Mostowska 2011, 2014; Parker and López Catalán 2014). The literature described the policies implemented when foreign EU citizens need support in arriving countries, for example, the provision of basic needs, counselling regarding housing, access to the labour market and financial support for return (e.g. Minas and Enroth 2015; Mostowska 2014; Zelano 2018a). From the perspective of sending countries, 2 publications dealt with policies to address local challenges in care systems for children and older people resulting from the number of family members working abroad (Balaban and Huțuleac 2021; Kindler 2018). One recent publication asked about the access conditions of retired intra-EU migrants to local social services in Spain (Calzada *et al.* 2023). The main actors described are the municipality, seen as responsible or at least the first contact to provide basic needs (e.g. shelter) and NGOs as social workers and intermediary actors with (language) skills to inform and support. Many authors contributed to this academic discussion, with perspectives from urban studies and political sciences included (e.g. Persdotter 2019).

Both discussion lines analysed and criticised the ways in which social inclusion policies serve to control and select the migration and mobility of foreign EU citizens. Studies argued that, due to the abolition of border controls and the difficulty of consistently monitoring free movement rights, the local level is taking over migration control through street-level/front-line bureaucrats of national or local authorities, police and social workers (mostly working at NGOs). Border techniques and exclusionary practices were diverse – for example, the eviction of homeless camps (Parker and López Catalán 2014; Persdotter 2019) or conditions for registration (e.g. Bruzelius 2019; Parker and López Catalán 2014; Scheibelhofer 2022; Spehar, Hinnfors and Bucken-Knapp 2017).

The publications showed problematic linkages between NGOs and authorities in the context of these exclusionary practices (e.g. EY 2014; Manca and Vergnano 2019; Tervonen and Enache 2017). NGOs and social workers are highlighted as being the main contact point and mediator in many cases and the authors concluded that there had been a transfer of responsibility from the municipality to the NGOs (e.g. Minas and Enroth 2015). As a rule, the NGOs are funded with public money (mainly from the EU) for regulated tasks for a certain period. They are bound (at least financially) and, thus, may act as middlemen through their direct contact with communities. For example, Manca and Vergnano (2019) described this in the context of a rehousing project for Roma in Torino (Italy): social workers checked individual suitability for participation in the project and, where it was lacking, encouraged applicants to return to their home country.

Authors also described exclusionary policies regarding the enforcement of national law at the local level, primarily through strategies to restrict access to welfare benefits (e.g. Lafleur and Stanek 2017b; Martinsen and Werner 2019). Kramer, Sampson Thierry, and van Hooren (2018) noted that national institutions mainly regulate access through practical and administrative instructions rather than legal changes. Authors concluded that front-line bureaucrats (representing national authorities) are caught between two different logics – the European endeavour of equal rights and national protectionist welfare regimes (Thierry and Martinsen 2018). The lack of guidelines opens up substantial power for bureaucrats to act according to their personal principles (Ratzmann 2022) and they are hardly legally bound and controlled. Likewise, according to Blauburger and Schmidt (2014), the burden of proof is increasingly being reversed, to the disadvantage of migrants. Thus, the institutional setting was described as being rather arbitrary (e.g. Dwyer, Scullion, Jones and Stewart 2019; Ratzmann 2021). Moreover, Lafleur and Mescoli (2018: 490) write about a ‘schizophrenic welfare state’ – while NGOs are mandated to support migrants, applications for social benefits are rejected by front-line bureaucrats.

Access to welfare benefits also depends on European law. The authors analysed the legal design of the right of free movement as it is negotiated by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) on a case-by-case basis (e.g. Eigmüller 2013; Heindlmaier and Blauburger 2017; Parker and López Catalán 2014). They concluded that, while legal decisions have led member states to revise their national policies, the patchwork of unclear regulations and instructions described above remains. Also, Mantu and Minderhoud (2023) argue that the legal decisions support the restrictive and conditional access to the welfare services in the member states (see also Mantu and Minderhoud 2019; Mantu, Minderhoud and Grütters 2021; Thym 2015b). Ultimately, the ECJ's legal decisions were too small in scope to initiate uniform implementation across the different member states. Major differences in the political and administrative systems of the member states hinder, for example, the transferability of entitlements in the social system (unemployment benefits, pensions) and have not yet been resolved by European laws (Grabbe 2023).

The scholars showed findings on new associations and initiatives by intra-EU migrants to represent their interests (Lafleur and Stanek 2017b) and these initiatives can be traced back to community building in many ways (Barnard and Fraser Butlin 2020). The authors emphasised that intra-EU migrants (or mobile workers) succeed in exercising their social and labour rights through their own institutions, at times using these institutions to claim their rights with greater vehemence.

This process is seen as necessary by many authors due to their very critical opinion of the *institutional logics* that shape the actions toward (vulnerable) intra-EU migrants and mobile persons. The authors found that the restrictions on social benefits for foreign EU citizens and the conditionality of free movement in various member states in recent years are *a response to the rise of right-wing populists* (e.g. McMahon 2013; Mullan 2017; Roos 2019). This also applies to the latest decisions at the European level (Roos and Westerveen 2020). According to Dølvik and Eldring (2017), a (renewed) normative positioning has primarily been taken by the ECJ (as described above) but not by European political institutions.

At the local level, in the sample, 4 discussion strands of *institutional logics* with adverse effects on social inclusion can be identified:

- (1) The institutions' reactions to the needs of foreign EU citizens resulted from (previous) experiences with migration. Institutions reactivated strategies for social inclusion but their policies did not consider changed conditions and action was thus trapped in a *cognitive lock* (e.g. Bousiou *et al.* 2016; van Ostaijen and Scholten 2018; Ulceluce, Bock and Haartsen 2021; Zelano, Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors and Spehar 2016).
- (2) The *mobility lock* is a specific aspect of the discussion on EU freedom of movement (e.g. Bruzelius 2020; Mostowska 2014; Persdotter 2019). Short-term, circular migration and, if applicable, the associated multi-locality of foreign EU citizens are not part of the institutional logic. This leads to a lack of access to these people. Closely linked is the research on (urban) European citizenship (e.g. Bouali 2018; Simola 2018; Vrăbiescu 2019).
- (3) Different institutions act according to *normative and neoliberal integration paradigms* (e.g. Kostka 2018). This is illustrated, for example, by front-line bureaucrats who make language skills a prerequisite (Ratzmann 2021; see also Carmel and Sojka 2021). Above all, it is in the social work of NGOs that neoliberal integration paradigms, such as the individualisation of responsibilities, are analysed and criticised by the authors (e.g. Magazzini, Chiozza and Rossi 2019; Manca and Vergnano 2019; Vrăbiescu and Kalir 2018).
- (4) Decisions and basic features of host-country migration regimes were at least partly shaped by *racism* and resulted in the exclusionary policies described above (e.g. Kostka 2018; Persdotter 2019; Raitelhuber 2019; Ratzmann 2021, 2022).

To sum up, the literature described the front-line bureaucrats of public authorities and NGOs as the actors and institutions responsible for social inclusion at the local level. Authors criticised the institutional logics at the local level leading to the (intended or unintended) exclusion of (vulnerable) intra-EU migrants and mobile persons. However, their decision-making competence is highly dependent on the national (mainly legal) and European levels (mainly legal and financial), whose institutional logics are shifting towards more restrictions and conditionality. It is striking that hardly any specific organisations are named at the national level. Instead, the term institution is used in a broad sense here – for example, welfare system. Only when looking at the European level is the ECJ clearly mentioned as crucial for elaborating policies and programmes that are further discussed in the coordinative discourses at the local and national levels. The findings pointed to distortions between institutions at the local, national and European levels, which are discussed in depth below.

Labour migration

In the research field of labour and production, institutions and the right of free movement are less relevant as topics. Authors worked at different intersections of economics, industrial relations, social sciences, demography and law. The contributions in the sample are more related to singular aspects, yet two strands of research are still visible. Firstly, there is a discussion of working conditions. In this context, publications discussed the role of trade unions, the emergence of temporary staffing agencies and governmental responses. Secondly, the recruitment of skilled workers and the local, regional and national actors involved is increasingly the focus of research.

In the publications, the changed role of trade unions and the fulfilment of the right to also represent foreign EU citizens (as workers) can be traced back: Heimann (2021) stressed the fact that trade unions opposed protectionist positions during the debates on eastward enlargement (approx. 1997–2012). In 2015, Cancedda *et al.* (2015) noted that, in their four case studies, each city had some form of counselling service or information campaign (co-)initiated by trade unions to counteract the abuse and exploitation of migrant workers. Refslund (2016) observed increased cross-border cooperation between trade unions.

In the mid-2010s, authors described postings and temporary staffing as significant challenges for trade-union action and the enforcement of the labour rights of foreign EU workers (e.g. Refslund 2016; Zelano *et al.* 2016). During Eastern enlargement, temporary staffing agencies emerged as new transnational actors (Friberg and Eldring 2013). Authors criticised new, atypical forms of employment and the profits of the companies involved through their undermining of collective labour agreements and minimum wage laws in receiving countries (Refslund 2016; Wagner and Hassel 2017). The publications highlighted the ambivalence in enforcing the labour rights of *all* workers as the *challenging rationale* for trade unions' actions in the complex system of free movement (Dølvik and Visser 2009; Friberg and Eldring 2013; Refslund 2016; Wagner and Hassel 2017). Refslund (2021: 331) concludes, for the Danish case, that 'institutional embedded unions' and their 'effort to engage with the migrant workers' contributed significantly to improving the situation and bridging the gap between workers.

The recruitment of skilled workers is rarely discussed critically. Authors presented different strategies (e.g. Cancedda *et al.* 2015). Kovacs, Girasek, Kovacs, Aszalos, Eke, Ragany, Cserhati and Szocska (2017) showed both an increasing professionalisation and a binational networking of chambers and recruitment agencies. Given the shortage of skilled workers, recruitment strategies seem to increasingly aim at accompanying social inclusion (e.g. individual support to find a job or housing; Cancedda *et al.* 2015; Zelano *et al.* 2016). Authors described regional networks of companies, chambers and agencies as well as cultural and social actors for coordinating offers (e.g. Heimann and Wieczorek 2017). As Heimann (2021) points out, this is complemented by diverse European actors (e.g. the EURES network) and policies (e.g. the European Higher Education Area).

The *institutional logic* of these actors is the *possible benefit of the deregulated (labour) market* within the European Union. This is subject to the logic of *competition between regions* in the EU. So, publications from sending countries discussed how authorities cooperate in setting up financial support and other incentives to enhance the remigration of skilled workers (Croitoru 2021; Genelyte 2017; Kirch 2018; Soltész 2019).

To summarise, contributions which were included dedicated less of their discussion on the coordinative discourses and the responsibilities or decision-making opportunities of institutions in the field of the labour-market participation of intra-EU migrants and mobile workers. The thematic proximity to social inclusion issues is noticeable (e.g. trade unions and working conditions). A new publication by Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser (2023) crosses the bridge between labour-market-centred analyses and social rights. The authors discuss hypermobility and the precarious employment of seasonal workers and point at ‘institutionalised exploitation’ (*ibidem*: 12) as national and European institutions are not effectively enforcing labour standards. In this review, results are lacking when it comes to presenting a larger or more nuanced picture of the institutional role in labour migration and policy outcomes (e.g. the Posting Workers Directives, wage regulation, see Dølvik, Marginson, Alsos, Arnholtz, Meardi, Müller and Trygstad 2018).

Horizontal and vertical governance patterns

The research on governance in the context of intra-EU migration and mobility is about the forms of cooperation and distortions between actors or levels. Contributions mainly came from political-science scholars researching migration but most studies concerned with social policy discussed particular facets. Some aspects, especially horizontal collaboration, have already been mentioned in the previous sections.

In the publications, it is notable that the ways in which policies were shaped within different governance environments depend on whether migration and mobility are recognised and which patterns are considered (e.g. Eremenko, El Qadim N. and Steichen 2017; Lafleur and Stanek 2017b; van Ostaijen 2017). In this context, the authors emphasised the complex collection and interpretation of statistical data by authorities (Bruzelius, Chase and Seeleib-Kaiser 2016; van Ostaijen and Scholten 2017). In particular, it is striking that many authors wrote about the *ignorance* of various institutions towards intra-EU mobility and migration as one key feature of the *institutional logics* at play here (e.g. Dwyer *et al.* 2019; Eurofound 2015; Lafleur and Mescoli 2018 Shaw and Miller 2012).

Against this background, cooperation was described differently for cities, member states and policy fields (e.g. van Ostaijen and Scholten 2018). Authors emphasised the formation of new networks and improved cooperation at the local level to meet the challenges posed by an influx of intra-EU migrants *or* a shortage of skilled workers (e.g. Cancedda *et al.* 2015; Scholten, Engbersen, van Ostaijen and Snel 2018; horizontal governance).

Still, capacity at the local level seems to remain restricted. Most authors criticised the lack of interaction between different levels and its negative impacts on local governance. For example, the authors described the way in which responsibility for social inclusion is delegated to municipalities (see also above, e.g. Bucken-Knapp, Hinnfors, Spehar and Zelano 2018); nation states provided few or no guidelines (or financial support) and tried to circumvent European social legislation (e.g. Kramer *et al.* 2018). The EU level is described as absent from discussion and policy development apart from minority policies (Bucken-Knapp *et al.* 2018; van Ostaijen and Scholten 2018). However, also, according to the publications in the sample, European institutions finance most efforts for social inclusion within the minority policies and investment funds of European institutions (especially for Roma and other vulnerable groups; e.g. Kramer *et al.* 2018; Piemontese *et al.* 2013; Vermeersch 2013). The authors criticised the temporal limitation and the lack of coordination regarding needs at the local level (Vermeersch 2013; Zelano 2018b). A *lack of cooperation and uncertain division of competencies* leads

to the formation of ‘dispersed, contested or even incongruent policies’ (van Ostaijen and Scholten 2018: 255; also, e.g. Shaw and Miller 2012; Spehar *et al.* 2017; vertical governance).

Looking at the background of these *institutional logics* at play, scholars explained the lack of action and cooperation across the levels as resulting from *competing interests*. Engbersen, Leerke, Scholten and Snel (2017) even argue that the paradigmatic conflict of free movement cannot be resolved – the local level bears the consequences and has few opportunities to act pre-emptively. The EU is interested in enforcing the law and striking a balance between regions as essential parts of European integration policies (also Roos and Westerveen 2020). In between, the national level wants to keep its sovereignty. To finish, European values are negotiated in this process. Balch, Balabanova and Trandafoiu (2014: 1168) concluded that European values are ‘lofty rhetoric which can be adopted and adapted when it suits, and usually not for the benefit of the marginalised’ (also Barbulescu and Favell 2020; van Ostaijen 2020).

On the whole, the researchers draw a negative picture of current governance. To date, authors have mainly noted the rejection of responsibility and ignorance towards both intra-EU migrants and mobile persons as well as actors at other levels as institutional logics in the coordinative discourse. Researchers found that significant contributors to the inaction of a wide range of entities are a lack of knowledge of the legal framework, uncertainties regarding migration and mobility patterns and inconclusive competencies (this also refers to cognitive and mobility lock, see above).

Conclusion

Based on a systematic literature review, this article has explored the state of knowledge regarding the complex landscape of institutions involved in moderating intra-EU migration and mobility. Diverse scholars’ research, mainly in Western and Northern Europe, examined institutional action regarding the arrival (or recruitment) and social as well as labour-market inclusion of foreign EU citizens. Three core topics could be identified in debate about the institutions moderating intra-EU migration and mobility: social inclusion, labour migration and governance patterns.

The literature on social inclusion described in greater detail the institutional practices at the local level, with local actors mainly responding to new problems. NGOs and front-line bureaucrats are central to the enforcement of policies that promote social inclusion. Publications discussing the European level and the ECJ as decisive actors underlined the rejection of responsibility and the non-action of many actors that could be involved. Discussion of labour migration refers to trade unions and temporary working agencies but it cannot be deduced from the included publications whether these (alone) are the decisive institutions. Policies (non-)moderating intra-EU migration and mobility are inconclusive across the nation states and the EU. This has adverse effects on (mostly vulnerable) citizens and dedicated actors.

Institutional logics at play refer to changes in the past years – for example, the right-wing shift in Europe – but also to path dependencies such as cognitive and mobility lock, as described for the local level, an uncertain division of competencies and competing interest, as described for the multi-level governance. The synopsis of the elaborated institutional logics within the coordinative discourse presented in the review highlights some crucial ambivalences within the European integration process:

- The freedom of movement is a prime example of disorganised deregulation. While the EU pushes the opening of markets for economic and wealth growth, it does not take political responsibility for negotiating in socially divided and capitalist societies. In extreme cases, this results in disastrous working and living conditions and racist harassment towards foreign EU citizens. Readjustments are only made through juridical (case-by-case) decisions.

- The proclaimed legal equality of migrating and mobile EU citizens supports a neoliberal integration paradigm in arrival cities and nations. Institutions hand over the social and political responsibility for the living situation to the individuals – ignoring the question of the extent to which social and labour market participation is possible. Front-line bureaucrats and local NGOs deal with inconclusive policies that should support intra-EU migration and mobility (e.g. as part of recruitment strategies) and still restrict access when it is not clear that the person is contributing a societal value.
- The different interests between the policy-making levels and the competition between regions hinder a joint discussion about the potentials (and necessities) of the freedom of movement. There is no negotiation about the migration/mobility paradigms and the development of policies for the benefit of *all* EU citizens.

Surprisingly, institutional action on many migration and mobility patterns is not discussed in the English-language literature, at least within the range of the search terms used. For example, there is hardly any literature on students or the mobility of young people, while the EU supports this with many financial resources and narratives of a common European space. The search terms here also cover the area of labour markets only inadequately. So, it remains unclear who the key players are in the recruitment of skilled workers. The role of companies and their benefits through intra-EU migration and mobility is analysed and discussed to a very limited degree. The introduction of free movement took place in the context of creating the single European market. However, intra-EU migration and mobility are hardly the subjects of economic development. The sample lacks analysis of non-funded short-term mobility (exceptions, *inter alia*, Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser 2023) and its impact, i.e. new opportunities and challenges, on the regional and urban development of receiving and sending regions.

In the scientific debate, there is a need for a stronger (interdisciplinary) link between the social issues of free movement (including working conditions) and its economic relevance, especially in the context of ambiguous opportunities for regional development. Due to demographic changes, EU regions are in fierce competition with each other for the recruitment of (qualified) workers through ‘soft’ immigration strategies (e.g. incentives, image) as well as remigration policies. Research should critically examine policies in terms of adverse consequences for mobile people and its implications for the European integration process. In particular, perspectives on institutional action in sending countries are missing.

It should be noted that the criteria set by the author limited this study. For instance, a search in German-language literature revealed a more intense debate within the field of labour migration. Furthermore, the disciplines use different terms and not all could be covered. Therefore, a linguistically broader review might reveal an even more complete picture. This could also apply to research from non-Western European countries. However, other (urgent) issues, a different positionality of the institutions as considered here and a lower funding of the sciences could also be reasons why these countries are so little present here in the review.

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Notes

2. There are significant difficulties statistically mapping the movements of EU citizens (Marchand, Fajth and Siegel 2019). For example, authorities often do not register postings, seasonal workers and students. This article considers the wide range of patterns by discussing the mobility *and* migration of EU citizens. These data still include citizens of the UK and EU citizens in the UK. The UK left the EU on 30 January 2020.
3. In 1997, the European Council granted candidate status to 7 countries of the former Eastern Bloc, starting a political and media debate on the EU right of free movement.
4. Unfortunately, two volumes were also unavailable for checking contributions: Amelina, Carmel, Runfors and Scheibelhofer (2021) and Arnholtz and Lillie (2021).
5. Norway and Iceland were part of the comparative studies. Therefore, these countries are marked on the maps even though they are not members of the EU.

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